

Written evidence submitted by Advantage Schools

Dear Jonathan,

I am writing in my capacity as CEO of Advantage Schools. We run Bedford Free School (OFSTED Outstanding in January 2020 and in the top 140 schools in the country for Progress 8) and Elstow School (OFSTED Good in January 2020).

You will be aware that in 2017 we gained approval to open a new free school in St Neots – St Neots Academy. We had 600 local families signed up to our mailing list, and a great deal of support. The main driver was that local secondary provision was poor in outcomes for children and OFSTED judgements in the town's two schools. At that time, both schools were run by an academy trust- St Neots Learning Partnership, meaning there was no choice for parents in the area. A significantly higher proportion of secondary-age children than average were going outside of St Neots for their education.

In 2017, our free school was approved to change that by introducing a school with very high expectations. This would encourage collaboration, competition and choice to St Neots children, and would mean that families are likely to be better served by the secondary education on offer from all three schools. We have made world-class appointments to our Trust Board and Executive Team so that we can ensure that St Neots Academy is, from the moment it opens, one of the best schools in the country.

St Neots Academy, like Bedford Free School, was and is planned to have exceptionally high standards, including of conduct. At BFS, behaviour is impeccable and hundreds of school leaders visit every year to see how we achieve this. We believe in providing this academic high-quality education to all pupils, regardless of background. We believe it can make the biggest difference to the most disadvantaged pupils. Bedford Free School is now one of the most successful Free Schools in the country and has had over 4 applications per place for each of the last two years.

Because this was to be a Wave 12 Free School, the costs of St Neots Academy would be met by central government rather than the local council.

Unfortunately, the Department for Education failed to secure a site for St Neots Academy, and because of a stated lack of demographic need for new school places in the SCAP data, the project has been put 'on pause' since 17th June 2019. Last week, I received a letter from Baroness Berridge suggesting that she is minded to close the project and hence St Neots Academy will not open. I have 21 days to reply, otherwise the project is closed.

The situation with secondary schools in St Neots has not improved, however, and indeed has got worse. Families in St Neots have no good secondary schools that they can attend locally. You will be aware that the last Ofsted inspection of Longsands (October 2019) was "Requires Improvement" and that Ernulf has not yet improved its OFSTED rating from "Requires Improvement". Meanwhile the headline achievement (Progress 8) figures for secondary schools in St Neots are +0.14 at Longsands (average) and -0.7 at Ernulf (well below average). At Ernulf school **only 23% of pupils achieved a grade 5 or above in English and Maths, compared to 43% nationally**. Both schools are once again run by the same academy trust – Astrea – who now also run Cottenham Village College (downgraded from 'good' to 'requires improvement' in December 2019).

At Bedford Free School our Progress 8 figure is now +0.8 (well above average). Pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds achieved +0.45 (when this is a significant negative nationally). Furthermore, our Progress 8 score for pupils that joined us on the Special Educational Needs register is **higher** than for those who were not on the SEN register when they joined Bedford Free School. Our attainment 8 and English Baccalaureate scores have been consistently higher than national and local authority averages.

Crucially, our figure for boys is +0.92 and a great number of these are white working-class boys. I know that educational provision in St Neots faces many challenges, explicitly including the achievement of white working-class boys.

Further to this, a local residents group and other concerned local residents have repeatedly been in touch with me because of their concern over the persistent low standards in local schooling and the secondary school capacity with recent developments in Loves Farm and Wintringham in St Neots.

As one of them said to me in an email, which I've copied below, an FOI request he put in to Cambridgeshire County Council appears to show that all schools will actually be at full capacity by 2023, meaning there will be an urgent need for a new school at that point. This contradicts the information that they have submitted to the DfE which is the basis on which they have issued the 'minded to terminate' letter.

[email redacted]

From this information, I believe that it is **not** in the interests of St Neots residents for St Neots Academy to be closed, and I am writing to Baroness Berridge to request that she suspends the cancellation and asks the DfE to redouble their efforts to find a site for a school that I firmly believe will be one of the best in the country.

Given the possible shortfall in secondary places, and the urgent need to improve secondary provision in St Neots, I am writing to ask if you would add your backing to my request?

In addition, given the significant blow to families in St Neots, I wonder if you would consider asking a question such as the one below during Education Questions in the House of Commons:

"Many Free Schools have been shown, via innovation, collaboration and high expectations, to have increased standards for the families that they serve, but also for schools that are near them. St Neots Academy, a free school given approval in my constituency in 2017, has been earmarked to be closed without ever having opened. Given the blow to families in my constituency who are crying out for a new school with better outcomes, particularly for disadvantaged students, could the Minister/Secretary of State commit to looking again at free school projects earmarked for closure, like St Neots Academy? These new schools have the potential to change thousands of lives, and in areas like mine will deliver on the Prime Minister's agenda to level up opportunity across Britain."

I look forward to your reply and am available on this email or the number below. I have also sent a copy of this correspondence to Robert Halfon as Chair of the Education Select Committee, given their current consultation on the achievements of white working-class boys.

Yours sincerely,

Stuart Lock
CEO

Advantage Schools

Aspiration, Respect, Honesty

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