



Via email to:  
Bedfordshire Schools Trust Limited  
BEST House  
Shefford Road  
Clifton  
Bedfordshire  
SG17 5QS

**Date:** 15<sup>th</sup> November 2021

Dear Board Members,

I am replying to your 'open' letter of 4<sup>th</sup> November.

Improving educational attainment is, and will remain, one of this Council's top priorities. Having the right schools in the right places is part of achieving this, as is the move towards the two-tier educational system.

Within the Council we have allocated many millions of pounds and officer time towards co-ordinating and enabling the shift from three to two-tier education, and the Schools for the Future programme currently represents by far the biggest capital programme this Council has in its Medium Term Financial Plan.

We recognise that we need to continue working in collaboration with our schools, partner Academies, and Multi-Academy Trusts, including BEST. It is essential to make this change in a co-ordinated way.

It is the Council's statutory duty to ensure we deliver the best value for Council taxpayers' money. The Council needs to assure itself that proposed plans are efficient and cost effective. Therefore, regularly assessing the planned creation of school places against demand is critical. It would be wrong to fund places that are not needed or to remove places where future growth is imminent. Similarly combining responding to growth with the age of transfer changes, where this is an opportunity, is prudent as it offers the best value and a single change.

The Executive report of 4<sup>th</sup> August 2020 stated:

*'There is also a risk that housing development could be delayed. This would be mitigated through regular reviews of the housing trajectory through the Schools for the Future programme and amendments to the timelines. This would prolong the forward funding pressures noted above.'*

We continue to review the SFF programme against expected growth as this is a pragmatic approach to ensuring we can deliver the right schools in the right places at the right time.

Following further detailed work, we understand that an all-through school is not physically deliverable on the Samuel Whitbread site within the land held by the Council and BEST. This was discussed at a recent meeting between BEST and this Council's Chief Executive.

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Furthermore, the latest modelling suggests that the cluster, if the current plans as consulted on are adopted, will result in a significant and sustained over provision of Primary places.

We therefore need to review elements of the current plan for Phase 2 of the cluster otherwise the Council risks spending significant sums of money on school places that are not required. This may lead to some schools struggling to survive financially which could only have a negative effect on pupils' education and will undermine the outcomes we are trying to achieve.

In your letter you ask that we:

1. Agree and finalise plans for Shefford and Stotfold, for the good of **all** students in the cluster;
2. Reconfirm [our] commitment to the five pledges [we] originally agreed in August 2020;
3. Commit to the two-tier transition taking place in September 2023 – or an alternative timeline agreed with the whole cluster.

As you are aware, last year the plans for the Shefford and Stotfold area were separated into two phases of work following feedback from a public consultation. This meant that the Henlow pyramid of schools was contractually too far advanced to recalibrate, and we continued with this work, as was clearly set out in our correspondence to Headteachers.

However, we remain focussed on working with schools to develop a plan that is deliverable and will continue to explore the best solutions for all students in the Shefford and Stotfold cluster and we have brought in additional expertise to rework our delivery strategy.

With regard to the five pledges, as things stand, and for the reasons set out above, we cannot commit to an all-through school that is both physically and financially undeliverable; this needs to be rethought as it would not currently meet a test of best value against which we would be measured.

We continue to support new school places where they are needed, and as such we continue to support the Campton Academy new build option.

We also continue to support the growth of sixth form provision at Samuel Whitbread and Etonbury / Pix Brook, however, as you will know, the funding of sixth form places is not a function of local authorities and we need to ensure we prioritise our statutory duties such as SEND place provision.

We are still committed to working with you on possible solutions to PFI-related issues on the Samuel Whitbread site.

Whilst we are disappointed by your approach in sending out an open letter, which in itself risks creating further uncertainty, you have stated that you will consider your next steps on receipt of this response. We would encourage you to continue to work with the Council to develop solutions to the change in age range. It is only by working together in partnership that we can achieve the outcome we are all seeking, namely the improvement to children's educational attainment.

Yours sincerely



**Councillor Richard Wenham, Leader of the Council**

**Central Bedfordshire Council**

Priory House, Monks Walk  
Chicksands, Shefford  
Bedfordshire SG17 5TQ

**Telephone** 0300 300 8301

**Email** [customer.services@centralbedfordshire.gov.uk](mailto:customer.services@centralbedfordshire.gov.uk)  
[www.centralbedfordshire.gov.uk](http://www.centralbedfordshire.gov.uk)