

Children and Young People Committee

Item 4: Petitions and Public Questions

Question from Mr James Boyle, local resident:

Back in November 2020 the CYP discussed the DfE's plans to build a new secondary school in Soham under wave 12 of the Free School Programme. At that meeting, Councillors expressed concern over the lack of collaboration between the DfE and the LEA. We now have a similar situation in St Neots where the DfE is proceeding with another wave 12 proposal. Again, there seems to be a lack of communication and collaboration between the DfE and the LEA. CCC officials say were unaware of the DfE plans to proceed until March of this year. The LEA's stance now is that this is a DfE project and that no action is required from the LEA until the project has run its course. I am very concerned by this lack of engagement. Also, the issue has not been put before this committee, denying our recently elected councillors the opportunity to endorse the project or, indeed, to raise any concerns.

In order to assess the St Neots Free School project, councillors will want to be in possession of the full facts. It is very disappointing, therefore, that despite assurances of 'transparency' at the last CYP meeting in June we are now in September and the Feasibility Study into Secondary School provision in St Neots has still not been published. Also, the latest projected student numbers have been circulated without any supporting evidence or details about the underlying assumptions. These figures need to be subjected to public scrutiny if we are to avoid a repeat of previous errors.

One of consequences of the previous errors is a failure to secure any potential funding towards the LEA's preferred option of expanding the two existing St Neots schools. In April 2019, the LEA requested £22million of CIL funding for this purpose. In that bid, the LEA stated that the expansion project was "essential" and that "if funding is not identified there is a risk that we will not meet our statutory duties and children will be educated in temporary accommodation or bussed to alternative secondary schools potentially a significant distance away."

HDC rejected the proposal out of hand due to lack of detail. The Feasibility Study should provide the missing detail, confirm whether the £22 million figure is accurate and identify any other challenges with this option. As far as I know, the above risk, identified by LEA officers, has not been brought to the attention of the CYP. The failed £22 million bid for an "essential" project has never been mentioned. The risk of significant additional costs, if the free school option fails, is not mentioned in the Business Planning Proposals for 2022-27 which is on today's agenda. So, again, there is no transparency.

Will the committee please confirm that the feasibility study and the detailed student estimates will be made available without further delay and that the issue of secondary school provision in St Neots will be discussed by the CYP at the next available opportunity?