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Children, Young People and Families

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Mr. J. Vale,
Chair of Governors,
Etone Technology Language Vocational College.

Dear Mr Vale,

Proposal to establish new Post-16 provision at Etone College

I am writing on behalf of the County Council in response to the consultation document published by Etone School on a proposal to establish new post-16 provision at Etone. The proposals were discussed at the Nuneaton and Bedworth Area Committee at the meeting on 7th November and by the Cabinet at the meeting on 15th November.

The Council would wish to make the following comments:

1. The Council recognises that Etone is a high performing school, judged as 'outstanding' by Ofsted with specialisms in technology, languages and vocational education. The Council is very appreciative of the support the Headteacher and Governors of the school have given to the Council in supporting other schools in the County.
2. The Council has responsibility and a statutory duty to promote higher standards, to promote progression into education and training and to ensure the broadest range of learning opportunities for children and young people. The Council is required to act as an advocate for children and young people across the County. The Council have therefore considered the proposal in the light of these responsibilities looking therefore not only at the impact on young people in Etone School but also on young people in the area as a whole as part of a strategy for Nuneaton and Bedworth.
3. The Council recognises too that the award by DCSF of high performing vocational specialist school status to Etone gives the school the opportunity to propose the establishment of post-16 provision at the school with a presumption that such a proposal will be agreed by the Learning and Skills Council (in terms of any capital grant required) and by the County Council as the decision making body for school organisation proposals.

4. In considering the response to the consultation, the Council have sought to ask two key questions:

- i. Is additional post-16 provision required in Nuneaton and Bedworth? Will the proposal contribute to choice and diversity?
- ii. What is the impact of the proposal on the area as a whole and will the proposal lead to higher standards and increased participation?

5. Is additional post-16 provision required? Will it increase choice and diversity?

5.1 Projected student numbers

There is a projected drop in numbers of post-16 students in Nuneaton and Bedworth of some 7% between 2006 and 2010 and 14.6% between 2006 and 2015. (This does not take into account of any new housing figures.) Even with increased participation in education and training post-16 the planned increased capacity of King Edward VI College and North Warwickshire & Hinckley College should be more than sufficient to meet future demand for places. It is therefore difficult to justify on this basis the additional 250 places planned for students aged 16-19, at Etone. Reference is made to the possibility of an additional 10,800 homes in the Nuneaton and Bedworth area, but this is still in the planning stage and not yet formally agreed. Recent announcements from the Government about young people staying on in education imply some additional provision may be needed.

5.2 Curriculum Choice

In 2004 the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) and the Local Authority carried out a Strategic Area Review of post-16 provision which you will recall was the subject of widespread consultation and was considered by the Area Committee and accepted by the Council. That report did not identify gaps in provision for young people taking into account the offer made by the two colleges and the sixth form at Nicholas Chamberlaine School in Bedworth. The more recent review similarly did not identify that the position had deteriorated.

It is difficult to be clear exactly what the curriculum offer will be at Etone and the Council is aware of the discussions the school is having with the colleges to identify programmes which will complement the offer made by them. However, the colleges have made the case that the programmes proposed at Etone are already offered by the two colleges with greater opportunities for mixing vocational and academic courses through the proposed co-location of the two colleges, and the size of these two institutions.

The Council therefore has concerns in relation to curriculum choice which the Council would ask the Governors to consider:

- i. the difficulty in providing the broadest range of courses both vocational and academic in a relatively small post-16 provision (125 in each year group).

- ii. the dangers of social segregation. There is a tendency nationally where there is choice of provision for some providers, and in particular school sixth forms, to favour high achievers, A-level students.
- iii. the provision of popular A-level courses at Etone could impact on the numbers at King Edward VI College and therefore that college's ability to provide a very broad range of AS and A-level courses and in particular minority subjects which are cross subsidised from more popular courses. It would not be in the interests of the area as a whole for access to those minority subjects to be jeopardised.

5.3 Curriculum Choice and Diversity

In terms of curriculum choice it is difficult to judge from the consultation paper the extent to which Etone's proposals will widen opportunities for learners. The evidence seems to suggest that there are no significant gaps in the courses and programmes available to young people in Nuneaton and Bedworth through the two colleges and the post-16 provision at Nicholas Chamberlaine School.

Nevertheless the Department for Children, Schools and Families is clear in its support for sixth form provision not least in the way that 'presumption rights' referred to in the consultation document have been given to high performing vocational specialist schools.

The Council recognises that the establishment of a post-16 centre at Etone will be smaller in size and give the opportunity for students at Etone to remain in a school environment rather than making the transition to a larger institution. The proposal might therefore increase progression rates for Etone students although these are already high. There is no evidence nationally that this is the case.

A key question for the Council which the Governors may wish to consider is the extent to which the post-16 centre will attract students from other 11-16 schools in Nuneaton which will be important if Etone are to secure an average of 125 students in each year group from the average of 150 students in year 11.

Key to the success of the post-16 centre at Etone will be therefore the strength of the collaborative working between schools, the two colleges and other partners which is already strong in the Nuneaton and Bedworth area.

In recognising that students from Etone who remain at the school would have access to the same high quality teaching and pastoral care available to them in KS3 and KS4, the Council also note from the response of King Edward VI College to you that there are high levels of satisfaction from students at the college, very good completion rates and they have equally excellent pastoral care and guidance.

The Council notes the opportunities presented by the proposal to develop a more flexible curriculum across the key stages with the opportunities for some students to 'fast track', for example beginning AS courses in KS4. This is clearly a significant benefit to students at Etone, which could be extended to students from other schools, and include the two colleges. It is suggested in the consultation that students in the post-16 centre will more easily be able to "mix and match" vocational and academic courses. That is important. A clear aim of the proposals by the two colleges to co-locate is to give students that flexibility. Crucial to the success of that at Etone will be the curriculum offer and the range of courses and programmes the post-16 centre can deliver with the relatively small student numbers planned. At this point the Council cannot identify the rationale for the curriculum pathways proposed.

6. Will the proposal raise standards and increase participation?

- 6.1 As has already been noted, the Council recognises that Etone is an 'outstanding' school and will bring the same quality of teaching and learning and pastoral support to its post-16 provision as obtains in the 11 – 16 part of the school. Post-16 provision would give additional opportunities and challenges to staff at the school and may help Etone to retain and attract high quality staff to the benefit of all students in the school.

Standards at Etone have been good in the past. However they declined in 2007 with a 10% drop in the number of pupils achieving 5+ A* - C grades in GCSE and apparently poor performance at KS 3 in analyses carried out by the Fischer Family Trust data.

It is difficult however to see where this proposal would support higher standards in other 11 – 16 schools in the town or to raise levels of attainment more generally in Nuneaton. In 2006 52% of students in Nuneaton and Bedworth achieved 5+ A* - C grades at GCSE compared to a county average of 58.5%. This represents a gap of 6.5%, which compares to a figure of 12% in 2003. The Council would appreciate further information from Governors on how the proposal could contribute to narrowing still further the attainment gap.

In terms of post-16 provision, the Council agrees with the statement in the consultation document that levels of attainment post-16 are good. Nuneaton and Bedworth are fortunate in having two good and improving colleges but everyone would agree that standards could and should be higher.

The document sets out three reasons why the post-16 provision at Etone would raise standards:

- the quality of pastoral care in support of teaching and learning
- the expertise and quality of teaching and learning at Etone School
- the opportunity for students to undertake courses that match learner needs, to 'mix and match' courses both vocational and academic.

The Council accepts the strength of these arguments but in recognising the quality of teaching and learning and pastoral care at Etone would not want to suggest that similar high quality is not found in the two colleges. The submission from King Edward VI College gives some detail of the pastoral support available.

An important point again relates to the breadth and range of the curriculum offer which the school will be able to make and the concern that the range of courses able to be offered may be constrained by the finance available and the numbers of students. Again a key principle underpinning the increased collaboration between the two colleges and the proposal to co-locate is to facilitate the 'mix and match' approach which Etone rightly identifies as important in raising standards.

So far as progression is concerned, in Nuneaton and Bedworth currently around 91% of young people post-16 progress to positive destinations with 7.6% in the category defined as 'not in employment, education and training (NEET)'. Whilst this figure compares well with national and regional figures, it remains too high. Much work is already in place in the north of the county to identify and support these young people

into appropriate places through a partnership which includes the LSC, Connexions, schools, NWHC and other training providers.

Provision at a post-16 centre at Etone could contribute to helping to meet the needs of these young people if the school is able to provide the range of courses it anticipates. It should be noted that progression rates from Etone are already good.

7. Other considerations

7.1 Resources

The proposal says little about the cost of these proposals both in terms of capital investment and ongoing revenue costs or any financial plan for the proposed curriculum at the school. Recognising the argument for choice and diversity, it is important to recognise the potential cost of increasing the number of centres offering post-16 provision. Smaller post-16 centres are unlikely to be able to secure the economies of scale of larger institutions particularly if the two colleges are co-located and able to share premises and some back office functions. There are likely to be increased transport costs also.

Reference is made to Educational Maintenance Allowances for post-16 students in full-time education. It is unclear how the school can access these grants paid directly to students.

7.2 Site issues

Officers have discussed with the school the difficulty of the timetable for bringing forward this proposal (by the end of March 2008) in the context of the timescales for reviewing more generally the pattern of school organisation in Nuneaton and Bedworth. A fundamental review is currently underway in preparation for addressing a range of issues including tackling areas of poor performance, potential academy provision and not least Building Schools for the Future.

8. Conclusions

The most recent review of post-16 provision in the area carried out jointly by the Local Authority and the Learning and Skills Council identified no significant gaps in provision and no need for change in the current pattern of post-16 provision. Those conclusions were considered and agreed by both the Nuneaton and Bedworth and North Warwickshire Area Committees and by the Cabinet of the County Council.

The Council recognises the very tight timescales in which the school are having to bring forward these proposals, but at this stage the proposal from the school contains insufficient detail in relation to:

- the curriculum offer the school is proposing to make
- the financing of the curriculum
- the way in which the proposed curriculum offer contributes to the range of courses and programmes available already in Nuneaton and Bedworth as a whole.

It is difficult therefore for the Council at this stage to take a definitive view of the impact of the proposals on curriculum choice and diversity standards and rates of progress across the Nuneaton and Bedworth area. However, the submission thus far does not provide sufficient evidence for the Council to move away from the conclusion of the

Strategic Area Review agreed in 2004 that there is no need for additional post-16 providers in the Nuneaton and Bedworth area.

If the Governors, following the outcome of consultation, decide to continue with the proposal, the Council would ask the Governors to consider further:

- the nature of the curriculum offer and the extent to which the school can deliver the range of courses outlined in the consultation document
- the sustainability of the financing of such a curriculum
- the way in which such a curriculum would complement existing provision and therefore the contribution to higher standards and increased progression in Nuneaton and Bedworth.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Mark Gore', with a horizontal line underneath it.

Mark Gore
Head of Service – Education Partnership and School Development