

Dear Keith

Proposal to establish DEALT and for schools to convert to academy status

Thank you for your letter of 17 July to myself and my Chair of Governors. I know you have also written in the same terms to heads and chairs of all the schools making the DEALT proposal. This is a first response on behalf of us all to ask you to clarify some of the points in your letter.

The first point to make is that this proposal is not driven by financial considerations but builds on the effective collaboration we already have in place between our schools. Formalising this collaboration will mean that we become accountable for each other and no school will become vulnerable, whether in educational standards, staffing or finance, and best practice and resources will be able to be shared more effectively across the schools. We recognise that there are significant financial implications and we are continuing to develop our financial plans across the Summer, as parents know. Any further clarity you can offer on the points set out below will help inform those plans.

Having received your letter we have reviewed the information made available on each school's website. Schools have been keen to respond to questions raised by parents and to share the answers with all parents so that there is transparency in the information that is being shared. You have identified a handful of examples, which generally appear only once in the information that schools have published. Some of those responses could have been expressed differently but they reflect a school's understanding of particular issues.

You say that all schools have had the ability to buy and procure services from wherever they choose. But schools may not have understood as clearly as you that this option has been available. Certainly the flowcharts on KELSI under the heading "Spending the Council's Money" suggest that KCC services should be the first port of call – and over £50k must be used where they exist. So I am not sure that heads' understanding that we have more restricted choice currently is quite as surprising as you suggest. We were also surprised to learn that we could negotiate collectively with KCC now. *Perhaps you could point us to the guidance we have missed which sets out these opportunities as clearly as you do in your letter.*

One outcome of our proposal will be to appoint someone across the proposed Trust with capacity to explore these issues in more detail and to seek out high quality, cost effective services. We will also be able to look more closely at alternative ways of delivering some services.

Our point about services that were formerly free but are now charged for reflects a transition over a period of time. Examples would include Making Figures Speak for Themselves which was previously free to schools but now costs £400. We now pay for outdoor education support, school improvement support, headteacher performance management, courses and additional training. All our schools have struggled in recent years to access the level of Education Psychology support we would wish and other than the statutory element, that is now a charged service. We state this as a fact, not as a criticism of the local authority; we understand that budgets have been cut by the Government.

We have been unable to establish what services The Education People will provide which will be free of charge at point of use. Indeed at a meeting on July 4 Richard Hallett was unable to say what services would be free and which would be traded. As we understand it the only services provided at no cost will be safeguarding and admissions. *It would be really helpful if you could clarify the Council's position on this point and identify those services which will be free and how maintained schools will be able to access them.*

I can only see one reference in the documents we issued to a KCC top slice, though there are several references to the top slice which DEALT will levy on its schools. That reference does not use “top slice” in the way that you use it – and on reflection it may have been clearer to use a different term. But “delegated and then held back” would require a bit more explanation. However we describe it, there are funds held back by KCC, perfectly legitimately, which on conversion will be added to our budgets. Some of those funds are spent on services which we may choose to replicate and therefore to purchase; but we argue that properly managed schools working together will not find themselves in financial difficulty. We understand that the de-delegated funds are the only recurring addition to our funding, though we also welcome the allocation of MDIF grant to support the establishment of the Trust. *It would be helpful if you could confirm what KCC funding will not be available to us as academies.*

In connection with this issue, we argue that a shared approach will better enable us to manage future pressures on our budgets; though we have been clear with parents that school finances remain generally under pressure and that we cannot guarantee that there will not be changes to staffing as a result. Sandown School has just undertaken a restructuring of support staff, independently of the conversion proposal. The Save Deal Schools group, with whom you have also corresponded, seeks support to oppose the academy proposal because they want no more job losses in primary schools. We understand why they have that concern, when they read about academies which have had to make staff redundant; but *we wonder if you are able to make that commitment to them for schools maintained by the local authority?*

The single statement about possible lack of choice over whether to convert in the future represents an understanding of the position at that time. Although the DfE clearly withdrew formal proposals to require all schools to become academies by a fixed date, their continuing position remained equivocal which is perhaps why the Secretary of State thought it was important to make his policy clear in his NGA speech on 9 June. It remains the DfE position that schools judged inadequate will be required to convert and RSCs continue to seek strong academy trusts which those schools can join to receive the support they need. Our discussions with the DfE indicate that they expect more trusts to be established and that they are likely in time to limit the number of trusts that they support. As a result there may be a time when we could not bring forward the proposal that we are now making. Governors decided that we should proceed with this proposal now so that we can secure a locally based trust focused on improving provision in Deal.

I hope this clarification of our position is helpful. We will consider what further information to share with parents and staff at the start of next term, alongside our more detailed financial plans. It will help us if during the next couple of weeks you are able to clarify the position on opportunities for wider procurement and for collaborative purchasing; services supplied by The Education People; protection from future job losses; and funding from KCC which we would not be eligible to receive as academies.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely