

Free Schools – opportunity, threat
or distraction?

Free schools - what are they?

- free schools are all-ability independent state-funded schools set up in response to what local people say they want and need in order to improve education for children in their community
- the concept of free schools is based upon a similar model found in Sweden as well as US charter schools
- as a legal entity a free school is in essence an academy

The government aims for free schools

- to drive up quality of provision and standards
- to provide parents with greater choice about the school their child attends – with the power to propose to set up their own school if they are unhappy with existing options
- to encourage greater innovation in the education system by opening it up to a much wider range of providers and approaches
- to provide a value for money solution to creating new school places and driving system-wide change
- to create an increasingly self-sustaining and self-improving system, relying far less on central government intervention and more on school leaders, teachers and parents themselves to ensure a good quality of education for all

Why set up a free school?

- because there are too few school places in the area and the local authority may no longer open schools
- because there is dissatisfaction with the quality of education locally
- to increase choice and diversity in the area
- to provide a school for a particular faith group
- to pursue a particular passion or philosophy
- to be independent of the local authority
- to gain freedoms around the curriculum, staffing, finance and day lengths

Free schools - what are they?

- free schools are part of the coalition's educational changes whereby it will be possible for parents, teachers, charities and businesses to set up their own school
- to set up a free school, groups need to form a company, gain parental support locally and make an application to the DfE
- funding is on an equivalent basis with other locally controlled state maintained schools
- free schools do not have to follow the national curriculum nor abide by teachers' pay and conditions
- free schools are still subject to Ofsted inspections and are expected to comply with standard performance measures

The assessment of applications

Applications are assessed in three ways:

- against the minimum criteria, to decide if the proposed free school is likely to be one of acceptable quality
- against other free school applications, to ensure that only the best applications are approved
- against cost considerations, to ensure that the proposed free school is affordable and offers maximum value for public money
- through interview with DfE officers and advisers

Free Schools – the story so far

- the first 24 free schools opened in autumn 2011
- there were 281 free school applications for autumn 2012
- the Secretary of State for Education announced approval for 55 of these free schools to open in September 2012 – three are in Hertfordshire
- of these 55 free schools , 21 are primary schools, 33 are secondary schools, eight are all-through schools and one is a 16-19 school
- more than two thirds are situated in the 50 per cent most deprived areas of the country
- others will meet additional need for schools places, meaning that more than 90 per cent of successful applicants are in areas that are deprived or crying out for places
- a list of these school can be found on the DfE website
www.education.gov.uk

Free schools in Hertfordshire

- The Harpenden Free School
- Alban City School
- Hatfield Community Primary School
 - partnership model
 - community at the heart of the school
 - science and technology specialism
 - 8 to 6 day and extended year
 - private early years and childcare provision
 - resilience programme
 - Spanish as a modern foreign language

Free Schools – opportunity, threat or distraction?

Opportunities:

- starting from a blank page
- innovation and imagination
- range of freedoms

Threats:

- relationships with other schools
- pupil recruitment
- realising the vision

Distraction:

- commissioning school places
- forming the company
- re-inventing the curriculum, policies and procedures

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Questions and discussion