



Oastlers School

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Mr Dominic Wall
Chair Bradford School Forum
c/o Southfield Grange Special School

10 June 2016

Dear Forum Members,

I am writing to you on behalf of Oastlers School's Governing Body, to ask for your help in resolving the issue of our school's deficit budget. Your assistance would enable the school to fulfil its potential, something that would deliver significant benefits for learners in the area with social, emotional and mental health difficulties, as well as for colleagues in the wider Bradford school community.

Oastlers School is at an important and exciting stage of its journey. The Governing Body has submitted an application to the Department for Education to convert the school into an academy which would extend our offer to more children with complex behaviours and needs.

Following a successful conversion to academy status, we intend to submit two further free school funding applications, in support of two areas: one for a primary SEMH provision on site; the other to develop support for those learners over sixteen years of age who are seeking to make the difficult transition from special school to mainstream environments, to secure successful post-16 destinations.

We strongly believe primary SEMH provision will have substantial benefits for learners in the Bradford area, and will provide valuable support to our primary mainstream counterparts who often face significant challenges in effectively managing the behaviours and progress of children in this group. The post-16 learner support will help address current issues in the Local Authority's NEET outcomes for this group.

In spite of the evident and substantial potential in this application, I regret to say that it has for the moment been refused until the school's deficit budget can be addressed. For the application to be approved, Oastlers is required to demonstrate a neutral budget. Its current budget deficit is £164,052. This deficit has been present since the early days of the school's journey. It is not an indication of financial mismanagement, rather a direct consequence of an ill-advised strategy imposed on us by the local authority to fill the school as quickly as possible on opening.

Unlike other new schools within the local authority, such as Dixons Trinity Academy, OIAM and Bradford Forster Academy, which all filled (or are filling) from the bottom year groups up, Oastlers was expected to fill concurrently through all year groups from the offset. Despite grave misgivings, we looked at viable strategies to deliver on this expectation.

However, significant issues and instabilities within initial intakes at Years 7 and 10 stalled efforts to fill the school any further at that early stage in its development, and further admissions were suspended until sustained stability could be restored.

To have continued admitting learners at this point would have posed serious health and safety risks to the school community, and this had to take precedence over the admission process. We were determined not to fail the authority by allowing disastrous consequences similar to those that befell Foremost School in Harrogate in 2013. Subsequent admissions were later managed on a case by case basis which allowed the team to create and maintain a safe and secure environment in school which I am very pleased to say continues to exist.

The school opened in September 2013 with a pre-opening budget of £445,738. By March 2014, there was a balance of £10,194. In April of the same year, a decision was taken to fund the school based on the actual number of pupils on roll, not the overall capacity for which the school was set up. In light of the admission issues I have described above, this decision immediately set a deficit trajectory in motion from which the school has not been able to fully recover. Additional factors such as a change of plan by the local authority to not fill the school from the temporary ESB school at the Ellar Carr site, and slower than anticipated referrals from SEN, have hampered efforts to address the deficit. There have also been other relevant unanticipated costs, including the following:

- Increases to pension and national insurance contributions at £60,000
- Building issues amounting to just under £20,000
- West Yorkshire pension deficit costs at £9,000

Despite these challenges, prudent management and effective collaboration with SEN has meant that the most recent forecast has reduced the deficit to a projected year-end figure of £164,052. Of the 90 places available in school (including a 10 place sixth form provision), current occupancy is at 74 with an expectation that this will rise to 87 by September 2016. Lower school is full; spaces are in Y11, which by now are no longer viable to fill. As the school moves forward, we do not anticipate any spaces.

Had we pursued the strategy of filling the school from the lower year groups upwards, it would have taken six years to reach full capacity, but this has been achieved in just over three years in an attempt to bring a speedier resolution to our budget difficulties. We have also increased year group sizes from 14 to 16 and approached the BACs for additional KS4 referrals. Other cost saving measures the school has put into place include minimal purchasing of resources, prioritising access to external courses/training, delayed recruitment and creative use of Pupil Premium.

Unfortunately, we are now at the point where we cannot reduce the deficit any further with current strategies as forecasts indicate a cost neutral financial projection on future activity.

The Governing Body is very proud of the achievements and outstanding progress made by learners and staff at Oastlers School in the time it has been open. We feel strongly that the school still has so much more to offer both to local learners and as an increasingly important source of support and expertise for local mainstream schools. However, if Oastlers is to fulfil this potential, the barrier of the deficit must be resolved, in a similar manner in which other Bradford mainstream schools have been supported. We are now at a crucial point where we need your assistance to move the school forward.

Many thanks for your consideration and we look forward to your response.

Yours sincerely



Robert Fairbairn – Chair of Governors
On behalf of Oastlers Governing Body
Cc: Andrew Redding