



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

LONDON SW1A 0AA

The Rt Hon Bridget Phillipson MP  
Secretary of State for Education  
Department for Education  
Sanctuary Buildings  
20 Great Smith Street  
London  
SW1P 3BT

4<sup>th</sup> October 2024

Dear Bridget,

I am writing to convey the concerns raised by Bedford Borough Council regarding the proposal to remove independent schools from current VAT exemptions for educational organisations. The greatest concern is that this policy is being pushed forward without any proper assessment of the impact on our local state school system. This is a concern that I share. With a significant proportion of local families choosing to educate their children privately and with a state school vacancy rate already below the recommended national minimum, Bedford Borough is likely to be disproportionately affected.

Bedford Borough currently has 12.6% of its pupils attending independent schools, nearly double the national average of 6.5%. The Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) estimates a 3-7% reduction in independent school enrolment following this policy, potentially leading to an additional 138 to 322 pupils seeking places in state schools.

Bedford's secondary schools however already face a shortage of spaces, with only 277 places available across all year groups. This represents just a 2.3% surplus, well below the DfE's recommended 5%. For Year 10, only 18 places remain across 13 schools. Additionally, Bedford Borough's school-age population has grown by over 1,000 pupils in the past two years due to net migration adding further strain on the system.

While a school capital programme is in place to meet current growth, it does not account for a likely influx of pupils from independent schools following this policy. The Council has a statutory duty to provide school places, yet accommodating these additional pupils from independent schools will create budgetary, capital, and transport challenges, especially since Local Authorities will not receive funding for students joining schools after the October census.

I have spoken with the Chief Officer for Education, SEND, and Schools Infrastructure at Bedford Borough Council, who is seeking clarity on whether additional school capital and revenue funding will be provided to support Local Authorities like Bedford Borough Council, which will be disproportionately affected by the proposed policy.

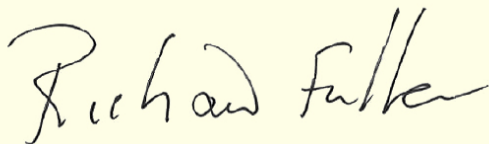
Finally, Bedford Borough was promised a new Secondary Free School by the Department for Education to address existing and future demand. However, I understand that plans for this project are now under review and may be at risk.

Considering the above please can you respond to the following questions:

1. Will the Department reconsider the proposed policy to remove independent schools from current VAT exemptions for educational organisations?
2. If not, how will the Department ensure that every child can access a school place in Bedford Borough?
3. What steps will the Department take to assist families unable to secure a school place?
4. What mitigation measures will be made to address the shortfall in school places that could arise from this policy?
5. Will additional school capital and revenue funding be allocated to Local Authorities like Bedford Borough Council which are disproportionately affected to manage the impact?
6. Given that Local Authorities do not receive funding for pupils joining after the October census, how will Local Authorities be supported financially to accommodate these additional students mid-year?
7. Will the planned secondary Free School in Bedford Borough still proceed? If not, will appropriate basic need capital funding be allocated to Bedford Borough Council to ensure it can meet its statutory obligations to provide necessary school capacity?

I would greatly appreciate your response to these concerns and look forward to hearing what specific plans the government has in place to reassure local families and communities about the future support for schools in Bedford Borough.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Richard Fuller". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Richard Fuller MP