

Free school sought to limit number of special needs and additional English speakers 19 Oct 2017

by Ann McGauran and Warwick Mansell

A free school chain limited the number of pupils it accepted into one of its primary schools after its leader argued that this would mean it would not have to take on large numbers of special needs and English-as-a-second-language children, official documents have revealed.

The Bellevue Place Education Trust (BPET) reduced by half the cap on numbers taken into its reception class at Halley House free school in Hackney, east London, after its chief executive, Mark Greatrex, warned that it did not want an intake with “huge EAL and SEN”. Doing so would also “protect [the school’s] existing children”, he told a BPET board meeting.

Greatrex told us that the decision was approved by the local authority and that it had been taken to “provide the highest quality education provision to the children who joined the school and not to be compromised by the addition of one or two pupils in-year”.

The thinking behind the decision to reduce the school’s Planned Admission Number(PAN), which sets out the maximum number of pupils to be accepted into reception, from 60 to 30 for the 2015-16 academic year is set out in a BPET board paper, released to Education Uncovered under Freedom of Information. The document also sees Greatrex asked about the “public impact” the move might have on the school, but responding that the information did not need to be made public.

The revelation comes with the issue of whether schools are always willing to take on SEN and other vulnerable pupils increasingly discussed, though it is very rare to find a school’s reluctance to take on such children clearly evidenced in documents

Jarlath O’Brien, a headteacher and author of a book on “marginalised” children, *Don’t Send Him in Tomorrow*, said: “Schools are supposed to serve all of their communities, meeting the needs of all children.

“If that school community has a proportion of children with EAL or SEN needs, there should be funding and support routes to support that. It should not be turning children away.”

BPET’s original application to the Department for Education to set up Halley House as a free school (<http://bit.ly/2fOAzjE>, originally to be called Dalston Free Primary School) sets out the intention for Halley House to be two-form entry, with 60 pupils in reception at opening in 2015 and then building up with a further 60 the following year, and so on.

The school actually admitted 31 in September 2015, but a board meeting that month seemed to conclude that there would be more pupils in future, as the school was “educationally very strong”.

However, BPET’s board meeting of 15th December, 2015 saw the recommendation to limit the number of pupils admitted in this first year – effectively a cap on numbers admitted mid-year – by reducing the PAN from 60 to 30.

The minutes say: “MG [Mark Greatrex] requested a decision from the Board on the recommendation from the Local Governing Body that the school reduces its PAN [Planned Admission Number] to 30 from 60.

“This reduction will be for this year only with the following year groups reverting back to 60.

“MG explained that the advantage to this is we can protect the existing children and prevent an intake of new children with huge EAL and SEN for the next six years. MG noted that this would only be for this year group and will be working hard to obtain 60 for the following year.”

The minutes add that Greatrex, on being asked by a BPET director about the “public impact” of the move, said: “the Trust does not need to make this information public”.

Invited to respond, Greatrex told us that the PAN for 2015-16 had not actually been reduced, but that it “was agreed with the local authority that no further children would be allocated in that year,” although “if a parent wanted to their child to attend the school, we would be obliged and happy to admit the child”. He said this notional cap at 30 was not extended into the 2016-17 academic year, with the PAN set at 60 and the school now having 41 pupils in its 2016-17 intake and 37 who started last month.

Its PAN is also 60 for the 2018-19 academic year, Hackney’s school admissions document <http://bit.ly/2xy5zhH> shows.

Government guidance (<http://bit.ly/2xi2ouV>) says academies – free schools are a type of academy – can change their Published Admission Number without consultation. This is because they are defined as being their “own admissions authority”, unlike local authority schools, where the LA sets the admissions policies, including school PANs.

Greatrex told us: “As a new school with 31 pupils on day one, the concern was that if a few more pupils were admitted in-year, this would create a financial challenge for the school and potentially jeopardise the education of the children on roll.

“SEN and EAL were only specifically mentioned, in reference to a very small school, with regards to the school’s ability to meet the needs of all pupils – our core purpose that we are not prepared to compromise on.

“Opening as a 2-form entry, the proposed cap was agreed with the local authority, as there was not the need for places in the area that year, though we clearly recognise that if a parent wanted their child to attend the school, we would be obliged and happy to admit the child.”

He added: “The first year of a new school is a challenging one and the decision to cap the school at one form of entry was taken to provide the highest quality education provision to the children who joined the school and not be compromised by the addition of one or two pupils in-year, that would have placed a huge financial burden on a small school. A cap has not been sought for further years, with the school taking on all pupils and managing challenging year group sizes.”

Greatrex initially provided us with figures showing that, as of this year, 11 per cent of Halley House pupils have SEN, compared to a national average of 14 per cent, though he said some pupils were still being assessed. The percentage of pupils with English as an additional language was in line with national averages, he said, at 21 per cent.

We went back to him to ask how the figures compared with more local data. He said the proportion of children with special educational needs in Hackney was 16 per cent, which is slightly higher than the national average, and suggests the rate at Halley House is five percentage points lower than in the local authority.

As for children with English as an additional language, the picture in Hackney is very different from nationally, with Greatrex telling us that 52 per cent of pupils in the local authority are classed as having EAL. This means that the proportion of EAL pupils in Halley House is far below what it is across the local authority. If such children are challenging, then, for schools, other local schools would appear to face tougher challenges than Halley House.

BPET – which runs seven free schools across London and in Maidenhead – says on its website all its schools are focused on delivering “high quality provision in areas where there is a shortage of primary school places”.

However, Greatrex’s comment that there was not a need for as many as 60 school places in the Halley House area in 2015 seems to stand in contrast to that statement, and also to the predictions in the school’s free school application form, submitted only two years before, in 2013.

Indeed, the school appears to have recruited well short of its predictions in that application, which would have seen it having 180 pupils across three year groups by this academic year, compared to the 108 Greatrex said were now on roll. This means the school has only recruited to 60 per cent of the prediction in its application form.

In response, Greatrex said: “Halley House School was opened with the support of the local authority, delivering the need for additional spaces in the area that was required at the time. While the building is not in the ideal location for our identified demand, we have successfully operated a school with strong pupil outcomes... Our experience in maintaining a number of free schools shows that there is sometimes a slow uptake in parental demand for a new school, with no external [Ofsted] reports available. We are confident the school will reach capacity over the next three years on entry.” Advertising signs on the school’s fences, which we saw on a visit to the site on October 7th, said “Places still available, apply today!”

Greatrex joined BPET in May 2015. He resigned as a director of the trust in December 2016, but remains its chief executive. He is described on its website as having worked with academies for the Department of Education from 2004, “supporting the brokering and feasibility of under-performing schools or new provision as what is now known as ‘sponsored’ academies throughout the country”.

Before joining BPET he worked for the E-ACT academy chain from 2009, becoming its director of strategy and business. He was a member of the E-ACT board from September 2011 until 2013. According to the BPET website he worked with former minister of state for education Lord Adonis on the production of the latter’s book on education reform – *Education, Education, Education*.