

Free school development support from the Co-operative College

Context

The government is continuing to promote Free Schools within a wider strategy for diversification of educational provision and providers.

323 applications were received for the 2011-12 round, of which approximately 10% moved to business case planning stage.

The number of start-up Free Schools can be expected to move towards a group of up to 200 during the course of the 2012-13 academic year, creating a significant bloc of schools within the new learning provision environment.

The Co-operative College has engaged with a pilot group of four Free School applications, two of which progressed to short-listing/interview stage and we expect one to be accepted to develop a full busi plan with a view to opening in September 2013.

This briefing note is designed to provide an opportunity to review and refine the position of the College on Free School policy and should be read in conjunction with the existing position paper on Academies and Free Schools.

The current briefing paper discusses two key questions:

To what extent should the College engage with the Free Schools Programme?

How should the College identify the more appropriate projects with which to be associated ?

What is the typical commitment of College resources and does the process of engagement provide a realistic opportunity for a return on investment ?

Which proposals should the Co-operative College be supporting?

The number of Free school proposal developments is likely to continue growing as those in the latest round are evaluated and the results publicized by the DfE.

The DfE is itself applying increasingly clear criteria to avoid the worst excesses of incoherence in planning of provision and places.

A specific definition applied at the assessment stage is that the application should show clear evidence of *the demand for this particular type of school*.

It seems reasonable that the Co-operative College should apply a screening test to determine which, if any, of the many requests for support should be followed through. This is important both as a matter of principle and as a necessary process to protect the College's identity and reputation.

Suggested criteria for Co-operative College engagement with Free School proposals:

1. Proposers should evidence a clear commitment to co-operative principles
2. Proposers should evidence support for the proposal from the local community by way of significant consultation work already undertaken
3. Proposers should provide evidence of how the proposed school will strengthen strategic links to existing or proposed educational provision within the wider community

4. A rationale for the particular case and characteristics of a Free School should be put forward, as part of any request for assistance or advisory input

What is the level of commitment required from the Co-operative College?

To develop a sound proposal for a Free School requires significant commitment, resource and energy over a lengthy period. The work requirement is easily underestimated, particularly around the key issues of sustainability (business plan) and securing hard evidence of community engagement.

The pilot schemes, such as the West London Free School, have germinated over a period of around 18 months; this pattern is reflected in the stronger proposals which have benefited from Co-operative College input in the latest (2012 start-up) round of applications.

The key to successful proposals and to successful partnership working with the College lies in early engagement. It is not realistic to produce a robust proposal meeting the DfE assessment criteria in a period offering less than a year of preparation and planning.

Essential elements are set out in the flowchart below, indicating three phases, each involving periods of around 4-6 months. College involvement would ideally commence from the second phase.

Based on experience from our pilot advisory work, it is likely that an allowance of around 6-8 days support would be typical (excluding legal costs).

This support would initially need to be “at-risk” provision by the College, with an agreement that costs would be recouped from the school’s academy start-up funding, should the proposal ultimately be successful.

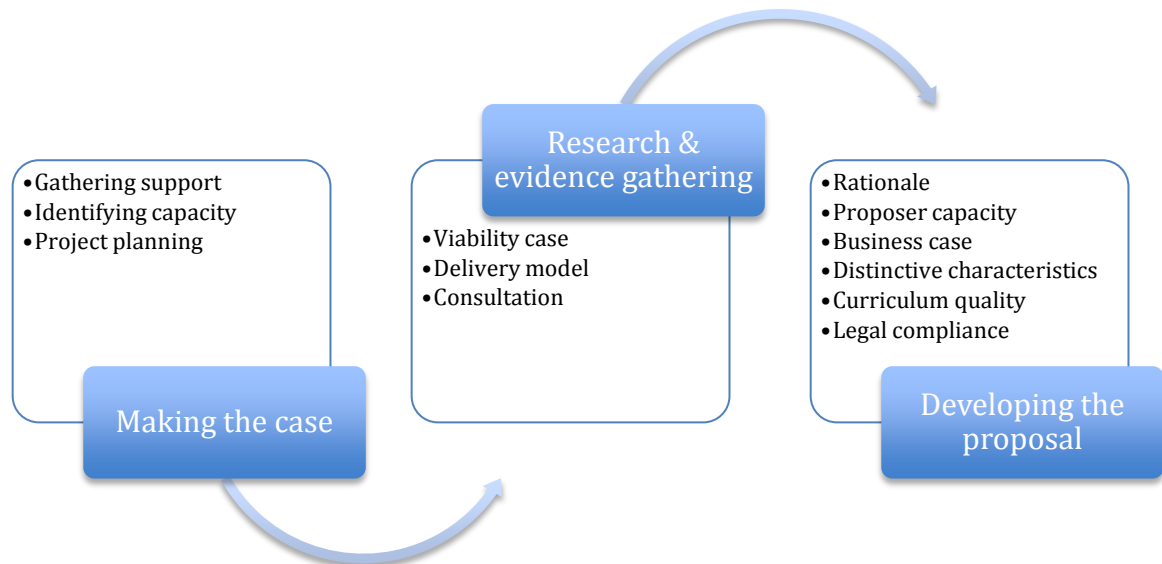
Board members will recall that when the free schools policy was announced by David Cameron, he stated *“I want to explore how we can create a new generation of co-operative schools in Britain, funded by the taxpayer, but owned by parents and the local community”*.

The free schools approved to date contain none that fall into the above category and the New Schools Network now actively encourages for profit providers, with parents groups essentially being used to demonstrate demand, effectively doing the market research for such providers.

We therefore recommend

- Priority in the College co-operative schools development strategy be with trust schools and co-operative converter academies.
- That as a matter of policy the College does not support the development of free schools in cases where they would clearly damage existing provision.
- That, where the College is asked to provide support for free school development:
 - 1 Proposers should evidence a clear commitment to co-operative principles
 - 2 Proposers should evidence support for the proposal from the local community by way of significant consultation work already undertaken
 - 3 Proposers should provide evidence of how the proposed school will strengthen strategic links to existing or proposed educational provision within the wider community

- 4 A rationale for the particular case and characteristics of a Free School should be put forward, as part of any request for assistance or advisory input
- That, where support requests do appear to meet the above criteria support be an initial meeting and any additional support on a full cost recovery basis reported to the Board.



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