

Annex A



department for
children, schools and families

Sanctuary Buildings
London
SW1P 3BT

To Nominated Local Authority
Primary Capital Programme Leads

Tel: 0207 9255251
Email:
peter.connell@dcsf.gsi.gov.uk

31 March 2008

PRIMARY CAPITAL PROGRAMME: NOTIFICATION OF ISSUES/CONCERNS TO BE ADDRESSED IN PRIMARY STRATEGY FOR CHANGE.

We said in the 6 December guidance on the delivery of the Primary Capital Programme that we would notify local authorities in advance where we had specific concerns about standards or surplus places. Since then we have received enquiries from a number of local authorities about the proposed handling of this commitment and we have concluded that the most helpful approach is to write to all local authorities to clarify expectations.

On **standards**, we expect **all** local authorities to show clearly in their strategy for change how overall capital investment will support wider local strategies to strengthen school performance and deliver better outcomes for children. It is important that local authorities appreciate that this investment is not simply a school building programme; it also needs to drive improvements in educational performance.

In particular, working with the Office of the Schools Commissioner and the National Strategies, we will continue to challenge and support local authorities to improve performance where:

- a) the combined percentage of pupils achieving level 4+ at KS2 for English and mathematics places them in the bottom 25% of local authorities nationally; or
- b) there are concerns about the number of schools in intervention or overall capacity to improve standards,

Local authorities should have regard to the latest information on the progress of primary schools in prioritising investment through the primary capital programme. Detailed information used by the DCSF and the National Strategies has been made available in the National Strategies e-room for each Authority. If you are not already aware of the Integrated Data Set for Standards and the National Strategies

RAG ratings for your LA you will be able to obtain the password to gain access to the LA e-room for your authority through your Head of School Improvement who is the designated contact .

With regard to **surplus places**, and in the light of recent misleading press reports, I should make clear that there has been no change in existing safeguards to protect rural schools; as Jim Knight's letter of 31 January to Directors of Children's Services made clear (copy attached for ease of reference). The guidance acknowledges that in order to preserve access for young children, there may be a need for more surplus places in rural schools - particularly where these are popular with local parents and there is no alternative school within a reasonable travel distance.

That said, it is important to recognise that too many surplus places can represent a poor use of resources. In some urban areas, it may also be an indication that a school is unpopular – perhaps because parents are concerned about standards. As birth rates fall and rise in different areas, local authorities have a responsibility as service commissioners to consider whether schools are delivering what parents want and in the right places. Against this background, it is clearly right that **all** local authorities look critically at strategies for securing an appropriate balance between supply and demand.

We said in the guidance that local authorities should work towards reducing overall surplus to under 10% with no school having more than 25%. However, we recognise that circumstances will vary from area to area and that the scale and difficulty of bringing supply and demand of school places into balance varies substantially from area to area. In looking at strategies for change, therefore, we will be looking primarily at whether local authorities have looked at how to make effective use of capital investment to support local place planning over the life of the programme, with early and decisive action to tackle surpluses in unpopular schools given a high initial priority.

I should remind local authorities that reducing surplus places does not necessarily mean that the schools affected should close. It may be possible to achieve significant reductions in surplus places by removing temporary accommodation by rationalising school space and/or to to achieve equivalent efficiencies through federation and co-location of services. The Primary Capital Programme provides opportunities to look strategically at whether surplus accommodation can be adapted for alternative use, broadening the services their schools offer in line with the likely future pattern of children's services and the needs of local communities. I attach the latest available data on surplus places in the primary sector which shows the general distribution of surplus places.

Finally, a reminder that we are developing a template to capture electronically key data on your initial investment priorities. We will circulate this within the next few weeks.

Peter Connell
Primary Capital Programme (Planning)