



Hello

We write to you as founders of Aspire Free School, a provision for children with 'High Functioning Autism' in Kent. We ourselves are parents of children with autism and know only too well the battles faced by these remarkable young people and those that parents endure every single day. We know the hardship in receiving a diagnosis, obtaining an Education Health Care Plan (previously known as a Statement of Educational Needs), and finding a school that will not only meet but exceed your expectations for your child. For we ourselves have run that gauntlet and now have our children in fantastic, supportive schools, and the difference is amazing, we want this for other families too. However, this all comes at a price. Our children leave their home for school around 7.15am and they return at 4.45pm, if the traffic is good. They travel in an unfamiliar car with strangers. We would like to take them to school ourselves at the normal time and with other children from the area they live but there are no schools locally to meet their specific and complex needs.

The majority of special schools in Kent are vastly oversubscribed and there simply are not enough spaces.

There are 22,961 disabled children in Kent and the Local Authority currently spend £17 million on transporting 4,000 children with Special Educational Needs to their nearest appropriate school. For children with High Functioning Autism living in Swale, this could be an hour or more journey, each way. How can this be right?



Aspire Free School is founded on the ambition to transform the life opportunities available to these young people with Autism and their families. The proposal for the school is to create a provision for those children who cannot access a mainstream environment due to their difficulties and hold an EHCP with High Functioning Autism as their primary need. Young people aged from 7 to 19 years, would learn the National Curriculum, taught in a thematic approach with many opportunities to develop and practice the skills that other children learn naturally. Our children do not know how to travel on public transport or who to ask for directions if they make a mistake. They need teaching how to answer a phone appropriately, let alone knowing how to be responsible in a work based environment. Aspire wants to help children live independently, to be successful in work and have a future. We want families to be supported, a summer camp and eventually a holiday, all designed with the child in the centre of it all, everybody from staff, to therapists, to parents and the young person working together, celebrating positives and working with the difficulties faced.

Our bid to the Department has developed over the past two years in response to the feedback received from them. The first application was classed as "one of the best we have ever seen" but left us short on commissioned places from Kent County Council. We were instructed not

to "make wholesale changes." The second application in October 2014 was more successful, having doubled the number of commissioned places and strengthening other areas of the complex application, our team were invited to attend an interview in January 2015. Team meetings and preparation took place over Christmas and the New Year. Unfortunately, again the bid was unsuccessful, in four areas - we had to increase our commitment from Kent again to all places being commissioned, change our bid to accept children only with an EHCP rather than our proposed combination of both, consider working with a Multi Academy Trust and revisit the educational framework we had previously proposed. The Department "urged" us to reapply in May 2015, leaving just six weeks to prepare and adapt our application accordingly. Being ones to rise to a challenge, and used to adapting in many situations (our Autistic children had prepared us well!) we set about with the team to rectify and strengthen the areas of concern, once again devoting many hours and sleepless nights into finding the right solution for our potential students. Many meetings were held and one by one the application became even more defined with 100% commissioned places from Kent County Council. Two leading educational establishments (a university and local inclusive school with a high ratio of Special Educational Needs children) agreed to work with us in the form of a partnership and provide leadership support and best practice for our students. The educational team created a brilliant curriculum with life skills and educational content interweaved into one whilst learning the National Curriculum subjects as our framework and the Autism Education Trust as guidance. Lastly, we had to make the tough decision not to accept children without an EHCP as this made the school more viable, despite knowing, that these children also desperately need somewhere they can reach their full potential too, that is not a derogatory statement against all mainstream schools, we accept that there are some wonderful provisions with very dedicated staff.

The application process itself has a very limited page count of a maximum 100 pages, which to be frank is a tall order, not in finding information to fill the document but in eliminating some of your plans and hoping that what you write is what the Department is looking for. Each application was in excess of 54,000 words; dissertations are much shorter and easier! There are eight sections and five of those have sub sections too. This is a complex process and most definitely not for the faint hearted, we have been through just about every emotion possible over the past few years, and for what? The Department once again turned down our final application, this time with, in our opinion, minor feedback not mentioned in



previous rounds and one, we believe, significant to the whole free school policy - "This proposal would be significantly strengthened if Aspire Free School were to become part of a Multi Academy trust with experience of delivering this type of provision." Whilst the Free School policy encourages existing academies to set up new schools, it also actively promotes that these schools are for parents and community groups to provide education in areas of deprivation and parental demand. The Autism community have always recognised the need for Aspire Free School and in our final application, 44 parents had signed our survey to say that they would name the school as their first choice on their child's EHCP without even seeing the provision, out of the possible 24 places on

offer for opening year (2017). A total of 145 parents agreed that they would like their child to attend the school without seeing the provision, for 116 places on offer and a further 118 said they would like to see the school and meet staff first. Swale is the second highest area of deprivation in Kent. We feel that this school is still needed, so do our supporters, therefore we made the decision to set up a petition asking Nicky Morgan, Minister for Education to reconsider the application without potentially jeopardising our vision for the school and students by becoming a part of a Multi Academy Trust in these early years of development.

Please support our vision by signing the petition at Change.org on the following link:

<http://tinyurl.com/owc4yvp> or the full link is

https://www.change.org/p/nicky-morgan-mp-approve-the-bid-for-aspire-free-school-in-kent-a-provision-for-children-with-high-functioning-autism?recruiter=261995741&utm_source=share_petition&utm_medium=copylink

or visit our website here: <http://www.aspirefreeschool.co.uk>

Thank you

Sarah & Donna

