



Headteachers and Chairs of Governors

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Keith Bartley

Director for Learning & Culture

My reference

Your reference

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This matter is being dealt with by John Mitchell

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Dear Colleague

Charging in schools

Last year the Oxford and District branch of the Child Poverty Action Group published a report entitled 'The Costs of Education'.

The report looked at the results of a study into the costs to parents of education in the maintained sector in the form of charges and voluntary contributions. As the report acknowledges, the study was not intended as a representative survey but, rather, "to investigate the issues which face parents and to raise awareness for the purpose of identifying changes that need to be made to policies at different levels." The study was based on responses from parents in a number of Oxford City schools but its findings have a potential resonance and relevance for all Oxfordshire schools.

The report has been distributed to Oxfordshire County Councillors and local MPs, expressed a keen interest in our response to it. If you would be interested to see a copy of the CPAG report it is available, at a cost of £6.95 (30pp) from CPAG at 94 White Lion Street, London N1 9PF.

The Learning & Culture directorate leadership team considered the report soon after publication and was quick to affirm its support for the principle that no pupil should be disenfranchised from educational opportunities because of their parents' inability to pay and that every possible step should be taken to lessen the financial burden for those who find it hardest to pay or contribute. Hardly a radical approach you might think and, indeed, most of our schools have been operating on such a basis for many years.

The report did, however, note that not everything in the garden is rosy. From the directorate's point of view, for example, it was noted that local guidance on charging had not been updated since 1990 and it is known that a number of schools have not been complying with the law or the spirit of the law. Such lapses are frequently

unwitting but not always so. The opportunity has been taken, therefore, to update the Council's guidance on charging. The new guidance takes two forms.

- Model policy for schools to adapt to meet their needs
- Model text to explain charging policy to parents

Copies of both are attached to this letter. If you wish to adopt these models for your own use, 'word' versions may be downloaded from the following link:

http://education.oxfordshire.gov.uk/human_resources/policies/charging.cfm (right click on the links to the files and go to 'Save Target As.').

When the charging legislation was first introduced in 1988 there were concerns that it would inhibit a number of activities, particularly school trips. While there is some evidence that this happened, the majority of schools have been able to maintain their previous levels of activity. In some cases, however, this has been achieved, as noted above, by the failure to comply with the requirements – notably by charging for activities which should not be charged for.

There are some difficult balances to be struck. On the one hand school trips, in their various guises, offer undoubted and valuable educational opportunities and we should do all we can to provide them for as many pupils as possible. On the other, the costs associated with them, when the legal requirements are applied, can act as a disincentive. We need to do all we can to ensure that those families who are financially disadvantaged are not, also, disadvantaged in terms of their access to opportunities offered. We should, also, have particular regard to the needs of those pupils who are in public care.

In parallel with this re-examination of the issues surrounding charging, the directorate is starting to explore the idea of a 'cultural entitlement'. We have a vision that every school child in Oxfordshire should be entitled to experience a range of cultural opportunities throughout their school life; this is an ambitious notion which will take some time to develop. We believe that a core cultural entitlement programme should be free; whilst some additional services, particularly those for individual students or small groups (such as the music service) will be charged for. From October 2005 we will be piloting a new (free) cultural loans service to schools (initially in West Oxfordshire only), and extending this to the whole county from April 2006. I'm sure you will agree that this is an exciting and welcome development and we look forward to bringing you further news about it in due course.

If you have detailed questions about the accompanying guidance please contact the Governor Services team at Cricket Road on 01865 492047

Yours sincerely

John Mitchell
Education Officer and Assistant to the Director for Learning & Culture

