

## **"You have our full 22% guarantee!", or Learnings of the educational system of Great Britain to make benefit glorious borough of Bexley**

### **Down the memory pereulok**

One thing I remember about my Soviet-school English coursework is "the topics". A "topic" was a short speech that you needed to write and memorise, one out of twenty: at the exam, you would be asked to pick one at random. There was "My family". ("My dad is an engineer. My mom works at the city party committee". The "party" was, of course, the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. You can see where I get compassion for decent individuals trapped in questionable social groups. But I digress). There was "My home city", complete with a list of local manufacturing plants. (A locally-produced laundry detergent named "Barf" did not seem at all remarkable). There was "Space exploration". And then there was "The educational system of Great Britain".

All I can say about that gem now is that it mentioned grammar schools and comprehensive schools. The subject did not seem important at the time. The chances of ever visiting Great Britain were tiny. Maybe if I became a diplomat, or a scientist dispatched to Britain as part of an important Soviet delegation... A tourist trip to London was a theoretical possibility, but given that even my mom, a well-connected Communist official, was only allowed to go to a capitalist country (Italy!) once - in a group, of course - it did not sound plausible.

Oh how things change. (And then in February 2022 they change again, and become frighteningly close to how they once were, and in some ways even worse! But I digress). A Baron of Siberia is in the House of Lords (not even bothering to show up!), and the formerly young Tony is in Sidcup, London Borough of Bexley - looking at the 2018 manifesto of the local Conservatives, of all things.

### **The western promises**

The manifesto says:

"Bexley schools are rated as some of the best in the UK. Again, that is not a coincidence. It's the result of long-term planning and significant investment. It's also down to a huge effort by teachers and support staff who we encourage to keep standards high.

We are confident enough of our service to pledge that Bexley's nurseries, schools and colleges will be rated as good or outstanding.

We will take action quickly if schools underperform and work closely with Ofsted and the Department for Education to drive standards back up".

The 2022 local election comes, and Bexley Conservatives make "We delivered 100% of our promises!" their battle cry, repeating it in bold letters on every leaflet. "Did they really?" wonders Tony, and checks the Ofsted site for ratings of Bexley schools.

Ouch. Nine Bexley schools - or about one out of every nine Bexley schools - "Require improvement". The percentages of under-performing schools in the neighbouring Bromley and Greenwich are far lower. "What's going on?", wonders Tony, "Teresa O'Neill looks so sweet, she cannot possibly tell an untruth!"

### **Mystery solved?**

Democracy with a capital "D" saves the day. The Bexley constitution allows members of the public to ask questions to Bexley Cabinet members. Said Cabinet members can talk without

answering the question, or - kapow! - block awkward questions by planting "fake" members of the public ahead in the queue, but hey, at least they don't send you to the Gulag! On July 20, Tony gets his answer from Richard Diment, the brand-new Cabinet Member for Education. The Cabinet Member explains that the Bexley council is prepared to accept responsibility only for "maintained" schools, run by the council, and that those "maintained" schools are indeed all "Good" or "Outstanding".

### **Trust but verify**

"What exactly are these maintained schools?" "How many of Bexley schools are maintained and thus covered by the guarantee?" Good questions both, not asked on July 20. Let's look into them now, with the aid of these visualisations.

[https://public.tableau.com/app/profile/tony.of.sidcup/viz/BexleySchools/Overview\\_1](https://public.tableau.com/app/profile/tony.of.sidcup/viz/BexleySchools/Overview_1)

The first thing to know about modern-day English schools is the rise of academies - funded directly by the government, and independent of the local authority. Out of Bexley's 86 schools, 62 - i.e. three quarters! - are academies (some technically "free schools"), including 6 converted to academy status since 2019.

Next, there are actual "independent", i.e. private schools - 5 across Bexley, including 3 in Sidcup. Then there are "voluntary" schools, of two kinds: "voluntary controlled" (VC) and "voluntary aided" (VA). Both types are funded by the local authority, but only VCs are "controlled" by the council; VA schools are fairly independent in their operations. Bexley has only one VC school, Foster's Primary School in Welling, and eight VA schools, seven of them Catholic and one Church of England's. (CofE schools are mostly academies). Finally, there are "community schools", fully run by the council. Bexley has 10 of these, all primary, including one special-needs school, Marlborough School in Sidcup.

"Maintained schools" include "community schools", VA and VC. For Bexley, these number 10, 8 and 1, respectively, for a total of 19. Divide 19 by 86, and you see that 22% of Bexley schools are covered by the 2018 Bexley Conservatives guarantee.

(Recall that VA schools are operationally independent. Should the Bexley council really take credit - or blame! - for the efforts of school governors and teachers? The Cabinet Member thinks so).

So let's correct the 2018 manifesto promise to what it really meant. "We are confident enough of our service to pledge that **the fifth of** Bexley's nurseries, schools and colleges **which we run or fund** will be rated as good or outstanding".

Was the promise delivered? Not until a week before the May 5, 2022 election, but many weeks after the first "100% of manifesto promises delivered!" leaflets were ordered. Sidcup's Orchard Primary School, a community school run by the council, was rated "Needs Improvement" in 2018, but achieved "Good" rating in the Ofsted report published on April 29, 2022, after an inspection on March 8.

At present, all 19 of Bexley's maintained schools are rated "Good" or "Outstanding".

### **Is our children learning? (To read, write and math)**

When you look at Ofsted data, you quickly realise that Ofsted's definition of "Good" may not align with your own. For example, meet Parkway Primary School in Erith, where only 31% (!) of pupils "met the expected standard in reading, writing and maths" in 2019. Not far away in Erith is John Fisher Catholic Primary School, where the same percentage is 95%. Both schools are "Good" according to Ofsted.

Available only for 2019 at the latest, the metric - which I will abbreviate to RWM - is recorded for most primary schools (and primary schools are most of all schools) and provides a complementary measure of school "quality". How do Bexley schools fare on this scale?

First, one can examine the RWM variation across individual schools, and observe some high achievers (the two Catholic schools in Welling and Erith score above 90%), and some sub-50% disasters such as Parkway Primary School and St Paul's CofE Primary School in Erith, and Orchard Primary School and St Peter Chanel Catholic Primary School in Sidcup. (Although Orchard Primary School has improved since 2019, if its new rating is to be believed).

Second, one can compare Bexley primary schools - limiting focus to community schools just to make the manual data collection easier - with those in the neighbouring boroughs. I consider Bromley and Greenwich - and in one respect find the two to be opposites, with Bexley in the middle. In Conservative Bromley, community schools are nearly a thing of the past: Bickley Primary School is the only one left. In Labour Greenwich, on the other hand, most of primary schools are community schools. When I examine RWM distribution for community schools in Bexley and Greenwich - Bromley is barely there - I find Bexley schools gravitate towards the lower half. Only two Bexley community primary schools - Dulverton Primary School in Sidcup and Danson Primary School in Welling - score high. Four schools are a tad below the middle. Three schools - Parkway Primary School in Erith, Orchard Primary School in Sidcup and Longlands Primary School in Sidcup - are at the very bottom, ranked 1st, 3rd and 6th-worst respectively among 43 schools.

### **Summing up**

When Bexley Conservatives imply that Bexley schools are particularly good, that they strive to keep them that way, and that they succeed in that undertaking, they exaggerate. Apart from the selective secondary grammar schools - all academies, not run by the council - Bexley schools do not look special. The council runs a shrinking handful of primary schools - at present, 10 vs. 32 in Greenwich - and only in 2022 succeeded in making them all "Good" as far as Ofsted is concerned, but "Good" Ofsted ratings mask pretty dire outcomes in 3 out of 10 schools. ("Again, that is not a coincidence. It's the result of long-term planning and significant investment"). Cabinet Member Diment has his work cut out. Encouragingly, he lives in Sidcup - handy for a visit to Orchard Primary School or Longlands Primary School, although a little far from Parkway Primary School - unlike his predecessor, who appears to have overseen Bexley schools from Rochester, Kent. Let me say this on behalf of all Bexley parents: good luck, Richard.