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A TOUCH OF CLASS

Angus Kaye of Kinnarps describes what is possible when a school has a free hand to redesign itself

IN THE RUN-UP TO THE GENERAL ELECTION there has been heated discussion of the Tories' plans to introduce Swedish-style 'free schools' if and when they get into power.

Regardless of the rights or wrongs of the Swedish system, or private versus public education, Kinnarps' first-hand experience of the Scandinavian 'third way' of financing new schools has had a lot to teach us about how to create an educational environment that attracts pupils; allows the school's public areas to be used to generate revenue streams from adult education, conferencing and community use, and, ultimately, improves the all-round marketability of the school.

David Cameron recently argued: 'Where is it written that we can't have really great schools in our state sector? We can, but we need change to bring it about. We should be busting open this monopoly and allowing the churches and the charities and, yes, even the private schools to come in and set up great schools for us to send our children to.'

While those opposed to throwing open the doors to all comers worry that the

system will exacerbate the gulf between the haves and the have-nots, the pro-'free school' lobby cites freedom of parental choice, teacher motivation and pupil-led schooling as positive outcomes of the Scandinavian system (in which parents are given the freedom to spend their education allowance where they please). Advocates point to beautifully designed and appointed schools in Sweden, which appear to represent an educational facilities utopia.

Sweden's school choice system was introduced in 1992. It is based on a virtual 'voucher' which is equivalent in value to the average cost of educating a child in the local state school. Parents can use this voucher to 'buy' a place at the school of their choice. The idea is that funding follows the pupil and, as a result, the state supports the schools that are most popular with parents, forcing all schools to 'up their game'.

As with the Conservatives' proposals for the UK, the Swedish voucher cannot be 'topped up'. So, in other words, any private school participating in the scheme can't charge additional fees, nor can the privately

Advocates of the Swedish system point to beautifully designed and appointed schools

run schools select pupils on any basis other than first-come-first-served.

Before the advent of the voucher system there were hardly any private schools in Sweden. Now there are almost 800 and they educate around six per cent of all pupils. The jury is still out on whether or not educational standards have improved in line with the burgeoning private sector.

However, as a Swedish-owned company that specialises in workplace, care and education furniture, Kinnarps has had first-hand experience of the increased demand for beautifully designed and furnished schools arising from the introduction of competition into the Swedish state education sector.

Our education clients in Sweden have ►

St John's spacious, airy new buildings



All photography: Redshift Photography

the freedom (and rightly, or wrongly, the spur of competition) to choose furnishings that are flexible, sustainable and stylish, and look after the physical wellbeing of the pupils and staff.

After all, given a choice, parents are unlikely to spend their education kroner with a school that doesn't look like a state-of-the-art teaching environment or house their children in bright, nurturing and stimulating surroundings.

ST JOHN'S SCHOOL

Some of these lessons are already being learned in the UK, and Kinnarps recently worked with the management team at St John's school in Marlborough to create meeting, staff and public rooms with built-in flexibility and visual impact.

The school has been splashed all over the press recently, thanks to its



entrepreneurial approach to fundraising; the same spirit that drove the need for the flexibility that would allow St John's to use its available space as cost effectively as possible and to welcome external groups into the school, helping to top up the coffers. Barry Worth, who is business director at St John's, explains how his facilities management role has changed over the course of the project.

'I was the school bursar at the time when we were lobbying for public money to build a much-needed new school building. Despite the fact that we were trying to run a single comprehensive school between two sites 1.6 kilometres apart, it quickly became evident that government funding wasn't going to happen and that we were going to have to raise the finances ourselves.'

It must have been a daunting prospect. 'Our visionary head teacher, Dr Patrick Hazlewood, was absolutely committed to bringing the school together on a single site, and he came to the conclusion that as we were a foundation school, meaning that St John's and its assets are owned by the

governing body, we were in prime position to go it alone,' says Worth. 'However, I don't think I quite realised what I was letting myself in for when I agreed to take on the management of the project as business director.'

He continues: 'We believe we are the first people in England to rebuild an entire state school without public funds and it's been quite a learning curve. I've had to learn quickly about property deals, planning regulations, tendering processes and even how to go about getting a new access road built.'

Hazlewood's vision for the new school was always that its design would allow it to serve a far wider community than just its own pupils and staff, a vision that is reflected in an environment that The Times described as: 'A stunning series of buildings, designed to maximise natural light, exploit views over the surrounding downland and forests and feel like a community campus rather than a conventional school.'

Barry Worth was also tasked with ensuring that the school's 'public' spaces ▶



The furniture in the 'for let' areas had to have a professional as well as academic identity

would offer the flexibility not only to serve the needs of the student body, but to appeal to external groups and help to bring additional revenue in to the school.

'We had to factor in a whole host of considerations,' he explains. 'Obviously the school buildings and furnishings need to be durable enough to stand up to the exacting treatment dished out by enthusiastic teenagers during normal school life, but they also needed to be aesthetically pleasing enough to make other groups be prepared to spend money to use them.'

'We also needed to future-proof our investment in furnishing the school. So durability was a key factor, as was the choice of modular furniture that would allow us to increase and adapt our available workspaces as the changing working patterns of our staff and students demand.'

'For example, having realised that we needed a group of staff to be able to work closer together, we have been able to easily reconfigure an open-plan office space, which originally accommodated 14, to take 20 workstations.'

The school has its own theatre, built

to professional standards, with seating for 450, an amphitheatre, purpose-built science and music rooms, a 350-seat restaurant run by a professional chef, a fully-fitted dance studio and a sports hall with four full-sized badminton courts.

With the help of Kinnarps' local business executive, Steve Jones, Worth was able to develop plans that maximised the available space and choose furniture that gave the areas 'for let' a professional as well as an academic identity.

He was particularly pleased to find a furniture supplier that could help to ease the design burden. 'Steve was incredibly helpful,' he says. 'He took our flat floor plans and produced three-dimensional images, which made it much easier for the lay person to understand how the finished space would look and how the modular furniture could be moved and reconfigured to suit the needs of a range of user groups.'

'He even worked with a group of our sixth formers to design their common room, and generated images so they could see how their ideas might look in reality.'

Since the new buildings opened, Worth's remit, as business director, is to generate

income for the school by whatever means are available to him. As well as a steady flow of people using the well-fitted public spaces, attending evening classes, staging and supporting shows and dining in the high-spec restaurant, he is also finding that his knowledge of creating a well-designed, commercially viable school is in demand.

'I've found that many other schools are keen to share our success and to avoid making the mistakes that we have inevitably made during such a steep learning curve. So I now find myself being hired out as a consultant, advising other schools on fundraising and the planning and building process, so that they benefit from a better designed and more flexible environment too' **fmx**

Further Info

Angus Kaye, a qualified architect, is leading Kinnarps' development into the UK education sector.

www.kinnarps.com/en/uk