

Client: London Borough of Tower Hamlets
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THE SHAPE OF THINGS TO COME

Pupils at a London school are starting the new term at a state-of-the-art £30m campus, built to give them a brighter future. But, reports **RICHARD GARNER**, it's the last to slip through the net after Michael Gove scrapped the scheme

For years, the boys from Bow School have been bussed out of their own borough if they wanted to play sport. It has been time consuming and has left less time for other things they could be learning. There was no room, either, for them to take up dance or drama, in what was rapidly becoming a ramshackle building.

But this week, pupils have started moving into a £30m new building a mile from the school's old site, with state-of-the-art rooftop pitches where they can play football, cricket or tennis (netting prevents them from kicking or hitting the ball out on to the streets below), and an assembly hall that can double up as a 350-seat theatre. Dance and drama facilities abound and pupils lunch in what is described as a "dining pavilion", overlooking a garden and play area which backs on to a canal. There is a fitness studio at the new site, too.

Bow School in Tower Hamlets, east London, is one of the last schools in the country to benefit from the Building Schools for the Future programme, set up by Labour, and axed by the former Education Secretary, Michael Gove, soon after taking office – on the grounds that spending on it had been "profligate".

Luckily for Tower Hamlets, the east London authority that maintains the school, it had been further down the road than other boroughs in drawing up plans to spend Labour's cash, and as a result, its programme was reprieved. The borough also had one of the fastest-growing school populations in the country, with a projected 40 per cent increase in the number of

pupils over the next decade – another mitigating circumstance.

As a result of the investment, Bow is expanding massively. It will become a mixed school from the start of next term and the number of pupils on roll will eventually grow from its present 525 to 1,600.

Cath Smith has been headteacher at Bow for the past three years. She also had a stint in the 1980s as a teacher at the school's former site. "Education in those days – you can't really compare the two," Ms Smith says. "But there were some good teachers, who were really doing their best for the students."

There is now an air of excitement among pupils and staff about moving. "The students have been blown away by the new building – particularly the sports provision," she says.

"They love it and they can see that they've been given something really special here. There is a high level of respect for the new building."

The pupils are gradually moving from the old site to the new one, with only those taking exams still at the old school by the end of last term. "We didn't want to disrupt their education," says Ms Smith. "We had some end-of-term celebrations in the new school and we had a 'Bow's Got Talent' evening in the new theatre. We haven't been able to do that sort of thing before."

All pupils will be in the new building this term. Its wide corridors and open-plan classrooms also mean that there are fewer places for pupils to hide, and less jostling between them as they



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go from lesson to lesson. Teachers can keep an eye on them, with in-school behaviour likely to improve.

"It's a very nice school," says Jabbir Ahmed, aged 14. "We can play football on the roof, the theatre is like a cinema: it's like having a VIP seat for a production. It's much better; the other one was cramped and the corridors were quite small. It's really safe as well." Fana Roberts-Clarke, also aged 14, agrees: "It's a great place – much better than the other one."

The school had already built up a good academic reputation before leaving the old buildings, with the percentage of pupils getting five A* to C grade passes at GCSE going up from just 4 to 89 per cent in the past 15 years. The percentage with five A* to Cs including maths and English was 61 per cent – above the Government's floor target for schools. However, Ms Smith is relishing the chance to broaden the curriculum now that they have moved into their new buildings.

In contrast with many other areas facing population expansion, this part of Tower Hamlets was provided with the infrastructure for education provision before the effects of the major housing expansion were felt. The borough is now in the top 10 areas of the country for sending pupils to the most selective Russell Group universities.

The future – in terms of the qualifications gained by the pupils at Bow – is looking bright. For the first time, the school will have sixth-form provision. Some educationalists believe that it will be easier to persuade students to

continue with their studies if they can do so in a familiar environment – a view that appears to be shared by the pupils.

It is not just from within Tower Hamlets that the new building has been praised, though. Sir Nicholas Serota (the Tate director worked with the school to design a safe new underpass) describes the design as a "remarkable achievement".

"This was a really uninspiring site [before]: it was a waste site, there was flytipping," says Sir Nicholas. "It's remarkable the way in which they have managed to place the building on the site to give protection to the pupils and pay appropriate attention to the environment.

"You would barely know that there's a major road on the other side of the wall, and you have this beautifully landscaped garden next to the canal and can imagine this being a place that young people will really enjoy

growing up in."

You could try telling those involved with the project that it was part of a "profligate" school buildings programme, but they would argue that it was money well spent. ●

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New heights: The rooftop pitches at Bow School, overlooking the garden and canal

SUSANNAH IRELAND



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