

Notes of PCHS Trust Public Consultation Meeting, Wednesday 1 July 2009 from 6.00pm

27 in attendance

Q1) A member of the public queried the effectiveness of notices sent to parents by post or e-mail. Many parents were not aware of the meeting.

A) Mr Prandle, the headteacher, (SJP) and Mrs Taverner – Normal good practice had been followed in informing parents by e-mail where they had provided their e-mail address for communication from the School. Letters had been sent by post to those without a registered e-mail address or where an e-mail delivery failure notice was received. Notices had been sent to partnership middle & first schools, Ponteland library, councillors and a range of businesses and community groups as well as being displayed in a number of local shops. A full distribution list was available on the School website. The School would reflect on the effectiveness of this notification.

A show of hands indicated 15 parents present.

Q2) Why the rush to finish the process by January 2010?

A) SJP – The statutory process for consultation sets out appropriate timescales and these fit comfortably within this target.

Q3) Parent – people that are here want to listen: we do not know whether or not those not here did receive email

Presentation

SJP – The proposed Trust status was not to be confused with academy or grant maintained status. It would remain funded and controlled through the Local Authority (LA) and would not be controlled by its partner businesses. Trust status would not remove the school from any future reorganisation of schools. Teaching staff terms and conditions were set nationally and this would not change. Support staff terms and conditions would be maintained. The land and buildings would be held in trust and the trustees could not dispose on any part of this without LA approval. There was national emphasis on developing a range of school organisational structures. A number of innovative structures were emerging in Northumberland including federations between schools, academies in Blyth and Hirst and trusts in Ashington and Haydon Bridge. Some of these were to tackle problems but Ponteland was able to look to innovation from a position of strength.

Governors had been attracted to the co-operative trust model, based on their ethical values, with a minority of trust governors and a stakeholder council. The arrangement arguably provided greater democratic accountability than existing arrangements.

Newcastle International Airport, Northumbria University Business School and the Cooperative Group had agreed to join us as partners. Their input would help to improve School standards and could offer support to other partnership schools. The Trust, as a charity, may have access to additional funding but this is not the main aim.

Two local first schools and two local middle schools had considered joining us in consultation. They had decided not to go to consultation yet but had not ruled out joining later. We hope they will participate in the stakeholder council and eventually join the Trust.

Mike Brown (Chair of Governors) invited questions

Q3) John Blundell (Ponteland Town Council) not representing council. Some residents have asked me, as a councillor, to pose some questions – here as a councillor for this purpose.

1 Some staff feel excluded from consultation. Representatives had not been allowed to address the governing body and staff were not allowed to attend this public meeting.

A) SJP – The School had stuck to the letter and spirit of consultation. Staff input to governing body was via elected staff governors. Staff and unions were able to put their views forward both at these meetings and in writing and governors would consider all responses made. It was not clear where the impression that staff were to be excluded from this public meeting had come from.

Mike Brown – It had been made clear at the Staff meeting that they would be welcome at this meeting and some are here.

2 How will the trust raise standards? Is there any evidence that this will happen?

A) SJP – This is a long term process, external partners on board for benefit of both staff and students. e.g. Newcastle International Airport deliberately a big 3rd sector partner rather than big business. Travel & Tourism Diploma – natural links to airport.

3 Why are partners more likely to get involved with a Trust than without them?

A) SJP – There has been cooperation without a trust but it has been sporadic and down to individuals taking the initiative. A Trust's Memo of Understanding serves to set up, maintain and develop sustainable and dynamic links. We need this long term input.

4 What about shared facilities and resources with Ponteland Middle School?

A) SJP – Areas of the site are currently designated as belonging to the middle school, to the high school or as being shared. This status quo is reflected in a draft agreement being developed by the two schools and the LA.

Q4) Had the school used Pont News and Views to publicise the consultation?

A) SJP - No.

Q5) Does the School have links with professional engineering organisations like the IET to support science and engineering subjects alongside languages?

A) SJP – The school had made some enquiries but had received no reply as yet. This suggestion would be followed up. Potential support for engineering diploma courses and science subjects would be welcome.

Q6) regarding comment wanting a possible new date for meeting – if parents were concerned they would be here (as in school re-organisation) despite lack of clear communication 100s had turned up to that meeting.

She asked about responding to the consultation. It would have been better to include a separate response form. A Q&A document was referred to but was not included in the consultation pack.

A) Mrs Taverner – Response forms were included in the booklet in the pack and responses could also be submitted by e-mail. The Q&A document referred to was bulky and was available on the School website.

Q7) I understand how voluntary aided schools work and your aspirations are hard to argue with but what are the real benefits of a cooperative trust? How does it affect the school and the running of the School? How does trust governance operate?

A) SJP – Partners would provide links to a number of supportive resources. The Cooperative Group, for example, would provide links to its business colleges, its network of international organisations and its own fairtrade partners. Partner organisations would nominate some trustees and others would be elected by the stakeholder forum. The stakeholder forum would be open to, and allow input from, parents, young people, councillors, local businesses and the community. The Trust would nominate only a small minority of governors to the Schools governing body so would not control the School.

Q8) I have a child joining the school in September. Have parents of Y8 pupils been informed of this consultation?

A) SJP – Information had gone to both middle schools. (Discussion suggested that Ponteland Middle School had passed the information to parents but Richard Coates Middle School may not have done so).

Q9) OfSTED had graded Ponteland High School outstanding only for its 6th form provision. Queen Elizabeth High School, Hexham, and King Edward VI High School, Morpeth, had been graded as outstanding. Had Ponteland High School management taking their eye off the performance ball due to the Trust proposal contributed to missing an 'outstanding' OfSTED result?

A) SJP – A fall in '5 GCSEs including English and maths' results was the principal reason for missing an 'outstanding' judgement. The School believed that the reasons for this had been identified and addressed. It was hoped that this would soon be supported by GCSE results for the current year.

Q10) Asked about trade union leaflet and how many staff this represented

A) SJP – 58 people had attended the staff consultation, including some trade union officers. About 14 had spoken.

Q11) Might trust status lead to a high turnover of staff in January?

A) SJP – We doubt that anybody would leave for ideological reasons. No negative impact on staffing anticipated. The School had a good record in terms of staff turnover.

Q12) Y7 parent – Would staff be employed by the Trust?

A) SJP – No, they would be employed by the school governors.

Q13) Would trust status have any impact on statemented SEN pupils?

A) SJP – No, SEN delivery is statutory responsibility so no impact

Q14) There had been a steady diminution of LA responsibilities since 1974. This looks like removal from the LA to an unelected body. Does the Cooperative Group have a political bias or links?

A) SJP – The Co-op College is non-political. There had been a process of central government retaining more powers and, during the last two periods of government, review of the LA role based on thinking that local managers in schools may be more effective than a concentration of staff in the LA. The cooperative trust structure is a third-way approach to governance. It can be more reflective of the community's wishes and more democratic through structured association with the Trust.

Q15) The points about notice of consultation are important. Personally not necessarily against the proposal. We have spoken about the local community. Will there be any impact on rural communities in terms of school travel etc?

A) SJP – No impact on home to school transport etc. Extended services were expanding their activities in the rural areas. Stamfordham First School had been interested in consulting on joining the trust until very end when Ponteland Middle School decided not to consult yet. Richard Coates Middle School already has its own trust and so could be involved but not as members of a second trust.

Q16) Can you clarify the decision making process?

A) SJP – Governors will consider responses to this consultation, including comments made at this meeting, and then decide whether to continue to a further process of statutory consultation. Following this next period of consultation governors would take a final decision subject only to an appeal to the Secretary of State. Current proposals had come from the Head Teacher's duty to scan the horizon for likely changes in school organisation. Such thinking had already given rise to school developments such as membership of the 'Tynedale Virtual College' group of high schools.

Q17) Would the proposals not be more convincing if all schools on board?

A) SJP – Yes, we would have preferred their coming to consultation with us. Their mixed opinions were understandable given their individuality and mishandling of the 3 to 2-tier Putting the Learner First proposals. Despite this we continue to work comfortably with partnership schools. We hope they will join the stakeholder council and join the trust at a later date.

Q18) Concerned about wording in paper - need Plain English in documentation

A) SJP – We acknowledge this and see the need to use clearer English.

Q19) Would the School still be inspected by OfSTED?

SJP – Yes

Q20) Extended Services and extra-curricular activities offer after school activities. Rural pupils are tied to school bus times, is there a rural access equity issue?

A) SJP – Extended Services were supporting activities in outlying first schools.

– Some pupils live far from the rural First schools.

SJP Acknowledge rural transport is already a county issue

Q21) What evidence is there for a better future and more rounded education under a trust?

A) SJP – There will still be a broad and balanced curriculum. Empirical evidence is not yet easy to find as the 100 or so pilots are fairly recent and the improvement long-term rather than a sudden change. The link to ‘Supporting Trust and Foundation Schools’ on our website provides specific examples.

Q22) Scotland and Ireland are doing well and not proposing trusts. Newcastle have no trusts proposed. Why are we in such a hurry and what do our partners expect in return?

A) SJP – Newcastle has moved to academies. We want time and expertise from our partners rather than money.

Prof Paul Croney (Dean of Newcastle Business School and Parent) – The Department has no money to give. The University is a trust and has obligations to work with wider community. We can provide advice on transfer from secondary to higher education and development of the business curriculum. We have collaborative partnerships nationally and internationally can help with trips. As a parent I feel very comfortable and see the future of education changing and schools keeping and managing their assets. I like the Co-operative Trust model. We need to focus on the future and look out and explore further challenges.

Q23) Robin Ramsay – Mayor of Ponteland Town Council and former Chair of Governors but speaking as an individual – There is a need for improved cohesion of community across the age bands. We need wider involvement beyond the parents and 3,000 children in schools throughout the partnership. We need to have involvement of wider community in stakeholder council. Does the transfer of assets to the trust make it easier to share the resources with the wider community, especially if something like a new assembly hall were possible?

A) SJP – The School is committed to sharing resources with wider community.

Q24) I have 2 children at the school with one about to leave. Both have done well. I hope the change of status will not dilute their experience.

A) SJP – Gave an assurance that this would not happen.

Q25) Parent of pupil in year 9 who had moved from Blyth – I feel bamboozled by document. Is it about getting partnership and expertise? Could we not do this without the trust?

Q26) SJP – The trust would provide greater permanence and a bigger impact to provide structure.

Request for a further meeting repeated by those concerned about attendance.