

58 in attendance

An apology for absence was received on behalf of Joyce Guthrie of Unison.

Introduction

Mr Prandle (SJP) gave an introduction to the trust proposals. Governors had been attracted to the co-operative trust model with a minority of trust governors and a stakeholder council. The arrangement arguably provided greater democratic accountability than existing arrangements.

Under the proposed structure the school would become a new kind of foundation school. It would remain part of the Local Authority (LA) structure and would be funded in the same way as other LA schools. It would not be immune to future LA reorganisation of schools. It would not be managed by business partners but by the head teacher, staff and governors.

The trust's influence on raising standards would be a long term influence brought about by partnership working. A variety of leadership had emerged across the county including federations, academies and trusts. Some of these had been in response to local difficulties whereas Ponteland were able to innovate from a position of strength.

Terms and conditions for teaching staff were determined nationally and neither these nor their security would be affected by the proposals. Support staff terms and conditions were determined by the LA but were expected to be brought into a national agreement in the near future. Their terms and conditions would not be worsened and the LA would be asked to continue their existing pension arrangements.

SJP introduced guests to the meeting. He told audience that if there was anything he could not answer then a written answer would be provided. Responses would also be posted on the School website.

Questions & Answers

Q1) Geoff Holmes (NASUWT Co Secretary)

Other schools had said 'not yet', believed timing not correct given current economic position and potential change of government – trust schools detached themselves from government therefore may get freedom to set own pay and conditions under a new regime.

A) SJP – We do not know how legislation might change in the future. It was the intention to protect staff terms and conditions and there should be similar security in a trust school as in other LA maintained schools.

Q2) Concerned that there may be reduced protection for staff in unstable times.

A) SJP – Exactly the same protection for LA and Trust Schools.

Q3) We would be in a less secure position to resist pressure on conditions if we were a Trust School.

A) SJP – Trust schools would be in the same position as LA Schools.
Mike Brown (Chair of Governors) – Nobody in the proposed arrangement would be able to gain from a reduction in staff terms and conditions. Governors would continue to recognise the importance of terms and conditions in attracting, retaining and motivating effective staff.

Q4) Budget cuts might lead to redundancy. If these changes took place would staff entitlement to redundancy payments be affected?

A) Ian Harbottle (LA) – There would be a transfer of service accrued with no break in service so there would be no impact on redundancy payments etc.

Q5) Questioned the references to democracy. If a majority of teachers express view against it – would you still go ahead?

A) SJP – In arriving at a decision, governors would have to consider the interests of all stakeholders including staff, pupils, parents, the LA and the wider community.

Q6) Ponteland Middle School went to teachers vote – referred to governors – decided not to proceed.

A) Mike Brown (Chair of Governors) – reported that, as a governor at Ponteland Middle School, he was not aware of any such ballot having taken place.

Q7) How will staff share views with other responders?

A) SJP – All responses will be available on the School website, including meeting with student councils

Q8) Given that predicted benefits will be ongoing rather than immediate, how will school be different in 2 years time if the proposals go ahead?

A) SJP – We expect that more schools will have followed the foundation route. We will have cemented links with our partners leading to improved links with higher education and businesses links supporting work based learning and curriculum development. The formal trust organisation will have made cooperation a more continuous and less cyclical process. We hope we will by then be partners in a multi-school trust. An active stakeholder council will be engaging more of our partners, staff, pupils, parents and our community.

Q9) Why do businesses want to invest in us?

A) SJP – Partner businesses are not investing in us financially but are pledging their knowledge and experience to advance what we can offer. The charitable trust itself would be in a position to seek external funding. Looking at established school trusts some do not look to raise external funds and others raise significant amounts. Garforth has brought in over £1M PA through its activities including festival promotion.

Q10) Will there be a ballot of employees on the site?

A) SJP – No, this is not part of the statutory process.

Q11) Can we conduct our own ballot?

A) SJP – We wouldn't stop you – decision making process belongs to governors.

Q12) Would it be better to wait until a new government is in office?

A) SJP – Putting things off is not usually a good thing. The proposal had been developed over an 18 month period and governors feel ready to go ahead.

Q13) We need more info re benefits of a Trust, is it revocable or can we return to the LA as a safety net? Staff do not trust business.

A) SJP – We will provide a written answer setting out examples of trust benefits. Trust status is reversible. Our partners are not big private businesses but are Newcastle International Airport, whose ownership involves several LAs, the Co-operative Group and Northumbria University.

Ian Harbottle – The School would still be a LA maintained school

Q14) How difficult would it be to revert to non-trust status?

A) SJP – The process would be similar to the present one of coming into Trust – the school could become a Foundation school without a trust, still a LA maintained school under the control of our own governing body.

Q15) NUT Rep – Both sides of argument need to be put. Why is the meeting afraid of hearing the counter-argument?

A) Mike Brown – Governors wish to be fully and properly informed and will take account of all comments made this afternoon and all written responses to the consultation.

Q16) Will the public meeting tonight have the same format and will there be a chance to put counter arguments?

A) SJP – The format of the public meeting will be the same as for this staff consultation.
Mike Brown – Provided that the public had a full chance to make their own points, staff and union representatives were welcome to attend the public meeting.

Q17) Richard Woolhouse (ATL) – Does the School management have the capacity to manage Trust status? Might retirements mean that key architects of the proposal, and their expertise, would not be here in 4 or 5 years' time?

A) SJP – A range of management support is provided by the LA under service level agreement. We would continue with this. The trust structure would be less sensitive to changes of personnel.

Q18) On what basis are public making their decision? What note will be taken of their opinions?

A) SJP – The decision making process is set out for Governing Body. All consultation responses, including the points raised at these meetings would be considered as part of this process.

Q19) The literature puts much emphasis on raising standards. What is our vision for a Trust school?

A) SJP – We will include this in written responses.

Q20) What services would remain with the LA?

A) SJP – There were no proposals for this to change with trust status.

Q21) Would the decision be made on a one governor, one vote basis?

A) Mike Brown – Yes. The next decision by governors is on publishing Statutory Proposals and going to a final stage of consultation before a final decision.

Q22) Will governors vote this term? Is the target of January 2010 too soon?

A) SJP – The date for the next decision has not yet been confirmed. In terms of the legal process the target is a comfortable one.

Q23) What are responsibilities of Trustees?

A) SJP – In general they act as guardians of the culture of the school. A copy of their proposed memorandum of understanding would be put on the School website.

Q24) If given number of staff on board and parents on board – what impact will that have on governors

A) SJP – We are going through a standard process in which governors consider the responses made to the consultation. It is unlikely that we will receive the opinions of all parents.

Q25) What is the staff governors' role?

A) SJP – All governors have a duty to the best interests of the school. Staff governors take part as individuals and express their professional views.

Mike Brown – Staff governors are individuals but I believe that they are effective in raising staff issues.

The meeting closed. Mr Harbottle offered to remain to address any individual questions from staff.