



MINUTES

SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Time: 4.45pm – 8.00pm

19 November 2009

Present: Councillors Stephenson (Chair), Watkins (Vice Chair), Bradford, Driver, Fairbairn, Jeraj, Little(A), Offord, Ramsay and Wiltshire

In attendance Councillors Sands and Waters

Apologies: Councillors Blower, Cannel and Gihawi

1. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Councillors Jeraj, A Little and Offord declared personal interests in item 2 below because of their employment or association with the University of East Anglia.

2. ACADEMY SCHOOLS IN NORWICH

The chair explained that this was a follow up to previous meetings to discuss the closure of Heartsease High School and the possible closure of Earlham High School. The first part of the meeting would be to review the experiences of transition to the City Academy at Earlham and the impact on students, staff, other schools and the community. The second part of the meeting would then review the performance of the Open Academy at Heartsease after its initial years operation.

City Academy at Earlham

(Mr Brunton, Principal, and Mr Palmer, main sponsor, attended this part of the meeting).

The chair referred to the answers already provided to the committee's initial questions which had been tabled at the meeting. Mr Brunton and Mr Palmer then answered a number of supplementary questions about their experiences of transition to the City Academy. Mr Brunton said that it was difficult to give precise figures on this year's intake but they understood that significantly more pupils had chosen the City Academy than chose Earlham High at this time last year. They were aiming at a projected intake of 180 pupils a year once the new building had been completed whereas the previous school had a falling role.

Mr Brunton said that 383 students (approximately 56%) were on special needs registers. This was massively higher than other schools. He also referred to the numbers receiving free school meals. He referred to the support provided to children with special needs. The process for obtaining the necessary resources to meet these needs was however challenging.

Mr Brunton explained that the new building would be based on five zones with four related to the curriculum and one related to community access. Mr Palmer said that the involvement of the community was integral to the development of the school. They had recently secured funding of £100,000 from the Government's supporting education fund for adults coming back into education for fun. An initial event on how to store digital information had been held the previous Saturday morning. The event had been attended by a wide range of people including parents and pensioners. The community were being asked for suggestions for future sessions.

Mr Brunton said that the Academy operated an integrated sixth form with Norwich City College and used the strengths of both institutions to allow level 3 access. The Academy would also retain the partnership links of the predecessor school which were working together to offer the full breadth of classes. They were taking an active and lead role in this partnership and were fully engaged in the broader strategic plan.

Pupils were able to take classes away from Earlham from the age of 14. All year 10 students were expected to opt for a vocational course although some were delivered within the City Academy. The maximum travelling time in any day would be 30 minutes. Students would only travel on one day a week and would go outside for the full day.

Mr Palmer said that the City Academy had only been opened for 10 weeks and the specialisms of english (literacy) and digital technology were not yet established. The first port of call would be the local community but they would ultimately like to promote level 3 courses further afield. Mr Palmer pointed out that the integrated sixth form meant that people from outside would not be taking places from local children. Mr Brunton said that the Academy would help feeder schools to improve levels of literacy. Classes for those with english as a second language were being built into the curriculum.

Mr Brunton referred to the work being done to look after the emotional well being of pupils. An intervention support meeting considered individual cases. If it was not possible to offer appropriate support within the Academy extended support was sought.

Mr Brunton explained the benefits obtained from the Academy sponsors. The City College had provided support in obtaining academy status. The UEA was providing support in terms of maths coaching for 11-15 year olds. This had helped the 65 students recently taking early entry maths. The UEA was also planning a young persons literacy week. The Vice Chancellor had also put in a bid to Tesco's and Kellogg's to support the breakfast club. The head teacher of the Norwich School had today spent three hours at the Academy to discuss support arrangements.

Mr Brunton said that although the Academy did not yet provide any opportunities for lifelong learning the new building would have a communities wing. An extended schools team had just formed and would be looking to outreach from the Academy.

Mr Palmer said that the future zone was part of the vision of what the new school would look like when it had been rebuilt. A room would be kitted out with new technology. This would operate as a learning laboratory for teachers and to show students and the community what the school would look like. He hoped that people trialling new equipment would come to the future zone. All furniture within the room was on wheels which meant that it was possible to change the layout within seconds. He said that approximately 40% of pupils had internet access at home.

Mr Brunton said that 3 pupils had been permanently excluded in the last year. Fixed term exclusions were currently 1 compared to 33 last year. This was a reflection of a number of factors including improved levels of confidence and well being of both students and staff. The number of lost staffing days had reduced from 200 to 51. He would provide information on the number of children with attendance problems outside of the meeting. (Information was subsequently provided giving a persistent absence figure of 90 at half term one).

Mr Brunton referred to changes to the curriculum since his appointment as head teacher. Mr Palmer pointed out however that students were still able to do a full GCSE programme.

Mr Brunton said that the Academy recognised and worked with trade unions. A joint consultative committee met on a regular basis. There was little staff turnover at the end of the last summer term. The former Earlham High School had found it difficult to recruit but the Academy was now fully staffed. Nothing has been spent on agency and support staff this year compared with the expenditure of approximately £125,000 the previous year.

Mr Brunton referred to clubs offered to pupils. The fitness suite was full every lunchtime. Normal referral procedures operated for children needing support in respect of things such as bullying. They were actively working with two girls involved in cyber bullying. There was a strict policy on the use of computers within the school. The learning support unit worked with children with specific learning difficulties.

Mr Brunton said that the governing body had adopted some 35 policies prior to the Academy opening in August. These were currently being reviewed in the context of the academy status of the new organisation. The policies were not on the Academy website but were available on request.

Members generally welcomed the improvements made by the Academy which meant a better education for local children. Councillor A Little said however that he was not clear whether the improvements had occurred simply because of the change to academy status or whether any school with an injection of cash, uniform and new building could have delivered similar improvements.

The chair thanked the representatives of the City Academy for attending the meeting. She wished them well in building on the improvements achieved to date.

Open Academy, Hellesdon

(Mr Hayes, Duty Principal, Mr Phillips, Vice Principal and Mr Nichols, Vice Chairman of the Governing Body, attended for this part of the meeting).

The chair expressed concern that the Open Academy had not provided answers to the committee's questions in advance of the meeting. Mr Hayes said however that the council's email had been sent to the wrong person. He apologised if an incorrect email address had been provided.

Mr Hayes said that of the 485 pupils at the Academy 20 were on statements. 45% of the pupils had special needs. 30% of year 8 students had a reading age of below 9.5 and provision was accordingly being made for intensive literacy courses. The Academy was happy to take any children from whatever background. Mr Phillips said that the Academy was trying to reach out to minority groups.

Mr Hayes said that there were currently 81 pupils in year 7 and 79 in year 8. He anticipated that these numbers would increase in the current year. There had not been any increase in the number of students in the initial year of operation although there had been a demographic downturn in the number of children in the area in the last year. Mr Phillips said that the Academy had recently held two open days and open evenings where the turnout had been huge and many positive comments had been received.

Mr Hayes referred to the pilot scheme for giving pupils at the Academy a free laptop. This would allow students to work at home and was aimed at raising standards. The whole IT infrastructure of the academy was very good. Mr Nicholls confirmed that they were using Wi-Fi in the school. The new building was however hard wired which would enable devices to be used if there were any health issues with Wi-Fi in the future.

Mr Phillips referred to feedback that people were hearing good things about the Academy and that it was having a positive effect on the children. Mr Hayes said that parents generally wanted a good local school and status was a secondary issue.

Mr Phillips said that last year there had been 6 permanent exclusions in the school. This year there were none. The number of temporary exclusions was similar to the predecessor school although exclusions were falling this half term. They would provide information on the specific numbers involved outside of the meeting. The long term vision was to reduce the number of exclusions by engaging children. Mr Hayes answered questions about the support provided to children who had been excluded from the academy. They had a room called the bridge where a pupil could be isolated from their class but still follow lessons.

Mr Hayes referred to the use made of other facilities such as city college, Easton college, the football club etc. one of the strengths of the academy was the work with Egin as an engineering training provider. He said that the academy was continuing as a member of the KETT Partnership. It was also a member of a consortium called Northern Lights. Next year the new building would accommodate hair and beauty. The whole agenda was about having a wide offer and this could only be achieved by working with other schools. Mr Phillips pointed out that their governing body included representatives from other educational establishments.

Mr Hayes referred to the benefits bought to the Academy by the sponsors. They were trying to create a very successful education system for the whole of this area of Norwich. He referred to plans for OPEN Road, which already existed as a charitable trust, to be accommodated within the Academy in the future. It was however necessary to consider how this would operate in practice given that the Academy was only meant to employ fully qualified teachers. Mr Hayes said that there had been huge changes to the curriculum since he had started at the Academy although these had not been of a religious nature. 40% of year 7 students were now taught thematically by the same teachers which had a positive impact on pupils. There were also more vocational options at key stage four. Mr Nichols said that the sponsors were keen that the curriculum was based on the specific needs of the individual pupil.

Mr Hayes said that the academy did a lot of lettings of their sports halls at weekends. They were hoping to do more of this when their new building was available. Evening classes were also run from the academy. Charges made for lettings were low compared with the private sector. They will consider reduced charges for community use when the new building was completed. The new building would include computer suites for community use. Mr Nichols added that questionnaires had been sent out asking what facilities people would like to see in the new building. They would engage further with the community once the new building was in place.

Mr Hayes referred to an "extension" introduced into the curriculum covering a range of 36 different activities. This gave students experience of other areas and was very popular. There was a logic to extending some of these things to the adult community. Mr Phillips referred to "lads and dads" numeracy sessions being held at present. Mr Hayes said that any extension activities outside the normal school day were run by teachers on a voluntary basis. He said that people were working at the Academy because they wanted to make a difference.

Mr Hayes said that last year some 32% of students had obtained 5 GCSE's at A* to C and data indicated that this percentage would be much higher this year. The value added calculation had not been made yet but data put the Academy in the 3rd percentile for key stage 3 to 4.

Mr Hayes said that staffing levels at the Academy were higher than in the predecessor school. Teachers had a lower teaching load than typical schools in the area. Sickness rates in the last half year had been very low. Only two staff had left in the last academic year of which one had gone to teach in Kenya and the other had retired. The headmistress had left the previous year for personal reasons. Mr Nichols explained why the governing body had employed a recruitment agency to seek a new Principal. They had felt they owed it to both staff and students to try and recruit the best possible person to lead the new Academy.

Mr Hayes said that the Academy tried to improve on Norfolk County Council terms and conditions wherever possible. It seemed to have been easier to attract better quality staff over the last six months. Mr Nichols said that this had also been helped because of interest in the new Academy. He said that the Academy had recently formed a joint consultative committee to deal with staffing matters.

Mr Nicholls referred to the composition of the board of governors. This included a number of governors with business expertise. They currently had one parent governor. There were no teacher governors as this was precluded by the charitable

trust status of the Academy. However the governing body had regular meetings with staff. He would like to involve more parents and students in the future. The students council was currently very active. Mr Hayes referred to proposals to establish a parents forum.

Mr Hayes said that the Open Academy was funded at a higher level than most schools as the funding was not top sliced. Mr Phillips said that in the longer term funding was at the mercy of politicians and the economy. Their job was to provide the best possible education from the budget available.

Members generally welcomed the positive outcomes achieved by the Academy with particular reference to the high staffing levels. The chair said that the speed of which the former school had had to become an academy may have affected consultation with the community. She looked forward to seeing the outcome of further work with the community in the future.

Mr Hayes said that he would be happy to show members of committee around the Academy if they wished.

Conclusions

In summing up the chair said that the committee welcomed the high staffing levels at the Open Academy and the benefits of partnership working and community work at the City Academy (although the contribution of all partners was not clear). However, the committee has not been convinced that these benefits were due to the schools gaining academy status.

The committee might in the future wish to explore issues around the fact that the two academies share several of the same governors and that the governing bodies of both schools lack parent and staff representation. The committee might also wish to further investigate the affect on neighbouring schools of the ability of academy schools to offer non standard terms and conditions. There also seemed to be a question over the future funding of the academy schools and the committee notes that a lower income could lead to fewer future resources, such as staff. The committee also had concerns about whether the academies would be able to maintain their improving performance under a tighter budget.

Although the meeting touched on permanent exclusions it would still be useful for members to receive confirmative data on the numbers of exclusions both pre and post academy and how this compares with other schools in Norwich. The Committee was also interested in methods employed to keep exclusions to a minimum.

Some members of the committee were concerned that the City Academy was becoming 'business-led' with sponsorship from large companies for its breakfast club and for digital equipment.

As a member stated during the meeting, it is not clear whether any improvements have occurred because of the change to Academy status or whether any school with an injection of cash, new uniform and new building could have delivered similar improvements.

CHAIR