

QUEENSBRIDGE SCHOOL GOVERNING BODY

Minutes of the Extra-Ordinary meeting held on 13th September 2010 at 6.30 p.m.

Present: J. Baines, A. Ahmed, G. Oliver, S. Stewart, T. Boyes, H. Reeves, D. Harman, R. Frere, P. Smith, E. Hendricks, S. Evans, A. Lee, J. Moore, T. Everett, A. Wallace, N. Qureshi, S. Archer.

From Moseley IEB: Thelma Probert, Akhtar Choudhary, Inderpal Lotay, Denise Cutting, Ise Samour, James Brown.

Andrew Dixon, Lead Officer for Schools Partnerships.

Mary Neate, Specialist Schools and Academies Trust.

Joyce Rawlinson, School and Governor Support.

Liz Haskins (Clerk)

Apologies had been received from S. Trowbridge, S. Bi, P. Ellingham.

This was a single agenda-item meeting: Agreeing the Consultation Document for Foundation Status.¹

Andrew opened by reminding the meeting that this was an opportunity to hear about issues from someone at a national level. There remain some legal issues for the LA to conclude with Moseley, and thinking to be done on the best route to take, but Queensbridge is free to make decisions. Both schools had achieved very good results. Government focus is currently on Academies and Free Schools, and it is not clear how they will in future identify struggling schools and what will be done.

Mary then introduced herself as being a representative of the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust, an independent organisation, not government funded, to give support and guidance to schools. She had not come either to persuade or to dissuade. The aims of the Trust were to raise achievement, and assist partnership.

The previous government had been much in favour of autonomy for schools, and the new one seemed to be wanting to build on this, with the recent Academies Act, by which all schools will have the opportunity to convert, not just those that are underachieving. Thus it appears that autonomy is the watchword, and just what sort for each school depends on how much self-government Governors want.

Questions followed:

What is the definition of the different types of school? There are maintained and non-maintained schools. Maintained schools are funded by the Government through the Local Authority, and these are Community Schools, Voluntary Controlled and Voluntary Aided, Foundation and Trust schools. These all come under LA plans, the National Curriculum, OFSTED, statutory Pay and Conditions and Pensions schemes. Within that is a variation of the amount of autonomy, whether the LA remains in control of admissions, employment, and land and assets. In Trust and Foundation schools these three areas become the responsibility of the Governors, although admissions must remain within the existing code, there would be no visible changes in employment, and the Governors or Trust would hold the land and assets. About 90% of the organisation does not change. (Non-maintained

schools are funded directly by the Government, include Academies, Free Schools, and University Technical colleges, and act with independence. There are also Independent schools, which are completely self-funded.)

So what about the other 10%, how does this translate into day to day running? This depends on the context of the individual school. It could mean that the Governing Body has more control over arrangements for Support Staff, structure and pay. Admissions can be adjusted. Land and assets can be developed more simply and quickly – this would apply to Queensbridge, with the Sports Development, where the LA has been holding matters up. As to the disadvantages, Mary said there were not really any.

Would this make more work for the Governors? What about liability? No. Governing Bodies now act on informed advice, and could still buy into LA services. They need to draw up an admissions policy, within the code, and either the LA would administer appeals, or the school could elect to do this.

What about Single Status? If as an employer, the GB acted contrary to pay legislation, what would happen in the event of a complaint? They must always ensure parity in any pay arrangements, and have a rationale for actions. They can take LA advice, and would only be considered liable for action were informed advice to be ignored.

What about legal issues? The GB should act on informed advice. If taken to Tribunal, risks would be minimal, and legal support could be bought in. Any claims would be against the GB.

And admissions and appeals? The GB publishes the admission criteria (within the LA framework) and in most cases this would be as before. There is a set pattern of action, and schools can choose to administer both the admissions and appeals, or the LA can take on either or both. The school would still be subject to the Independent Appeals Panel.

Trustees? They would have no involvement in the running of the school, the Trust had its own remit and objectives. The GB remains the same position, as in all maintained schools. [With regard to Trusts, cf also Tim's comment below about Trust and Foundation status].

Will the Governing Body change? Not the legal framework. Governance would change slightly, with a new category of Governor, the Partnership Governor(s), who represent the interests of the community. The change is greater in a Trust school, but at this point Tim wished to make it clear that the suggestion for Queensbridge and Moseley was not Trust, but Foundation status. A Foundation school is not obliged to have Partners, but can do.

How do the Unions view all this? Their concern would be over pay and conditions, but for teaching staff the existing framework is absolutely legally binding. The difference might be with support staff, where the school would not necessarily be bound by single status, but still have to have a regard for parity and rationale for new arrangements. Support staff can take part in the Local Government pension scheme.

National Curriculum? This still applies.

Who will be Partnership Governors? The criterion is that they should complement the existing skills of existing Governors, add value to the school, and to the local context. There would be a minimum of two, and maximum of a quarter of the GB.

Once a decision for Foundation is made, can it be reversed? There is no legislation for going back.

So what exactly is the point of change? We need to be assured that any step take would be beneficial. Schools claim that their improvements are due to them having greater autonomy. Things can be done more quickly and easily. It might be possible to pay at a higher level to attract and retain more skilled teaching assistants.

And what about use of assets? The school's assets can only be used in the interests of education, there are safeguards.

Is there protection against an 'unhelpful' Governing Body? There is always recourse to the LA, who have powers of intervention, and can remove a Governing Body.

It was made clear that the LA still has a duty to schools, although its functions might be delivered in different ways.

How many Foundations schools are there? Figures were not available, but will be sent on. In Birmingham there are about 10-15, and the number of non-community maintained secondary schools is about a third of the total.

We hear talk of cuts in Local Government. Does this mean that buying into services will be costly? By taking Foundation status the school would be able to have strong contracts, and know what it is going to get. The costs would only really rise if significantly more services were bought in than are at present. Co-operation within a partnership gives opportunity to share ideas and experiences.

What about our existing contacts and partners? Schools can continue to work with existing partners, and/or bring in new. The idea is for a shared educational vision, a wide perspective, and a more formal partnership from which contacts are less likely to withdraw, once they have invested time and thought into entering in the first place. The GB select the partners, on the criteria that they have attributes which are needed. Some may even deliver services, for example business acumen and financial expertise. They do not have to offer financial support, although they may, but mainly they are needed for their skills.

Any further progress is governed by statutory processes, the next step being consultation, with parents and staff.

At this point the visitors were to leave, and Moseley IEB withdraw to continue their discussion on their own, as would Queensbridge. The visitors were thanked for their time and contributions, and Thelma Probert, on behalf of the IEB thanked Queensbridge for including them in this discussion session.

Many expressed the opinion that the session had been helpful and the simple presentations and direct answers to questions had clarified issues. There have been a number of different courses of action canvassed over previous months, and some felt that while the Governors had expressed interest in Trust status, prior to the General Election, this was the first time Foundation had been looked at, and it had not been fully debated. Notice had been given of a motion to be tabled to defer any decision until the opposite point of view had been presented, and a fully informed discussion taken place. Tim had suggested someone to do this, but he made it clear that this person would present an academic and ideological stance, rather than practicalities for this school.

While there was more clarity on benefits, there was still some concern over liability. Tim referred again to the Sports Development, which was in danger of being lost because of the slowness of the LA, and that this could have been avoided by the school being able to take independent action. This is not the only problem that the LA has engendered.

The point was made that, irrespective of philosophies, the main concern for Governors was surely the strategic vision for this school. They needed to determine what is right and wrong for Queensbridge, and it seemed that it would be good to have more control. There had already been much procrastination and vacillating, time has been taken, and care should be exercised not to confuse reservations about Academies with Foundation. Would more time actually be beneficial; clear information had been given and arguments rehearsed. Indeed, there had been shifts, but now it seemed that a good clear picture had been given. The danger might be in communicating insecurity to parents and staff, and it was brought out that staff certainly wish to know what is going on.

Looking at the schedule, it is clear that the next step is Consultation. This is not a vote, and there are opportunities throughout the next period of time for Governors to assess the climate and abort the procedure if this seems appropriate. Any information sent out will be unbiased. There would also be time and occasion for further discussion should this be deemed necessary and helpful.

Alastair Wallace proposed that the Governing Body do not make a decision on proceeding with Foundation Status until it has had an opportunity to hear the case against, and that we should invite someone from an organisation which opposes Foundation status to our next meeting. This was seconded by Naeem Qureshi and put to the vote. There were 6 votes in favour of the proposal, and 11 against, with no abstentions.

Darrel Harman proposed that, having had many discussions about underlying principles, the matter should now proceed and put out to consultation about Foundation Status. This was seconded by Selina Stewart, and put to the vote. There were 12 votes in favour, 4 against, and 1 abstention.

It is to be noted that this decision does not mean that the Governors have made any binding commitment.

The meeting closed at 8.55 p.m.