
PROPOSAL FOR AN ACADEMY IN DARLINGTON

Responsible Cabinet Member – Councillor McEwan – Children’s Services Portfolio

Responsible Director(s) – Margaret Asquith – Director of Children’s Services

Purpose of Report

1. To seek Members’ approval to develop an Expression of Interest in a City Academy to the Department for Education and Skills (DfES).

Background

2. In 2002, DfES announced the intention to introduce a radical new funding programme ‘Building Schools For The Future’ (BSF) aimed at reforming secondary school education, developing a long-term strategic vision for how local authorities would deliver education to secondary age pupils. Unfortunately, Darlington Borough Council did not feature in the early ‘waves’ of BSF. The only indication from DfES in their letter to Darlington Borough Council about when we may expect to access funding was the ‘ambition that you will rebuild at least one secondary school by 2011 and join the full programme by 2016’. However, it was made clear in the announcement letter that this is an aspiration and by no means certain.
3. In response to the disappointing BSF announcement the Authority sought alternative funding to try and deliver investment into Darlington secondary schools. This funding was sought to address the key issues of raising attainment, meeting the most urgent condition needs and tackling surplus place issues.
4. As detailed in a report elsewhere on this agenda the Authority submitted a bid under the DfES Targeted Capital Fund (TCF) for £15 million to address immediate condition based needs at Hummersknott School and Language College, and also supported a Diocesan TCF bid by Carmel Technology College to provide investment of £10 million into the school.
5. Two of the remaining 4 schools, Eastbourne and Hurworth currently enjoy an existing close working relationship through the Federation work undertaken between the two schools and their Governing bodies. With escalating surplus place issues at Eastbourne and a desire to raise education standards at the school, the Authority has explored with the Governing Bodies of both schools, proposals to bring together both schools on a new site. This would allow the Authority to use one of our highest performing schools to support a school with difficulties to raise attainment for all. A potential site has been identified adjacent to Cummins.
6. In early October, following dialogue with the DfES, and lobbying of Government, the Council was invited to submit an “Expression of Interest” in the Academies programme to

replace Hurworth and Eastbourne schools. Whilst an Academy was not the basis of our requests for early funding, it nevertheless offers an important opportunity to meet the same objectives and to deliver, much earlier than otherwise feared, an environment that extends an excellent education to all of our children.

7. If the Expression of Interest were agreed by the Department, there would then be an extensive period of Feasibility work (taking approximately 2-3 months), followed by formal consultation (approximately 6 months). If this process resulted in a decision to proceed, the Academy could open around 2008 (although this would be an ambitious timescale).

Detail

8. An “Expression of Interest” is the first formal stage of an Academy project. It brings together the need for an Academy and the vision for the future, underpinned by the practical information essential for the project to move efficiently into the next stage (the “Feasibility Stage”). It will include key elements of the Academy project, which will enable Ministers to consider our proposal.
9. Academies are publicly funded independent schools with sponsors from the private or voluntary sectors or from churches or other faith groups. A funding agreement between the Trust Board of an Academy and the Secretary of State provides the funding for an Academy to be established and run, but also replicates many of the legislative expectations which govern maintained schools. This critical document is negotiated between the Local Authority and the sponsor, and determines the sort of partnership required.
10. A sponsor will be sought who shares the Council’s ethos and vision for the Academy, and is keen to contribute to the borough-wide drive to raise attainment.
11. In most circumstances, sponsors provide a contribution of 10%, up to a cap of £2 million towards the costs of the new or refurbished building, and the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) provides the balance which in this case could be in the region of £25m. Should Members agree the report, an appropriate sponsor will be sought in tandem with the development of the Expression of Interest.
12. While there has been a mixed reception given to Academies within the press, there are good indications that those which are operating are delivering improved educational outcomes. Of the 13 inspected 12 were found to be performing well.
13. In the Darlington context there are, within the Councils vision, the ingredients that would point to a successful development that could attract a sponsor willing to work closely with the Council.

Expression of Interest

14. The key elements the Council needs to include in the “Expression of Interest” are as follows.

- a) How the proposal for an Academy fits within the plans for secondary education across the whole of the borough
 - b) The vision for the Academy in terms of its ethos, and its place within a coherent borough-wide approach to admissions, inclusion, attendance etc.
 - c) Full details of the preferred site including the exact location (Ordnance Survey maps), the ownership of the land, any impediments such as covenants or physical difficulties.
 - d) The projected timetable from entering feasibility to opening in new buildings which will cover formal and informal consultation, SOC approval (for the closing schools), entering into a funding agreement, start of the capital programme and the prospective building completion date; and
 - e) Details of the sponsor.
15. For Darlington, the vision for an Academy would take forward the proposal for two schools that are already working together to be merged onto one site, enabling the excellent performance and high standards of attainment in Hurworth to support the strong drive to raise attainment in Eastbourne.
16. In addition it is proposed that the Academy should contribute to our Borough-wide drive to raise standards for all children, providing a home for a new education improvement partnership and working in partnership with the other secondary schools in the Borough to ensure all children achieve their full potential. A sponsor will be sought on the basis of this vision, and a commitment to Council policies around admissions and inclusion.
17. Additionally, the demographic needs of the south east of the borough dictate that a single 1200 place school is required to successfully meet the anticipated demands provided by the two schools currently (Hurworth 638 places and Eastbourne 900 places). This proposal will remove 338 places leaving around 250 places surplus, or around 4% of the total number of available places. This remaining surplus will be at an acceptable level to cope with parental preference and the annual movement of families in and out of the area.

Information

18. With just seven secondary schools in the borough the development of an Academy is of particular interest and significance to the people of Darlington, and it will be vital that people have opportunities to be informed about the development of the proposal, and contribute their views through formal consultation.
19. The announcement was accompanied by letters to all the parents in each school, the opening of a Helpline, and meetings with staff, Trade Unions and Governors. A further programme of information is in development and will ensure that all stakeholders in the borough, employers, other schools and colleges, the Darlington Partnership and the general public are informed about the opportunities and the facts. Particular attention will be paid to ensuring that parents of children in the two schools, staff and Governors are kept informed.

20. The feasibility phase, should the Expression of Interest be agreed, will inform the development of a detailed proposal document that will be the basis of the formal consultation period. Every effort will be made to ensure that this information is accessible to all those with an interest and that they have a wide range of opportunities to feed in their views.

Outcome of Consultation

21. No consultation was required in the preparation of this report as we are at the beginning of compiling the information that will be required for formal consultation. Extensive consultation will be undertaken should the Expression of Interest receive support from the DfES.

Legal Implications

22. This report has been considered by the Borough Solicitor for legal implications in accordance with the Council's approved procedures. There are no issues which the Borough Solicitor considers need to be brought to the specific attention of Members, other than those highlighted in the report.

Section 17 of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998

23. The contents of this report have been considered in the context of the requirements placed on the Council by Section 17 of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998, namely, the duty on the Council to exercise its functions with due regard to the likely effect of the exercise of those functions on, and the need to do all that it reasonably can to prevent, crime and disorder in its area. It is not considered that the contents of this report have any such effect.

Council Policy Framework

24. The issues contained within this report do not represent change to Council policy or the Council's policy framework

Decision Deadline

25. For the purpose of the 'call-in' procedure this does not represent an urgent matter.

Key Decisions

26. This report constitutes a key decision as it affects more than two wards.

Recommendations

27. It is recommended that Members: -
 - (a) Agree that an Expression of Interest for an Academy in Darlington should be developed, and

(b) Receive a further Cabinet report detailing the Expression of Interest to be submitted.

Reason

28. To enable officers to progress work required to take forward a proposed Academy.

Margaret Asquith
Director of Children's Services

Background Papers

Correspondence from DfES – 29 November 2004 – Wave 2 and 3 BSF Announcement
Guidance issued by DfES in relation to the Academy Programme

David Chambers, Extension 2026