

PROPOSAL FOR NORTHBOROUGH PRIMARY SCHOOL
TO JOIN THE SOKE EDUCATION TRUST AND CONVERT TO ACADEMY STATUS
Summary of questions and answers from consultation meetings for parents and carers

Introduction

The Governing Body of Northborough Primary School held parent and carer consultation meetings on Wednesday, May 22nd at 2.30pm and 6.00pm. A total of 30 parents and carers attended the two meetings.

This document is a summary of the questions asked at those meetings, the answers given and where helpful further answers have been added.

Questions from the 2:00pm meeting.

Q1. How does the school get its fair share of funding and resources?

A1. Each member school receives its full funding allocation, which is based on the Local Authority funding formula for primary schools. As an academy Northborough won't receive any additional funding but will receive a proportion of funding that is currently held back by the Local Authority. Each member school contributes a % of its budget towards the trust's central costs, which are agreed each year by the trustees and headteachers.

Q2. What are the Trust's weaknesses?

A2. The trust was established in January 2018, so it is relatively young. Much of the focus has been on ensuring the trust is run effectively, efficiently and compliantly. We were delighted to get a clean bill of health from the Education & Skills Funding Agency following a monitoring visit in 2018.

The trustees monitor the performance of the trust and schools closely. No weaknesses have been identified but like any organisation there are things we want to do better.

Q3. What happens if a school manages their budget poorly?

A3. School Governing Bodies are given delegated authority to propose and monitor their budget. They must propose a balanced in-year budget and address issues that may lead to a deficit budget. Ultimately, if a governing body fails to manage their budget sustainably, the trustees have the power to remove their delegated authority and take responsibility. Schools that are run badly financially are not subsidised by schools that manage their finances well.

Q4. How are Trustees and Members appointed?

A4. When the trust was formed, the four governing bodies agreed who the Members and Trustees would be. They were chosen for their individual and collective expertise in education, governance, finance, business, HR, property and compliance. The list of Members and Trustees was ratified by the DfE and any changes must be communicated to the DfE. Going forward, new Trustees will be proposed by the Board for approval by the Members. New Members will be appointed by the Members. Currently, there is a vacancy and Northborough is welcome to propose a Trustee.

Q5. How will the children benefit? Can you give some practical examples?

A5. As teachers from the member schools have worked together to share ideas, resources and good practice, individual teachers have been able to enhance what they do in the classroom. This engages and develops the pupils and makes projects and topics more interesting. More broadly, the trust organised a choir event for the schools, hosted at the Cresset Theatre, which was well-attended by parents and families. The trust has a strong sports programme organised through Soke sports. Pupils have been participating in Trust Ambassador programmes to help shape the future curriculum.

Q6. What are the specific areas that Northborough needs support for?

A6. One particular area is music, which is a strength of the trust schools.

Q7. Can the sports programme be enhanced e.g. through a sports coach?

A7. The school is an active participant in the Soke sports partnership. The opportunity to have further sports coaching in the school is certainly something the trust can look at, for example using the Apprenticeship levy to fund the training of sports coaches.

Questions from the 6:00pm meeting.

Q8. Most of our pupils move to Arthur Mellows. What do they think about the proposal?

A8. Arthur Mellows is already an academy and part of a trust with primary schools that don't feed pupils into the school. We don't know what they think but we would expect them to be supportive of anything that helps prepare pupils even more for secondary school.

Q9. Will the school funding increase or decrease as an academy?

A9. Each member school receives its full funding allocation, which is based on the Local Authority funding formula for primary schools. As an academy Northborough won't receive any additional funding but will receive a proportion of funding that is currently held back by the Local Authority. Each member school contributes a % of its budget towards the trust's central costs, which are agreed each year by the trustees and headteachers

Q10. Will the school have to follow the national curriculum? Will it have to follow the Soke curriculum?

A10. Schools already have freedoms within the national curriculum develop their own policy. The trust does not have a curriculum policy. Each school has delegated authority to develop their curriculum to suit their school and pupils. Clearly, partnership working will lead to sharing and developing best practice, which schools may want to implement in their school but there is no enforcement.

All academies are still required to participate in national tests at Key Stage 1 and 2 and make sure their pupils are numerate, literate and ready for secondary school. This shapes each school's curriculum.

Q11. Do you expect to see any impact on the children? I have spoken to a child in another academy who said she was treated less as a child after academisation?

A11. We do expect there to be a positive impact on pupils and certainly no change to how the children are treated. As teachers from the member schools work together to share ideas, resources and good practice, individual teachers will be able to enhance what they do in the classroom. This will engage and develop the pupils and makes projects and topics more interesting. More broadly, the trust organised a choir event for the schools, hosted at the Cresset Theatre, which was well-attended by parents and families. The trust has a strong sports programme organised through Soke sports. Pupils have been participating in Trust Ambassador programmes to help shape the future curriculum.

Q12. If the schools are working together could specialist teachers come in to teach in our school?

A12. Primary teaching is very much based on a single teacher teaching their class pupils the range of subjects and topics. This helps with continuity for pupils and helps inter-connect the different parts of the curriculum. However, it is an interesting idea and if teachers felt it would be helpful it is something the Headteachers and CEO could look at.

Q13. What is the Trust's growth plan?

A13. The Trustees, Headteachers and Governors of the schools that formed the trust have discussed this a lot. There is no business plan with targets for schools or pupil numbers.

We recognise that the larger the trust the greater the combined resources and opportunities to develop programmes to support member schools. But grow too large, too fast and the trust could become difficult to run effectively. The aim is for sustainable growth, always ensuring the trust has the capacity to integrate new schools properly.

It is worth noting that the DfE suggests that 3,000 pupils is a threshold for sustainable trusts, which translates into adding several single form and/or two form entry primary schools, which feels too many.

Q14. Does the Trust have to take on failing schools as a sponsor?

A14. No. The decision to sponsor a school is for the Trustees, CEO and Headteachers.

Q15. Do the financial benefits of partnership flow back into the school?

A15. Yes. Ultimately the savings achieved by the trust mean that schools pay less for those services and have more to spend in the classroom.

Q16. Will money be switched from pupils to pay higher salaries for staff?

A16. No. Salaries already take up about 80% of a school's expenditure and those salaries are set by national agreements.

Q17. Have staff cuts had to be made to join the academy?

A17. No. Every school has a responsibility to balance its budgets and Northborough is no exception. The governors have had to make some tough, painful decisions over recent years but that has nothing to do with academy status

Q18. What data is there for the impact of academy status on the Trust schools?

A18. The trust was only established in January 2018 and its member schools went through the first set of national tests in May 2018. The trust will be reviewing the result of the 2019 tests in Autumn term 2019.

There is national data from 2018 that shows convertor primary schools do slightly better than LA maintained schools in Key Stage 2 tests.

However, in the same way a parent would judge a school on more than national test data, the impact of a trust can be judged by more than data. For example, the staff turnover at member schools has not changed since the member schools converted, suggesting staff are happy enough.

Q19. How will Ofsted inspect the schools?

A19. Ofsted will inspect each school individually as now. The judgement of one school will not affect the judgement of another school. Ofsted is testing trust-wide inspections where a number of member schools are inspected at the same time but that has tended to be used for much bigger multi academy trusts

Q20. What have the Governors and Headteacher done to drive (informal) collaboration?

A20. The Governors and Headteachers have actively pursued collaboration with other schools. However, there is a practical problem that out of 60 primary schools in Peterborough, 34 have converted to academy status forming several different multi academy trusts. Schools within those MATs tend to focus their partnership working with other member schools rather than those outside. So, there are fewer schools for us to work with, especially locally and the school risks becoming isolated.

Q21. What will happen if we don't join?

A21. The Governors are concerned that the pressures that the school faces will increase and will inevitably lead to a slow but steady deterioration in the quality of provision and outcomes for pupils. This is a risk that the Governors are not prepared to take and having investigated thoroughly believe that joining the Soke Education Trust will help the school thrive.

Q22. If in 2 or 3 years' time we decide it doesn't work can we go back?

A22. No. Once a school converts to academy status it can't go back to being a Local Authority maintained school. It can only move to another multi academy trust with the consent of the Secretary of State for education. That is why it is so important that Governors have investigated very carefully which multi academy trust to join and carried out thorough due diligence

Q23. How have staff responded to being part of an academy trust?

A23. It would seem staff are happy enough given that staff turnover has not changed since the member schools converted.

Additional questions submitted not covered above

Q24. Will this mean staff may move between settings to cover sickness etc, concerns re continuity?

A24. No. Staff are still contracted to work in their school

Q25. Will Sencos discuss pupils with others from the Academy?

The SENCO will have the opportunity to work with SENCOS from other Soke schools, share and develop good practice and share expertise on particular pupil needs. The trust is bound by the same requirements for confidentiality as now

Q26. Will resources be shared ie. forrest school at Northborough accessible for other pupils to attend(hypothetical at present).

A26. Yes and vice versa Northborough will be able to access facilities at other schools bearing in mind the logistics of moving pupils between schools

Q27. Will school facilities be available for use out of school hours i.e. outdoor gym ,table tennis for community use?

A27. That's a decision for the school.

Q28. How can we measure improvements is there an annual review?

A28. The trust is required to publish an annual report but more broadly communicates actively with Local Governing Bodies

Q29. Are you planning to engage local businesses for sponsorship?

A29. There are no plans to do so

Q30. What, if any, do you for see are the potential barriers to this status?

A30. None really following careful investigation by the Governing Body and DfE approval of the application

Q31. Will the status give more bargaining power when organising trips/enrichment opportunities?

A32. Yes. Being able to organise enrichment across a larger number of pupils both increases buying power and reduces the cost per pupil.