

REVIEW OF SECONDARY EDUCATIONAL PROVISION IN ST NEOTS

To: **CABINET**

Date: **26 January 2010**

From: **Head of Infrastructure, Children and Young People's Services**

Electoral division(s): **Little Paxton and St Neots North, St Neots/Eaton Socon and Eynesbury, Brampton and Kimbolton, Buckden/Gransden and the Offords**

Forward Plan ref: **2010/008**

Key Decision: **Yes**

Purpose: **To:**

- i) Advise Cabinet of the consultation undertaken in St Neots in the autumn of 2009 on the structural options identified as a potential response to the challenges faced by St Neots Community College;**
- ii) Advise Cabinet of the discussions which have taken place with the Office of the School Commissioner at the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) concerning the structural options available and the potential of securing National Challenge funding to support implementation of the chosen option; and**
- iii) Seek Cabinet's endorsement of proposals that:**

The Authority should work with the governing bodies of Longsands College and St Neots Community College to:

- establish a federation between the schools to be operational from 1 September 2010; and**
- change the status of St Neots Community College from a community to a foundation school to be effective from 1 September 2010.**

Recommendation: **Cabinet is asked to:**

- i) **Note the consultation undertaken in St Neots in the autumn of 2009 on the structural options identified as a potential response to a range of challenges faced by St Neots Community College;**
- ii) **Note the discussions which have taken place with the Office of the School Commissioner at the DCSF and the views expressed; and**
- iii) **Endorse the proposals that:**

The Authority should work with the governing bodies of Longsands College and St Neots Community College to:

- establish a federation between the schools to be operational from 1 September 2010; and**
- change the status of St Neots Community College from a community to a foundation school to be effective from 1 September 2010.**

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1.0 BACKGROUND

- 1.1 St Neots is currently served by two secondary schools: St Neots Community College and Longsands College. St Neots Community College is a community school and Longsands College is a foundation school.
- 1.2 The catchment area for St Neots Community College comprises those of its partner primary schools: Barnabas Oley Church of England Voluntary Controlled (Great Gransden), Bushmead, Eynesbury Church of England Voluntary Controlled, Middlefield, St Mary's Church of England Aided and Winhills. The school has capacity for 232 young people entering Year 7 each year and 1,160 young people aged 11-15 (between 7 and 8 forms of entry (FE)) in total.

The catchment area of Longsands College comprises those of its partner primary schools: Great Paxton Church of England Voluntary Controlled, Great Staughton, Little Paxton, Newton (Eltisley), Overhills (Kimbolton), Crosshall Junior, Priory Junior and The Round House. Longsands College has capacity for 290 young people entering Year 7 each year and 1450 young people aged 11-15 (between 9 and 10FE) in total.

Both schools have sixth forms.

- 1.3 In September 2009, the Children and Young People's Policy Development Group

(PDG) was advised that officers had identified the need to undertake a review of secondary educational provision in St Neots in response to a number of specific challenges faced by St Neots Community College.

1.4 The review was formally launched on 4 November 2009 with the publication and wide-ranging dissemination of a detailed consultation document. The PDG received an update report at its meeting on 9 November.

1.5 The consultation period concluded on 18 December 2009.

2.0 THE REVIEW

2.1 The need for a review of secondary educational provision in St Neots was prompted by three challenges specific to St Neots Community College:

1. The school was placed in special measures in the summer of 2009 following an inspection by the Office for Standards in Education (OfSTED). The school had been identified previously as a National Challenge school due to the low percentage of young people achieving 5 A*-C grades at GCSE including English and Mathematics.
2. The school is in severe financial difficulties and faces a significant deficit, which, even if a robust deficit recovery plan were to be in place, presents the school with a further major challenge in addition to that of being a National Challenge school in special measures.
3. Many parents are not choosing to send their children to the school.

2.2 The combination of these three factors meant that the situation at St Neots Community College could not be considered in isolation as it was having a direct impact on Longsands College and on the wider community.

2.3 Following discussions with the Office of the Schools Commissioner at the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF), the decision was taken to undertake a wide-ranging consultation and seek views on four potential structural options:

- St Neots Community College becomes a National Challenge Trust School
- A National Challenge Federation is formed between St Neots Community College and Longsands College
- A National Challenge Federation is formed between St Neots Community College and Longsands College and a charitable Trust is formed to provide further support and strategic direction to the schools
- St Neots Community College is closed and alternative arrangements are put in place either by establishing an Academy or by increasing the size of Longsands College

2.4 The consultation was launched on 4 November 2009 with the issuing of a detailed background information document setting out the need for change and the four options under consideration. The document made clear that status quo was not an option and that the Authority's preference was for St Neots Community College and Longsands College to federate and for the resulting federation governing body to decide whether or not to pursue Trust status.

3.0 THE CONSULTATION

- 3.1 A series of consultation meetings were held between 9th and 26th November in order to provide opportunities to discuss the options under consideration and to ask questions.
- 3.2 Comments were invited in writing and a general email account was set up specifically for this purpose. The deadline for receipt of written comments was 18th December 2009.
- 3.3 The consultation meetings held at St Neots Community College and Longsands College on 7th and 9th November respectively were very well attended. There were over 200 people at the parents/carers' meeting at St Neots Community College and close to 400 people at the one held at Longsands College.
- 3.4 Three open surgeries held at Winhills, Little Paxton Primary and Great Staughton primary schools were less well attended. Nevertheless, these provided useful opportunities for more in-depth discussions to take place with parents/carers, staff, governors and members of the community.
- 3.5 The Executive Director of Children and Young People's Services also attended meetings of both schools' student councils.
- 3.6 A total of 75 written responses were received by the 18th December 2009 deadline, including from:
- The governing body of Longsands Community College
 - The governing body of St Neots Community College
 - The Principal of Huntingdonshire Regional College
 - The Secretary of the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough branch of the Association of School and College Lecturers (ASCL)
 - Members of UNISON at St Neots Community College
 - Representatives from the St Neots Community College Student Council
 - The governing body of Overhills Primary School, Kimbolton
 - The governing body of Crosshall Junior School
 - The governing body of Comberton Village College and the Comberton Educational Trust.
- 3.7 The consultation elicited a range of views and concerns. The following is a summary of the key points and issues raised:
- A clear recognition of the need for change and a desire for this to happen quickly from some respondents, which contrasted sharply with some other views that St Neots Community College had been given insufficient time and support from the Authority to respond to the challenges facing it.
 - St Neots Community College's problems were of a long-standing nature and a fresh start was required to address these. Some respondents felt that this could best be achieved by replacing the leadership and management team.
 - Concerns that the strengths of Longsands College would be diluted through formal association with St Neots Community College and that the result would be two average schools rather than two good or outstanding schools.

- Concerns that under a federation option teaching staff from Longsands College would be transferred to St Neots Community College and that this would adversely affect the quality of teaching and learning at Longsands.
- Concerns that under a federation option pupils from the two schools would be forced to mix.
- Concerns that the Authority would change catchment areas and that this would result in some of the current Longsands catchment population being directed to St Neots Community College. In contrast, other respondents felt that St Neots Community College was always going to be at a disadvantage unless catchment changes were made due to the fact that it served an area of greater deprivation than Longsands College.
- Concerns that funding would be diverted from Longsands College to St Neots Community College.
- Concern that St Neots needs and deserves two good schools. People need and want choice. It was crucial that both schools retained their own identities.
- It was essential that the Longsands College did not simply inherit St Neots Community College's problems and was then expected to address these with no additional support from the Authority.
- Establishing a trust either for St Neots Community College or to oversee a federation between Longsands and St Neots Community College could provide added-value through the involvement of partners.
- St Neots Community College was the choice of school for some parents who were happy with the education their children were receiving. Others made clear that they felt the school had failed their children.

- 3.8 A number of the concerns outlined above reflect the high regard in which Longsands is held by parents and the local community and their genuine fears that the things they value about the school would be adversely affected by the proposed federation with St Neots Community College.
- 3.9 A number of the comments received demonstrated a degree of confusion between federation and amalgamation, with fears being expressed about having a single, very large, secondary school serving St Neots and the surrounding area. The two schools retain their separate identities within a federation. The budgets of the two schools would remain separate and be accounted for separately and pupils would continue to be enrolled at one of the two schools in a federation. It is likely that there would be enhanced opportunities for pupils to access facilities at both schools and for the sharing of practice. However, both matters would be for the Federation to consider and determine. There are no plans to change catchment areas if the federation proposals are required. There may be a need to consider catchment areas in response to long term demographic growth in St Neots but this is the case regardless of the governance models agreed following this consultation
- 3.10 Of those respondents who expressed a clear view on the four options for change identified, 11 were in favour of a federation between Longsands College and St Neots Community College, with a further two supporting the establishment of a National Challenge Federation with a Trust. A total of 12 were in favour of establishing a National Challenge Trust for St Neots Community College, with a further 6 supporting the establishment of an Academy in place of St Neots Community College.

- 3.11 In addition, the governing body of Crosshall Junior School, one of Longsands College's partner primary schools, thought the consultation to be of such importance to their community that they decided to seek the views of their parents. They received responses from parents of children in all four of the school's year groups, the majority of whom (55%) were in favour of establishing a National Challenge Trust for St Neots Community College. However, details have not been provided of the number of responses received, nor of the respondents, so it is possible that there may be some duplication of comments received directly by the Authority.
- 3.12 A National Challenge Trust for St Neots Community College is also the preferred option of the members of UNISON at St Neots Community College. However, if this were not feasible, there would be support for a federation between St Neots Community College and Longsands College.
- 3.13 Both the governing bodies of St Neots Community College's and Longsands College expressed support for federation. St Neots Community College governing body's second choice option was a National Challenge Trust.
- 3.14 Of those respondents who expressed a view with regard to the future pattern of secondary provision in response to planned housing growth, the favoured option was the establishment of a third secondary school in the west of the town. Members will receive a further report on this issue at their next scheduled meeting in March 2010.

4.0 DIALOGUE WITH THE OFFICE OF THE SCHOOLS COMMISSIONER AT THE DCSF

- 4.1 Officers have been in regular dialogue with representatives from the Office of the School Commissioner at the DCSF both before and during the consultation over the options for securing improvements in the educational standards at St Neots Community College. In particular, the Authority has sought to establish whether or not the Secretary of State would be likely to approve release of the funding available to support improvement through the National Challenge programme, should it decide to pursue its stated preferred option of a federation between Longsands College and St Neots Community College.
- 4.2 Prior to the consultation beginning, DCSF officials confirmed that a National Challenge Federation with a Trust led by Longsands College would be an acceptable model of governance and would be eligible for National Challenge Trust funding. This funding totals £750,000, less the £173,000 National Challenge Funding that St Neots Community College has received to date and the National Challenge funding that the school might expect to receive in the future; it received £108,000 in 2009/10. Assuming the school receives around £200,000 of National Challenge funding in the future, it is projected that the National Challenge Trust funding would total £377,000.
- 4.3 The DCSF position changed during the consultation. Longsands College was assessed as being good with outstanding features in its most recent Ofsted inspection. DCSF officials stated subsequently that the support of an outstanding education provider was required to access the National Challenge Trust funding. A federated governing body with a trust led by Longsands College would not be sufficient to qualify for funding. The federated body would need to commit to acquiring a trust which would include representation from the external provider

and the trust would have to appoint the majority of the governing body. It was indicated that the federated governing body would not have a place on the trust

4.4 Unfortunately, further discussion with DCSF officials could not reach agreement on an approach that would enable the federation to be driven by Longsands College to the extent as originally envisaged. It was agreed that there were three options available:

1. To proceed with a National Challenge Federation of Longsands College and St Neots Community College and the creation of a Trust comprising external partners, including an outstanding educational provider. The Trust would appoint the majority of the governing body. This would enable National Challenge Trust funding to be provided.
2. To proceed with a National Challenge Trust for St Neots Community College, with Longsands as one of the partners of the Trust. This would enable National Challenge Trust funding to be provided.
3. To proceed with a federation of St Neots Community College and Longsands College, led by Longsands College without forming a Trust. This would not enable National Challenge Trust funding to be provided.

4.5 Following discussion with the governing body of Longsands College, Option 3 was identified as the preferred option.

5.0 PREFERRED OPTION AND NEXT STEPS

5.1 After giving very careful consideration to the feedback received during the consultation process and to the issues raised in recent dialogue with the Office of the Schools Commissioner at the DSCF, officers remain of the view that a statutory federation between St Neots Community College and Longsands College would provide the best structural solution to the challenges faced by St Neots Community College. The main reasons for this are set out below.

5.2 **The “two school town” issue:** Despite their close geographical proximity, there is a long and entrenched history of actual or perceived competition between the two schools. They have acquired both deserved and undeserved reputations with parents and the local community. As in many communities served by two schools, these reputations have polarised as perceptions of individual schools that either serve the interests of more academically able or less able students or even simply as good and bad schools. This is a long-held issue that predates St Neots Community College encountering its current difficulties. There is a strong view amongst many in the St Neots community that Longsands has improved at the expense of St Neots Community College.

5.2.1 Radical measures are required to address this issue and secure sustainable improvement in St Neots Community College; this is fundamental to improving secondary education in St Neots. The federation option provides this opportunity. As required, the two schools would retain their separate identities. However, there would be increased opportunities for shared use of facilities, the sharing of professional understanding and skills and the promotion of greater cohesion in the community.

5.2.2 Whilst Longsands would clearly be the stronger and driving partner in this arrangement it is acknowledged that there is learning and benefit that would accrue to Longsands from a federation with St Neots Community College.

- 5.3 **Parental preferences and confidence:** Parental confidence in St Neots Community College has reached an unacceptably low level. The school can accommodate 232 children in each of its year groups. For September 2009 entry, 110 families named the school as their first choice of secondary school for their children for admission. This represents 58.5% of the children eligible to transfer from the school's partner primary schools. For September 2010, this figure had dropped even further to 66 families expressing a first choice preference or 28% of available places.

Longsands is perceived locally as a high performing school. It is extremely well regarded by its own parent body and is regularly oversubscribed, principally as a result of movement from St Neots Community College's catchment area. For September 2010 entry, the school received 319 first choice applications against 290 places, resulting in first choice applications representing 110% of available places. The contrasting fortunes of the two schools have widened the gulf of educational opportunity between the children and young people of the St Neots and surrounding community

- 5.3.1 Establishing the Longsands ethos and brand for St Neots Community College would be highly advantageous because of the specific confidence that the community has in the school. Such a change would provide the required signal of a clean break from the past; it would not simply be the reinvention or repackaging of St Neots Community College with additional support.
- 5.4 **Strength of Longsands:** It is accepted that not all members of the Longsands community support the proposed change. The principal concern expressed is that of a Federation leading to a dilution of the efforts that are being made to enable Longsands to continue its progress towards being judged an outstanding school. These concerns are entirely understandable. However, lengthy discussions with the senior leadership team and governing body of Longsands have led officers to conclude that the school has the capacity and ability to lead fundamental improvement in St Neots Community College without putting its own further improvement at risk. Longsands is a good school with outstanding features. It has a strong senior leadership team, one capable of maintaining the school's own development whilst bringing strong and effective leadership to St Neots Community College. The school has a clear ethos and systems and practices in place which are transferrable to St Neots Community College. Most importantly, the leadership of the school knows the wider St Neots community and its strengths and issues and has the trust and confidence of this community.
- 5.4.1 The Parkside Federation experience demonstrates the rapid improvements that can take place when parents have immediate confidence in the ability of a partner school to deliver improved outcomes. Federation with Parkside had an immediate impact on preferences for Coleridge and the school population now much better reflects its catchment area. Similar changes could be delivered in St Neots through the community's confidence in Longsands. Housing development in the Longsands catchment area will mean the school increasingly filling up from its own catchment area. Federation would allow families in the current St Neots Community College catchment area to continue to be able to access the strengths of Longsands.
- 5.5 Federation also provides opportunities for making the best use of collective resources. This will benefit the two schools financially and enable a wider range of

opportunities for all students. As an example, one of the current issues facing Longsands is the increasing number of applications from post-16 students and the financial disadvantages that the school experiences as a result of the treatment of growth within the post-16 funding model. The school has not had the funding to expand its support structures at the rate of the growth of its post-16 numbers. The planning of post-16 provision across the Federation allows the delivery of a broader curriculum for the benefit of all students.

- 5.6 It is proposed to pursue a model of Federation that is unlikely to be eligible for the receipt of National Challenge Trust funding, as explained in paragraph 4.3. It is the view of officers that the leadership of Longsands College is crucial to the delivery of a successful Federation in St Neots. The Federation needs to be locally driven whilst having capacity to access the external support it considers necessary to drive improvement at St Neots Community College. The models proposed by DCSF do not provide the requisite flexibility and would require both governing bodies to be dissolved with the majority of the new federated governing body being appointed by a trust. Given the desire to build on the successes of Longsands College in the Federation, fundamental change in the governance of the school would be counter productive.
- 5.7 Whilst not a pre-requisite of federation, the Authority would expect St Neots Community College to change its status from a community to a foundation school. Longsands is a foundation school and as such, it is the school's governing body's responsibility to employ the staff and act as admissions authority. With a single governing body operating across the two schools, it would make sense for that governing body to be responsible for the employment of staff in the two schools and to act as the admission authority for each one. Once the federated governing body was in place, action could be taken to acquire a Trust with the timetable and composition of the Trust being determined by the federated governing body.

6. SIGNIFICANT IMPLICATIONS

6.1 Resources and Performance

The Local Authority has previously committed to writing off the accumulated deficit of St Neots Community College. This commitment remains in place and reflects the view that radical structural change needs to be implemented. None of the options consulted on could deliver the improvement required whilst also addressing the inherited deficit. The deficit currently stands at £850,000.

- 6.2 Further work on the support and challenge to schools with deficits has been undertaken. This includes the issuing of formal Notices of Concern where deficit recovery is not proceeding to plan and a mandatory internal audit of a school's financial management arrangements taking place prior to a deficit being licensed.
- 6.3 In addition to the write off of the deficit it is intended to provide £350,000 of one off resource to support the establishment of the Federation and delivery of the improvement plan. This funding replaces the DCSF National Challenge Trust Funding.
- 6.4 It is recognised that in order to deliver the preferred option of federation, early agreement must be reached on the following:

- A swift and radical restructuring of management and staffing to address the

St Neots Community College's recurrent budget deficit

- An improvement plan with clear and stretching targets to ensure that St Neots Community College comes out of special measures at the earliest possible opportunity
- A programme with clearly articulated goals and targets for the development of the federated schools that will regain the confidence of the local community and reverse the trend of falling rolls being experienced by St Neots Community College and alleviate the pressures placed on Longsands as a result of parental preference options for the two schools.

6.2 Statutory Requirements and Partnership Working

Federation, change of status from a community to a foundation school and acquisition of a Trust are subject to statutory processes.

- 6.2.1 The establishment of a federation rests with the individual schools' governing bodies to determine. Whilst both governing bodies have indicated their support for such a change, they will need to pass a formal resolution at their next scheduled governing body meetings to the effect that they have agreed to proceed with formal consultation on a proposal to enter into a Federation.

6.3 Climate Change

There are no significant implications resulting from these proposals.

6.4 Access and Inclusion

There are no significant implications resulting from these proposals.

6.5 Engagement and Consultation

As indicated above, further consultation will be necessary should Cabinet give its support to the Authority working with the governing bodies of the two schools to progress the establishment of a Federation with, in due course, the acquisition of an overarching Trust, subject to National Challenge funding being made available.

Source Documents	Location
Background consultation document Written responses to the consultation	B wing 2 nd Floor Castle Court Shire Hall Cambridge CB3 0AP