

Cambridgeshire Children and Young People's Committee, 13 September 2016

Tim Coulson, Regional Schools Commissioner, East of England and North East London

Role of the Regional Schools Commissioner

<https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/schools-commissioners-group>

1. What exactly is the RSC's geographical coverage? How many LAs? How many primary, special and secondary schools and how many of those are already academies?

The Regional Schools Commissioner for the East of England and North-East London is responsible for making decisions about the academies and free schools in the following 15 local authorities:

- Barking and Dagenham
- Cambridgeshire
- Essex
- Hackney
- Haringey
- Havering
- Newham
- Norfolk
- Peterborough
- Redbridge
- Southend-on-Sea
- Suffolk
- Thurrock
- Tower Hamlets
- Waltham Forest

There are 2373 schools in the region, of which 715 are academies. 657 schools have become academies:

- 387 primary - 208 converted, 179 sponsored
- 241 secondary – 167 converted, 74 sponsored
- 22 special - 16 converted, 6 sponsored
- 7 alternative provision - 5 converted, 2 sponsored

There are also:

- 60 free schools, nine opened September 2016
- 2 studio schools
- 4 University Technical Colleges
- 1 University Teaching School

2. How does the RSC travel across this area? Train, private car, taxi? How many hours per week does he spend travelling?

I travel mainly by train, but occasionally by private car when journeys by public transport are particularly time consuming. The amount I travel varies considerably but I am generally in the Cambridge office once a week, the London office once a week and travelling around the region the rest of the time.

3. There are 8 RSCs each directly answerable to the DfE via the National Schools Commissioner. They are interpreting for academies the expectations and requirements of the government. What is the process by which the RSCs ensure that their application of directives is consistent across the country?

The National Schools Commissioner is responsible for overseeing the consistent use of the decision making framework that has been published -

https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/548540/RSC_Decision_Making_Framework_April_2016.pdf

4. What is the structure of the RSC's staffing team? Deputies, clerical staff and where are they located?

The structure is as attached. This follows the recent merger of what had been the Regional Schools Commissioner's office and the regional team of a DfE Academies Group.

5. What is the annual cost of the RSC and his office (salaries, on-costs, travel expenses, office rental etc)

The annual cost is £2.3m.

6. What is the appraisal process for an RSC? Who carries it out, how often and what are the criteria? Does the RSC receive a fixed salary or is there a performance-related element? If so, what are the criteria? Is the achievement of school to academy conversions one of them?

The appraisal process is as the arrangements for members of the Senior Civil Service. My line manager is the National Schools Commissioner. The process is very similar to when I was senior officer in local government, ie with agreed objectives, half yearly review and annual review. I have a fixed salary. There is an annual performance related element. There has been a debate about the extent to which school to academy conversions are part of the measures and ministers have said that the KPI that we are held to account for will be published.

Working arrangements with the County Council

7. If as Cambridgeshire members we are criticised for having failing schools in the county, how can Academy Trusts get away with having so little contact with members if that is what they choose? How can lines of communication be opened up so that the local County member may know what is happening within his or her trust schools?

Effective communication is based on effective relationships. I encourage but do not tell trusts to have productive relationships with local authorities.

8. The Council is particularly concerned that schools serving new communities are being opened early and before they are needed by the population of the new community. This creates spare capacity unnecessarily, disrupts existing patterns of pupil movement and creates issues for the medium and longer term for both the new and existing communities as spaces intended for newly arriving families are taken up by pupils from existing communities who will then struggle to access future places for siblings. How will the RSC ensure that the timing of the opening of new schools better supports the needs of the community that they are planned to serve?

I am keen to work with the local authority to ensure that schools open when they are of most help

9. How can the RSC and the Local Authority work together to improve Cambridgeshire schools?

I am keen that we continue to communicate regularly and meet at regular frequencies, in particular to discuss where there are concerns about school quality or school places. We have a meeting tomorrow where we will look at the provisional primary school results of both maintained schools and academies. We are keen to discuss how to get the best school leaders to have a wider impact, to discuss areas of particular concern and how academy trusts can make a difference there, to discuss academies or maintained schools about which we are concerned and actions that will follow.

Darwin Green Decision Making

10. One of the tasks of the RSC is to decide on who will open a new school. Recently in Cambridgeshire we had a process for opening a new secondary school in Cambridge. There were three applicants. Cambs CC staff carried out the full process to the letter and on the day of the interviews in Shire Hall, a representative of the RSC was present throughout. After detailed and exhaustive interviews of the applicants, the panel unanimously agreed to eliminate one applicant. After a long discussion, it was agreed to recommend one of the two remaining applicants and the RSC's representative did not demur. Some weeks later we were informed that the RSC had appointed the applicants who had been unanimously rejected by the panel. What is the point of having a panel and interviews, at considerable public expense, if the RSC is then going to make the decision irrespective of the recommendation?

The framework for deciding on the sponsor for a new school is clear and that the RSC may make a different decision to the one recommended. This decision was reviewed by the National Schools Commissioner and his letter is attached.

11. What had persuaded the RSC that Meridian Trust were the better option to take on the running of the new school as opposed to the CCCs selected option?

It became clear that a difference of view was that the council had decided that the impact of the decision on North Cambridge Academy was not something that should be brought to bear on the decision. I came to the view that it was reasonable to consider the impact on North Cambridge Academy.

12. Did the RSC apply different criteria in reaching a decision, what were the differences or if he disagreed with the findings of the CCC which parts of the process of procurement did the RSC disagree with? Why was objection not raised at the time by his representative, who I understand was present at proceedings?

As in question 11, there was a different view. The RSC's representative observed the interview stage but was not involved in the decision making and about what factors to take into account. Although now retired, his views were sought as part of the review of this decision by the National Schools Commissioner,

13. If this process were to take place again with another new school what lessons, if any, has the RSC learnt from this experience? What does he think could be improved?

Sir David's letter recommends:

- It should be reinforced in the presumption guidance that the LA should not make its preferred sponsor public before the final decision by the HTB, to avoid any issues should a difference of opinion arise.
- In each presumption case, the LA should be invited to meet the RSC to explain the rationale for its recommendation before the recommendation is made to the HTB.
- In the interests of transparency, in each presumption case the RSC should set out the criteria against which his decision has been made and how each of the bidders matches those criteria.

Key issues for the Regional School Commissioner team in Cambridgeshire

- Improving the attainment of disadvantaged pupils
- Bringing together 'standalone academies into multi-academy trusts
- Helping the best primary heads to lead multi-academy trusts locally
- Supporting governance and effectiveness of multi-academy trusts
- New school places going in the right places
- Holding to account where school performance is unacceptable