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Little Paxton School Governing Body

Minutes of Meeting to be held on Monday 16th June 2016 at 6.30pm

Present:

Maria Button Co-opted Governor
Penny Conway Authority Governor
Neil Donoghue Co-opted Governor
Richard Fairbairn Parent Governor
Graham Hiom Co-opted Governor
Barbara Hughes Parent Governor
David Jones Parent Governor
Mike Kendall Co-opted Governor

Gemma Manning Parent Governor
Oliver Poulain Parent Governor
Jordana Watts Staff Governor

Apologies Received from:

Debbie Gray Co-opted Governor

In attendance:

Alison Gatward Clerk to the Governing Body

Context of meeting:

The governing body has, over the last few months, been considering the potential opportunities afforded to the school of becoming an academy and forming or joining a multi-academy trust (MAT). Alongside PPP partner schools, the GB had begun to investigate what this would mean. This has included a meeting on 28th April of a working party of governors from each of the PPP schools as well as workshop sessions organised by the Regional School Commissioner's office attended by the HT and the CoG in St Neots and Cambridge. They will attend a further workshop in London on 4th July.

A letter inviting the GB to consider whether Little Paxton School would want to become part of SNLP (an existing local MAT) was received on 12th May.

PC and OP gave a presentation regarding academies as attached.

Questions on the presentation:

Background information on academies and multi-academy trusts (MAT)

QU: Regarding the largest MAT, what are the results in these schools? Is it making a difference to the children in the school? There are some trusts that are doing well and some that aren't. It would be good to look at the performance of some MATs as background.

QU: Is this is really about money rather than performance? In many respects yes, but the Government's rationale for academisation is that giving schools more freedoms, alongside responsibilities, will raise standards.

QU: If we join a successful trust then will our influence be restricted? If we were to join a trust that is less strong we would have more to offer to the MAT. It is essential to work out what is right for this school.

QU: Are all of these bodies (Trust Boards and committees) staffed by volunteers? Generally yes and the majority must be as only 1/3 can be employed by the trust, although it is possible for them to be employed by a subsidiary. There has been some suggestion that positions such as the Chair of Trust Board and Chair of Finance could be full time positions in a MAT, but for the moment these are voluntary in the same way that governors in maintained schools are. Issues can arise when MATs start small with a certain structure and then take on other schools but fail to adapt the structure to accommodate this growth.

QU: Is there an exit strategy? The regional school commissioner could change the membership of a MAT but essentially there is no way out.

QU: In poorly performing local authorities, which may include Cambridgeshire, why will becoming part of a MAT improve performance in schools? This is a question for the government and the question has been asked to the Secretary of Education. The view is if the LA is consistently underperforming how can an outstanding school remain outstanding in that environment?

St Neots Learning Partnership (SNLP) and other local trusts

QU: At what point did the heads of school change? Would need to look this up. The Executive Head who was based at Longsands has now moved to Ernulf where he has taken on the role of interim HT.

QU: It appears that the total spend was more than the funding? This could be due to carry forward but this would be unsustainable.

QU: Do you have population figures for the catchment areas of Longsands and Ernulf, as the pupil numbers at each are very different? Longsands has a wider catchment area. Wintringham development will all be Ernulf catchment and it was a surprise that Loves farm was Longsands catchment. There are hundreds of pupil places available at Ernulf.

QU: Looking at the Diamond Learning Partnership Trust, what Ofsted grading are these 5 schools? Most are good or outstanding, one is required to improve and one is inadequate. The founder member of the trust is graded outstanding. For the two schools which have been inspected since joining the trust one is good the other requires improvement and for the other two schools which are yet to be inspected since joining the trust one was judged good and the other as inadequate at their previous inspections.

QU: Crosshall infant and juniors - are they separate academies? Yes, each one is an academy in their own right and they converted at the first possible opportunity.

QU: Do we know who the SNLP members are? This information can be seen on their website. Look on the website for their brochure.

QU: Have they followed up since the letter? Following the letter they have emailed and asked if we would like a meeting. They have been trying to organise with us a date for the meeting.

Discussion

An open discussion then followed to decide on the best course of action:

QU: What is our vision for this school? Where do we see where we are going and which way fits in best with this? This is where we need to start. The key question is - How will this benefit the children at Little Paxton School?

QU: With the planned growth of the school will it always remain as one school or could it be split into infants and juniors? The national strategy is to keep schools together as a primary facility rather than having separate infant and juniors.

QU: What would be important to us in setting up our structure? Going in with an existing MAT may score poorly as it may not fit with what we want for our children. Being clear about our vision and what we want for the children would also help us to communicate our decision with the parents.

QU: Is there anything to lose in speaking to the SNLP in order to receive more information? There could be an advantage for children all the way through their school life and may result in a smoother transition into secondary education. It does make sense to have local boards responsible for children from 4-18 which would do away with the potential temptation to over-estimate children's attainment levels at any point during their

education. It would also have the benefit of balancing the funding between primary and secondary. It would be good to understand the motivation behind the request from the SNLP to invite us to join their MAT, is it just to make the MAT bigger and more prestigious.

QU: Is there an option to be a flat MAT? The DfE's preference is now for MATs with an executive head, standalone academies and flat MATs where each school retains almost full autonomy are no longer considered to be viable options.

QU: Is the strategic vision and implementation good enough? There is concern that given the current situation and recent past history this may not be the right MAT to join.

QU: What is in it for the SNLP? For a secondary to join a primary school is this about managing the intake to the secondary school. Would they control our set up for transition into the secondary school? Surely if we were part of the MAT then it would be partly our responsibility to work together to bring up the levels of achievement at Ernulf which may mean a reallocation of children to the two secondary schools to give a more even distribution of prior attainment levels. Results at Ernulf will only improve if the children are achieving before they get there, by the time they get to secondary school it is too late if they have not reached the required standard.

Need to understand what SNLP have in mind, interested to hear what they mean. A meeting would have been a better starting point than a letter, especially as governors found the letter to be ambiguous and poorly written. Perhaps we should go and hear them verbalise what they mean by the letter they sent. The letter doesn't say enough. They have offered a meeting. The letter raises certain concerns for the governing body.

QU: Within the SNLP would we as a school have equal importance as the secondary schools? It was felt that the tone of the initial letter was that they had more to offer us than we had for them. Financially our contribution would be a lot smaller so how loud would our voice be?

Potential questions for SNLP -

- Tell me your vision for the future?
- What is in it for Little Paxton School?

QU: Is it a stronger option to make a MAT with the Priory Schools? Or could we become a standalone academy? Standalone academies are not now cost effective and would not have the support mechanisms. It could be possible to convert as a single school (as an empty MAT) but you would have to show the potential and capability of growing the MAT. There would be more control as a starting school in a MAT. A MAT of one would be encouraged to take on other struggling schools.

QU: Do we think that we should look at all of those options now or should we just go and find out more about the SNLP? There is no rush, the SNLP are unlikely to rescind the offer. The only issue on time is with other schools making decisions e.g. if the Priory schools joined the SNLP then they would be unavailable to create a MAT with Little Paxton.

QU: What discussions has there been with the other schools? SNLP met briefly with the HT of Priory Juniors who made them aware of the strong links between the PPP schools. This triggered further brief meetings with the HTs of Priory Infants and Little Paxton on the same day. The views of the three heads are that the letter is badly written, however, all feel that there is more information which needs to be gathered and they would like the opportunity hear firsthand what is being proposed? **QU:** What has been the response to the letter from Priory schools? One wants to find out more and the other governing body is yet to meet to discuss.

DH shared that at a recent National Association of Headteachers event there was an opportunity to speak to someone who raised an interesting question; if you were to join them then you would want to seek assurances that there wouldn't ever become a time that there would be changes to which school the children feed into.

QU: Are the staff employed by the MAT or the school? Teachers and other staff are employed by the MAT unless they have already a contract with the school. Current employees are encouraged to move contracts to the MAT. Any new teachers will be employed by the MAT. This allows for sharing teachers across schools.

QU: Have staff been consulted? Members of staff are aware as information from conferences on academies has been shared. They were aware of the meeting with PPP schools but this SNLP letter may not have been shared as yet.

QU: What is the staff's reaction? This particular MAT has not been discussed. No one has been concerned regarding the discussions with Priory schools. Priory staff were more anxious but no concerns have been voiced by our staff. People's reactions can be shaped by what they have heard about others experience of joining a MAT. The relationships of staff throughout the school with their peers in Priory schools are good and working together has been positive.

QU: What about DLPT? This should be one of the options? They have a very different way of operating. Middlefield was turned around and is now graded outstanding by Ofsted but internally it was a difficult process. Current systems were stripped out and replaced them with the Trust way. It was difficult for some people working within the schools. The ethos element was very different. We need to take learning from this and consider how we think we would want to things to be done. **QU:** Are the SNLP interested in joining with DLPT? DH asked this when the SNLP met with her and she was told the DLPT vision was not in line with the SNLP vision.

Should also look further at forming own MAT with PPP schools. PC shared some information regarding Cambridge Primary Education Trust - Hatton Park, Histon & Impington Infant & Juniors. In addition, they are sponsoring the new primary school in Trumpington. This is a similar set up to the PPP schools. **QU:** Is it worth asking them how it works for them, what processes they went through? It would be interesting to see how they operate and see what is delegated.

QU: How many primaries have joined MATs that haven't been forced to? These are the schools we need to talk to. Need to explore the positives of joining with other primary schools.

QU: When we make a decision what happens? If we decide to move forward to join or become a Trust we have to go to the Regional School Commissioner, he looks at the proposal and if he is in agreement and grants an academy order we can move forward. There would need to be a consultation period for parents. After this there are various legal matters to attend to. In general the process takes about 6 months.

What next?

Governors were asked to give DH, OP and PC permission to go and hear SNLP present their proposal. This was agreed on the basis that it is a fact finding exercise. It is hoped that the SNLP will be able to plan this meeting for this half term. Then further down the process it may helpful for them to present to the governors.

Governors have considered the academy route on several previous occasions and have not yet been convinced that this is the best thing for the school. Before agreeing to join this MAT, or any other academy, we would need to determine why this change would be the best option for the children in our school.

Need to set up a working team to propose a list of factors to be considered and a check list for evaluation of the different options.

QU: Are there any resources that are available from other schools which have already been through this process? Not come across anything.

It may be helpful to centre the questions around a specific objective. This must to be focused on Little Paxton's needs. This will guide whether this is leading us to an existing MAT or a new one.

Identify the principal stakeholders and explore what would be the key things for each group

- children
- staff
- parents
- governors
- wider community

Would need to understand for each option the degree of autonomy the school would retain.

Also looking further at forming own MAT with PPP schools.

QU: Do we need to articulate what our critical success factors, what do we measure our investigations against? What is important for our children and our school? This would assist us in scoring the information that we receive. For example financial stability, tools and deployment of resources – are not directly about the children but still have an important impact on them.

QU: Are we still trying to do too much at once? Do we not want to set up a score card first once we have the assessment criteria.

QU: How do we pull together what is wanted for each stakeholder group? How do we engage with staff and parents? Who do we tell what and when? To share about this letter would send out the wrong message, the letter has come marked up as confidential, but others seem to have heard about it. Don't open the discussion up too early until the governors have done more groundwork and have answers.

At a later stage it will be necessary to ask for input as to what is important for the school and future vision. A clear communication plan will be necessary. The governors have responsibility for strategic direction but should take on board the input from parents.

It was agreed to set up a working party to look into these next steps further.

Volunteers - Neil, Gemma, Ellen, Jordana with Graham, David, Oliver and Penny willing to be on hand if needed.

OP will issue a revised date for the curriculum meeting that should have taken place this evening or the C&S meeting may take place on the same evening as the FGB.

Meeting closed 8:55pm

Post Meeting Update

Following the meeting the CoG emailed all governors setting out the points and actions from this meeting as follows:

1. We are in no rush to make any decision about if/when/what we do about becoming an academy or joining a MAT.
2. It is crucial that we consider the impact of our decisions on the children, their parents, our staff and the village community and, not least, on governors.
3. No option has been ruled out although we recognise that becoming part of a MAT, one way or another, may be inevitable at some future point.
4. At this stage we do not have a preferred option.
5. We wish to continue to work closely with our PPP partners, and also maintain our links with the town's secondary schools as well as strengthening our links with other primaries; we will consider all options about how to do this.
6. We agreed that OP, DH and PC, in conjunction with representatives of our PPP partners, will accept an invitation from SNLP (received by school via email) to hear directly from them what they propose. This is simply so we can understand their vision for the future, not in order to enter into any kind of negotiation about the future.
7. Several governors volunteered to be part of a working group to investigate our options more thoroughly. This group will not meet until after the exploratory meeting with SNLP so they can receive feedback from that.

The CoG also sent links to websites and other information about the following local MATs, and asked governors to look through these so as to get a feel for the possibilities that may be open to us and the different ways that MATs operate:

- St Neots Learning Partnership Trust (SNLP)
- The Diamond Learning Partnership Trust (DLPT)
- Diocese of Ely Multi Academy Trust (DEMAT)
- Cambridge Primary Education Trust (CPET)
- Cambridge Meridian Academies Trust (CMAT)

Governors were also encouraged to extend their researches to other MATs.

In addition, the CoG asked all governors (as parents, staff or members of the local community) to think about what is that they value about Little Paxton School (Questions such as: Why did you select it for your children? Why do you choose to work here? How does it contribute to village life?) What are the essential elements that they want to preserve and build on? Governors were asked to forward their thoughts before the next FGB meeting (11th July) so these can be collated ready for discussion at that meeting.

Governors were directed to consult the Governance Handbook and Academies Financial Handbook (both published by the DfE) for information about the legal requirements and restrictions regarding academies and MATs. Links to these were provided.