

PROPOSAL TO EXPAND SWINDON ACADEMY TO INCLUDE PENHILL PRIMARY AND NURSERY SCHOOL

CONSULTATION REPORT

1. Introduction

This report summarises the findings of an extensive public consultation into the proposal to expand the 0-19 Swindon Academy to include Penhill Primary and Nursery School.

Swindon Academy, sponsored by the United Learning Trust (ULT), opened in September 2007. It replaced Headlands School, Pinehurst Infant and Junior Schools. Swindon Borough Council (SBC) has proposed this closure of Penhill Primary and Nursery School to allow it to be incorporated into Swindon Academy.

Following the Council's decision to close the school, ULT will seek the Secretary of State for the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) approval for the expansion of the academy.

Under the proposal:

- The academy's Penhill expansion would open in January 2009 in the existing Penhill school building and which would have a planned programme of refurbishment;
- The school would remain on its current site but under the governance and management of the academy;
- Places would be guaranteed for all existing students at Penhill School into the 0-11 element of the academy at the time the school closes in December 2008.

The aim is to improve the quality of education provided for the children of Penhill and, in particular, to raise educational standards and strengthen the development of good educational practice. This is in line with the DCSF expectations of local authorities to implement targeted interventions in primary schools identified as 'hard to shift'.

1.2 The Background Reasons for this Proposal

Penhill Primary School is on the DCSF National List of 266 'hard to shift' primary schools. It has failed to meet the floor targets at Key Stage Two in both maths

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and English for five years, despite receiving considerable additional resources and support from the Local Authority. An Ofsted inspection, which took place in September 2006, judged the standards reached by learners to be inadequate (Grade 4).

SBC has identified standards at Penhill Primary School as a critical issue that needs to be addressed urgently. The Council is of the view that a structural solution is required and as such recommends that the school becomes part of Swindon Academy, where it would benefit from the academy's drive to raise standards.

The educational plans for the 0-19 academy, which are currently being developed, propose for the academy to break out from traditional structures and introduce systems where the needs of the individual learner can be more readily met and personalised. Students will be progressed according to the 'stage' they are at in their development rather than their chronological age. Such a development could make it difficult for the current Penhill Primary School pupils to integrate into the academy when they move at age 11.

As well as helping to raise local educational standards, an academy expanded to include Penhill Primary School will promote inclusion and enjoy the benefits attached to continuity of care and personnel, especially for more vulnerable children.

ULT and SBC share the view that an all-age 0-19 academy is well-placed to transform the education and learning opportunities for primary pupils of all abilities from the surrounding area, raise aspirations and achievement and challenge expectations of learning. It removes a number of transition issues when moving from one school to another and provides continuity of teaching and learning for pupils.¹ The development allows for a cross-curriculum approach to teaching and learning across all the Key Stages ensuring individual levels of attainment are improved.

During the consultation to establish Swindon Academy, which was carried out in 2006 by DJB Consultancy² on behalf of the sponsor United Learning Trust (ULT), a number of respondents suggested that some of the academy's feeder schools (excluding Pinehurst Infant and Junior Schools, which are now part of the academy) would be disadvantaged, i.e. Penhill, Gorse Hill and Seven Fields. 86% of the academy's student cohort comes from these feeder schools, with 20% from Penhill.

¹ Evidence shows that pupil performance dips, and pupil progress is slowed, as a result of moving schools. In an area where raising standards of achievement is a key priority, which has not to-date been successfully addressed through to age 16, it is vital that these barriers to progress are removed.

² See Swindon Academy Consultation Report November 2006.

2. Consultation Process

This independent public consultation was conducted by DJB Consultancy on behalf of ULT and ran from 1st June to 14th July 2008 in parallel with the statutory SBC consultation process into the closure of Penhill Primary School.

The following areas are the key priorities explored in the independent consultation:

- The academy's intake and development;
- Transition, continuity and progression;
- Governance;
- Community links and wider use.

The consultation period included:

- Two formal consultation meetings on 9th June for parents, carers and the community;
- Separate meetings for staff including trades union representatives and the governing body;
- A meeting on 12th June for the Penhill residents (Forum) and the public;
- Face-to-face interviews and group meetings with a cross-section of the schools' staff, trades unions, senior SBC representatives, other key education stakeholders, the Chair of Swindon Academy's Local Governing Body and the Councillor for the Penhill area; **(Appendix 1 lists all individuals and groups interviewed and written submissions)**
- Focus groups with students from Years 5 and 6; **(Appendix 2 Summary of students' views)**
- An independent statistically-valid Survey of Public Opinion commissioned among 50 parents which included two parent focus groups with a cross-section of parents who participated in the Survey. It was an opportunity for these parents to explore more fully the issues raised in the Survey. **(See Survey of Public Opinion Report)**

The school-based meetings were also attended by the Head Teachers and Senior Management Teams of Swindon Academy and of Penhill Primary and Nursery School. A representative from SBC Human Resources was present to answer questions on TUPE and other conditions of service matters. The DJB Consultancy Lead Officer chaired all the meetings and presentations were made by SBC and ULT representatives with input from the Principal of Swindon Academy.

The Chair of Penhill School was unable to meet with us for a face-to-face interview but was in attendance at all the school-based meetings and chaired the

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Governors' meeting. He was requested and agreed to submit a written response, but this has not been received to date. SBC forwarded the Governing Body's response to the Council dated 13th July to the consultants on 14th July.

3. The Key Issues for Consultation – Stakeholders' Views

3.1 Attitudes to the Academy Proposal

The Penhill School Parents' Survey (details are in the addendum to this report) reports that parents were split in their attitudes to the proposal to expand the academy to include Penhill with:

- 46% supporting/strongly supporting the proposal;
- 37% opposing/strongly opposing the proposal;
- 25% neither supporting nor opposing the proposal;
- 4% said they did not know.

3.1.1 Positive Responses

- 'Since Swindon Academy took over Headlands, my other daughter's education has improved.'
- 'My eldest goes to the academy and is doing really well.'
- 'I know from people needing one-to-one attention it's quite a long wait to get things done here, but from what I've read it would be different at the academy.'
- 'It will raise the standard and the school is not all that good anyway.'
- 'There will be higher standards with all the schools on one level.'
- 'If it's going to improve a lot of things, then it's worth it and if it brings up standards.'
- 'There are non-curriculum activities, and I think the standards would be raised if it were in the academy.'
- 'I agree with them on the curriculum. If one child is slow they go down in the curriculum a bit to help them.'
- 'Might be a better education – I don't think it's brilliant at the moment.'
- 'Part of it is their standards will improve over the next two years or so, and they won't have to keep looking for funds.'
- 'I think Swindon Academy is brilliant. I have other children who were at Headlands, and I've seen the changes and they worked well with my older son with ADHS.'
- 'It'll give them more education.'
- 'Because I don't think with the way Penhill is going, which is badly, that it's very good – no anti-bullying policy, they don't follow it up, and it needs improving.'

3.1.2 Negative Responses:

- 'My daughter has had a good education and I don't see why it should change, it's fine.'

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- 'I don't like the academy. My other daughter has had problems, the headmistress doesn't listen, and it is difficult to see her.'
- 'They are alright as they are.'
- 'Firstly, the academy hasn't been going that long and I've heard reports of bullying. Too early to say if it's working.'
- 'Because the academy hasn't done a lot for my oldest child (first year there). His level has dropped dramatically – inexperienced teachers there.'
- 'How are they going to do it? The fact they'll be bringing in kids from other areas – less of a community if that happens.'
- 'Why change when it's going ok?'

3.1.3 Don't Know Responses:

- 'It's too soon to say, the academy hasn't been there long.'
- 'You hear two different stories.'
- 'There's not a lot of difference. When my son leaves Penhill, he'll be going to the academy anyway.'
- 'The proposal for Swindon Academy, the idea was that it would be all together but they will still have to make a move to the Pinehurst site. On the positive side they would (hopefully) bring the standards up.'
- 'Because Penhill School newsletters say it wouldn't benefit the children.'
- 'The academy says it would benefit, and the media say it would be good. I just don't know really.'

3.2 Staff and other key stakeholders' attitudes to the proposal on the key issues for Penhill to join the academy

3.2.1 Teachers and teaching assistants at Penhill on the whole, but not entirely, expressed a negative attitude towards the proposal. The trades union representatives were clearly against it, both with regard to academies in general and specifically against this proposal. Staff were also worried about their job security and conditions of work.

The Year 5 and 6 pupils, in particular, were also largely against the proposal. Much of this negativity was based on the feeling that not enough was yet known about how the change would affect Penhill and how the changes would be implemented.

There were concerns about the lack of evidence that joining the academy would improve educational standards for the Penhill children. There was also a feeling that Penhill would be just an "add-on" or would be "slotted in" to the academy.

A further concern was that Penhill children and teachers would not fit in since they would remain on the existing site and as such would not have

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the advantages of the academy's infant and junior school which is on the same site as the secondary school. Scepticism was expressed repeatedly with regard to the upgrading of the Penhill buildings; it was frequently asked why this refurbishment is only available now, while the proposal is on the table.

A few teachers favoured the idea of Penhill becoming a Trust and there was a suggestion that they would work with the community and partners including Plymouth University to form such a Trust. There appeared, however, to be a lack of understanding of the process and the timeframe for such a move. Resentment was expressed about the fact that it seemed to be a foregone conclusion that Penhill would 'close down' and join the academy.

- 3.2.2 Strong concern was expressed by the union representatives and others that they were being 'railroaded' into this decision. They claimed the timescales were such that people did not know what was going to happen. The union representatives also voiced their disquiet about the implication that Penhill school would 'close'. They also claimed that there had been a lack of transparency in the process; 'People feel it's a done deal and we're just going through the motions'.

The trades union representatives complained that they had not seen SBC's consultation document before it went out despite being told, they claimed, that the schools would be the first to see it. They also said that they had been told they would be able to contribute to the document but that had not happened. These promises had, they said, been made by the previous Director of Education. They also voiced concerns about conditions of work and whether teachers would have to 'resign' before taking up a post at the academy.

- 3.2.3 Overall the main objections included:

- Lack of evidence that the academy can improve educational standards;
- Feeling that an academy of 2,000 pupils is too big;
- Research suggests that children feel safer and happier in a family environment in a school no bigger than 300; 'Particularly here, where we have vulnerable children (SEN and EBD) – they cope here, they're secure. They struggle in secondary school.' 'Children come with emotional baggage – we are the consistent place in their lives. When given a new teacher they don't know how to cope.'
- Concern over the 'heavily weighted' senior leadership team and whether they will understand 'Foundation' children;
- Not a good model to bring 'secondary' practice into primary schools;

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- Paragraph D of SBC's consultation paper (vertically organised systems): 'This is damaging to the children's self esteem. They'll feel they've failed if they are kept back. Both the children and the parents will be affected.'
- Perception that SBC wants to 'dump' Penhill into the academy so as not to have to worry about the school any more; 'It will no longer be their problem and the SATs results for SBC will rise.'
- The timing of the decision-making and implementation process, and especially the date of 23rd July for the 'Report' to Cabinet; this was the last day of the summer term.
- The money apparently being suddenly available for the refurbishment of Penhill School. Will this money still be used for the school if it does not join the academy?

3.2.4 Despite the above reservations, all the staff were aware that standards need to be improved, though there was debate about how far this is necessary. Some teachers appeared to feel that standards were acceptable. Where teaching staff perceived that standards were not high enough, this was blamed variously on the community, the children and the Local Authority. A wide range of interventions for children with particular needs was mentioned, though during the interviews at least, these interventions appeared to be numerous and somewhat haphazard.

3.2.5 There is strong loyalty amongst the staff at the school and the residents of the estate to the school, the Head Teacher and the community. From the following quotations, it appears that there are four main strands running through both the support staff and teachers' thinking:

1. 'The children are lovely, but very, very needy';
2. 'We love working in this school, we love the children and the Head Teacher';
- 3 'Standards of education in the school are not as high as they might be, but the children are happy';
4. 'We've done our best'.

3.2.6 A view supporting the academy move suggested that Penhill had strengths, e.g. improvement in attainment levels of the more able pupils and also the development of the teachers, but that there were 'confused structures' in the school with a lack of focus, sustained teaching and performance management. Expectations were also a problem, with the Local Authority cited as having low expectations of Penhill; a significant stakeholder said: 'Everyone has low expectations of the children'. It was stated that the Local Authority had poured money in, but had not set standards and moved

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children on. It was also suggested that the people living on the Penhill estate would like the estate pulled down.

- 3.2.7 The overriding debate appears to be over the differing views of the educational standards at Penhill and whether or not joining the academy would make a difference.

The Penhill view is that the CVA (Contextual Value Added) score, which identifies how much progress the children have progressed between the KS1 SATs and the KS2 SATs, gives a more informed indication of progress as it takes into consideration the original starting points of the children, not just the end result. It now also takes into consideration factors such as the social and economic background of the catchment area – factors which are acknowledged to be relevant to the progress and attainment of the children.

The CVA score for Penhill Primary for 2007 is 99.0. When listed in order of CVA score, highest to lowest, there were five schools listed below Penhill Primary. Two of those schools listed below Penhill Primary also missed their 'floor targets' for mathematics and English. Three of the schools listed below Penhill Primary met their 'floor targets' for mathematics and English. All of those schools listed below Penhill Primary had higher aggregate scores, yet their lower CVA scores indicate that the progress of the children in those schools, between KS1 and the end of KS2, is not as good as the progress of those at Penhill Primary.

- 3.2.8 Swindon Academy, however, has provided the consultants with the following evidence about Penhill students entering the academy:

When tracking Year 7 students on entry and through the year it is evident that those coming from Penhill present particular challenges that others on the same scale do not. On average:

- a. They are already below other schools in terms of KS2 standards, particularly in English and science;
- b. Their CATs scores are below those of students from other primary schools;
- c. Their average reading age at 11 is just over seven years;
- d. Within the first six months of Year 7 they do not make the same level of progress as other students academically or behaviourally. In fact, significant numbers present challenging behaviour during this time as they adjust to secondary school. This has been particularly pronounced this year;
- e. A significant number arrive with high levels of SEN which have not been addressed. The academy has had to spend a great deal of time applying for Statements of Need within the first few months. This has been the case for four students this year. When talking with the

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parents of these students they often said that Penhill School just sent their son or daughter home when they were naughty;

- f. A significant number were withdrawn from the National Curriculum last year (five, possibly eight). They do not appear, however, to have followed an alternative programme and were not informed of their withdrawal. The academy was therefore unprepared for them in September.

4. Transition Issues

- 4.1 There was some disquiet voiced by the staff at Penhill about the transition of Year 6 pupils to the 'Headlands' academy site. Some of their thinking appeared to be muddled; there was recognition that by joining the academy there would be continuity of education from 0 -19, but simultaneously concerns were raised about how the transition would take place, and whether Penhill children would be disadvantaged viz-a-viz Pinehurst children. They asked how the children from Penhill would fit in if the proposal went ahead. It was felt that the traditional 'dip' in standards on transition at Year 6/7 would continue despite being all part of one institution.

Questions were also asked about whether the teaching assistants would 'move up' alongside the Year 6 pupils to help them manage the transition. It was said that 'it's still a significant way to travel at transition time'.

Another point of view from staff in support suggested that transition will be easier as the 'children aged 11 will follow through with the same remit. The same ethos will be followed'.

- 4.2 The academy is aware of the issues raised about the transition and has said that working together with the same systems will make transition easier. It did recognise, however, that as the Penhill Year 6 children will have been physically separate they could feel 'different'. However, it was a "solvable problem'.

The academy view is that it can build on the strengths that Penhill has and can bring:

1. A consistent and coherent approach to teaching and learning which the children need;
2. An opportunity to build strong relationships with parents and the community which will grow throughout the children's education. This has been significant for the academy this year and which is already seeing the benefits;
3. A specialist delivery to aspects of the curriculum with targeted intervention when needed. The curriculum can be delivered as a coherent framework from 0 – 19, thus raising aspirations and expectations;

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4. Targeted SEN provision from a large team of specialists to ensure that students' needs are met early and proactively. The academy can provide SEN support on a scale which Penhill cannot.

5. Governance

Staff across the board, from Sure Start, Penhill Primary and Nursery School and members of the Penhill community voiced the same concerns:

- Will there be / Is there enough representation of primary school expertise at Senior Management level?
- Will the needs of the primary level be catered for in the Governing Body of the academy?
- What is the make-up of the academy's Governing Body and will the existing governors from Penhill be able to join the academy's Governing Body?

At the public meeting with residents and the Penhill (Forum) community, very strong views were expressed about governance, and some people who were at the meeting were invited to apply to join the academy's Governing Body. It appeared that some members of the community did not appreciate that they could put themselves up for election as governors.

Concerns were also raised, both at the forum meeting and during some interviews, about whether governors would be elected or appointed. People were particularly worried about ULT 'appointing' governors.

6. Swindon Academy's response to the views expressed

Swindon Academy's vision is to see every member of the school community achieve their best. It faces the challenges of deprivation but will never allow that to be an excuse for underachievement. The academy provides a broad ranging and personalised curriculum and supports its students to do their best. The academy intends the same to be true for the children of Penhill if they become part of Swindon Academy.

ULT and the academy acknowledge that much still needs to be done, and the academy is only just beginning to 'bed down' but there are enthusiastic teachers who will make things work. The academy is also looking forward to the completion of its new buildings.

The academy describes the current situation as a time of transition. Although there are still some difficulties at the academy, staff and students are working together to overcome them. Continuity of education across the 0-19 age range will provide an anchor for the children and offer opportunities for children's attainment to be monitored and appropriate interventions provided where necessary. Poor standards of literacy in the primary age range is a significant problem.

Both we and the academy were, however, concerned to hear a number of comments made at consultation meetings which either made assumptions with no basis or had little to do with the children and their opportunities.

Having spoken with Penhill parents, it was clear that a number of inaccurate rumours have spread, including that the school was to be knocked down and the staff sacked, so it is no wonder some were angry!

The academy acknowledges that there will be complexities in Penhill joining the academy. In particular, a special effort will need to be made to ensure Penhill pupils 'fit in'; this is because they will not be located on the same site as the rest of the academy and also because they will be joining later. Although the academy acknowledges these complexities, it is confident that they can be overcome – with goodwill, good management structures and everybody working together to achieve what they all want – the very best education for the children. Having carried out this consultation, we likewise believe this is possible.

The Principal of Swindon Academy has offered to talk to senior staff, staff and governors about the structures and details of the academy as they are at the moment. She has also invited them to visit the Beech Avenue site to see the academy in action. It is very much hoped that these offers will be accepted.

7. Conclusion and Recommendation

In November 2006, the School Improvement and Targets Unit stated:

'The Local Authority will be challenged to justify the continued existence of these schools (hard to shift primary schools), with the strong presumption that those schools unlikely to meet the target by 2008 should be considered for closure. The Local Authority, in justifying the need to preserve provision in that school, Penhill, has used many other statutory interventions to raise attainment.'

The Local Authority, however, having taken into consideration the concerns raised, feels that although there has been some improvement, the best educational solution for further sustainable improvement is for Penhill Primary and Nursery School to be included in Swindon Academy.

We have not been given any detail of the Governors' Trust alternative to this academy proposal so we are not in a position to comment on it.

Therefore, on the balance of the evidence gathered, it is our view that the more significant issues raised can be overcome.

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We recommend that the Principal of Swindon Academy and the Head Teacher of Penhill Primary set up a Transition and Development Working Group with ULT guidance to work out the best way forward.

We therefore recommend that the proposal for Penhill School to be included in Swindon Academy should be progressed, as it offers the best way forward for continued improvement.

REFERENCES

A Proposal to expand Swindon Academy to include Penhill Primary and Nursery School – ULT Consultation Document.

Proposals to close Penhill Primary School and Nursery to allow expansion of the Swindon Academy – SBC Children Services.

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Swindon Academy and Sure Start Children's Centre, Pinehurst and Penhill – Partnership Principles and Working Relationship Policy.

Penhil/Swindon Academy Preliminary Report July 2008.