

## **Proposal to expand Swindon Academy to include Penhill Primary & Nursery School**

### **Independent Consultation Preliminary Report**

This preliminary report sets out the following:

1. The background reasons for this proposal
2. The consultation process
3. The key issues and responses emerging from the consultation which require consideration towards progressing the proposal.

The final report will be available in September 2008.

#### **1. The Background Reasons for this Proposal.**

The aim of the proposed closure of Penhill Primary and Nursery School to allow it to be incorporated into the expansion of Swindon Academy 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.

During the consultation to establish Swindon Academy, which was carried out in 2006 by DJB Consultancy<sup>1</sup> 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 will in any case become 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.

Penhill Primary School is on the DCSF National List of 266 'hard to shift' primary schools and has failed to meet the floor target at Key Stage Two in both maths 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). Penhill Primary School standards have been identified by Swindon Borough Council (SBC) as a critical issue that needs to be addressed urgently and it considers that a structural solution is required to move this school forward. If the school became part of the academy, it would benefit from the academy's drive to raise standards.

The developing educational plans for this as an all-through 0-19 academy propose that it will 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

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<sup>1</sup> See Swindon Academy Consultation Report November 2006

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.<sup>2</sup> The development allows for a cross-curriculum approach to teaching and learning across all the Key Stages ensuring individual levels of attainment are improved.

The academy's Penhill expansion would open in January 2009 in the existing Penhill school building and have a planned programme to refurbish the current accommodation.

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 Sponsor will seek the Secretary of State's approval for the expansion of the academy. **(Refer to Consultation Document issued by ULT.)**

## **2. Consultation Process**

This independent public consultation has been conducted by DJB Consultancy on behalf of ULT and has run in parallel from 1<sup>st</sup> June to 14 July 2008 with the SBC consultation process.

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

Formal consultation meetings were held on 9<sup>th</sup> June for parents and carers (two meetings), and for staff and for the governing body, and on 12<sup>th</sup> June for the Penhill Forum & Public. The school-based meetings were also attended by the Headteachers 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.

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<sup>2</sup> 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.

Face-to-face interviews and group meetings have been held with a cross-section of the schools' staff, trade unions, and focus groups with students representing Years 5 and 6 age groups, senior SBC representatives, the Chair of Swindon Academy and the Councillor for the Penhill area. 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 Governors meeting. He was requested and agreed to submit a written response, but this has not been received to date. SBC has forwarded to the consultants on 14<sup>th</sup> July the Governing body's response to the Council dated 13<sup>th</sup> July.

Further, DJB consultancy commissioned a Survey of Public Opinion of 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.

Correspondence has been received from the following:

15.07.09 - Helen Beale, a former pupil.  
14.07.08 - Governors' response  
14.07.08 - GMB Trade Union  
10.07.08 - Valerie Goulden  
26.07.08 - Penhill Forum Steering Group  
20.07.08 – Phil Deaves  
19.07.08 – Amanda Broomhill, parent  
24.07.08 – Ms C Bourton, parent  
09.07.08 – Ms Jan Shadick, Principal Swindon Academy  
02.06.08 – Creighton Muirhead, Headteacher of Ruskin Junior School

### **3. The Key Issues and Responses**

#### **3.1 Attitudes to the Academy proposal**

The Penhill School Parents Survey (50 parents participated) reports that parents were split in their attitudes to the proposal to expand the academy to include Penhill with

- support /strongly support the proposal - 46 %
- oppose/strongly oppose - 37%
- neither support nor oppose - 25%
- don't know - 4%

##### **3.1.1 Positive responses**

- "Since Swindon Academy took over Headlands, my other daughters' 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 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 2 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”.
- “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 A brief overview of the attitudes to the proposal and key issues for Penhill to join the academy**

3.2.1. Teachers and teaching assistants at Penhill on the whole, but not entirely, had a negative attitude towards the proposal. The trade union representatives were clearly against it, both with regard to academies generally, and specifically against this proposal. The Year 6 and Year 5 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.

Staff were also worried about their job security and conditions of work if Penhill joins the academy. In addition there were concerns about the lack of evidence that joining the academy would improve educational standards for the Penhill children, and there was a sense that Penhill would be just an “add-on” or would be “slotted in” to the academy.

A further concern was that if Penhill does join the academy, the children and teachers would not fit in since they would stay on the existing site and would therefore not have the advantages of Pinehurst which is on the same academy site as the secondary school. Scepticism was expressed repeatedly with regard to the upgrading of the Penhill school buildings, with the question often repeated as to why this refurbishment is only coming 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. However, there appeared to be a lack of understanding of the process and the time-frame 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 There was a strong concern expressed by the union representatives and others that they were being ‘railroaded’ into this decision, and that the timescales were such that people didn’t know what was going to happen. The union representatives also voiced their disquiet about the implication that Penhill school would (quote) “close”, and also 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 union representatives complained that they had not seen SBC’s consultation document before it went out. They claimed they had been told 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 hadn’t 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.” And: “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.
- 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 July 23<sup>rd</sup> for the ‘Report’ to Cabinet. This is 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 However, 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 Headteacher 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 Headteacher; 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. “*Children do need to be loved and happy, but they can have too much. They need education and standards.*” Expectations were also a problem, with the Local Authority cited as having low expectations of Penhill. “*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 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 score (Contextual Value Added score) - the 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 Maths and English. Three of the schools listed below Penhill Primary met their 'floor targets' for Maths 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 The Academy, however, has provided to the consultants 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 do not on the same scale. 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 7 years;
- d. Within the first 6 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. It 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 4 students this year. When talking with the 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 disapplied from the National Curriculum last year (5, possibly 8). They do not appear, however, to have followed an alternative programme and were not informed of their disapplication. The academy was therefore unprepared for them in September.

#### **4. Transition Issues**

There was some disquiet voiced by the staff at Penhill about the transition of Year 6 pupils to the 'Headlands' academy site. However, some of the 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 will be disadvantaged vis-a-vis Pinehurst children. If Penhill joins the academy, then how will they fit in? 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 also said that "it's still a significant way to travel at transition time".

However, 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."*

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, though it was recognised 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 us this year and we are 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;
4. Targeted SEN provision from a large team of specialists to ensure that student's 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 school be catered for in the Governing body of the Academy?
- What is the make up of the Governing Body of the Academy, and will the existing governors from Penhill be able to join the academy Board of Governors?

At the Penhill Forum & Public meeting very strong views were expressed about governance, and some people who were at the meeting were invited to apply to join the Governing Body of the academy. It appeared that some members of the community did not appreciate that they could put themselves up for election as governors. Also, there were concerns raised both at the forum meeting and during some interviews about whether governors would be elected or appointed and especially about the ULT 'appointing' Governors.

## **6. Swindon Academy's response to these concerns**

The academy has said they were very disappointed to hear so many questions and comments made at the consultation meetings which either made assumptions with



no basis or which had little to do with the children and their opportunities. They have talked with many Penhill parents and it appears that misinformation and false rumour has been allowed to spread widely, including amongst the pupils. Many parents at the consultation meetings had been told that the school was to be knocked down and the staff sacked, so it is no wonder some were angry!

The Principal has said she has offered to come and talk to senior staff, staff and governors about the structures and details of the academy as they are at the moment. This offer has been refused. She has also invited staff and governors to come to the Beech Avenue site to see it in operation – this invitation has not been accepted. It was therefore frustrating to hear such misinformation with no real attempt to find the truth.

Swindon Academy's vision is to see every member of our community achieve to their best. It faces the challenges of deprivation but will never allow that to be an excuse for under-achievement. Time and time again the academy has seen its students outperform others and themselves to realise their potential. The same will 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. When the new buildings are finished things will get better. This is a time of transition, and although there were still some difficulties at the academy, these are not insurmountable, and if everyone works together things will improve. Continuity of education across the 0-19 age range will provide an anchor for the children and give opportunities for children's attainment to be monitored and appropriate interventions provided where necessary. One of the biggest problems is the poor standards of literacy in the primary age range.

They also acknowledge that there will be complexities in Penhill joining the academy. In particular how will they ‘fit in’ – especially since they will not be on the same site as the old Pinehurst and Headlands schools, and also because they will be joining later. However, it was felt by the academy that these difficulties 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.

## **7. Conclusion**

The School Improvement and Targets Unit in November 2006 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”.

However the Local Authority having taken into consideration the concerns raised, feel that although there has been some improvement, the best educational arguments for further sustainable improvement is to include Penhill School into the Swindon Academy.

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

The consultants will produce a final report in September 2008 where all the issues and concerns raised will be included with recommendations.

Jocelyn Barrow and Dawn Hill  
15 July 2008