

# Education Reform News

## January 2017

Formerly known as “White Paper News” ... a briefing on the government’s education reform agenda

### **Welcome to the first newsletter of 2017**

Welcome to the first newsletter of 2017 – renamed to take account of the fact that the White Paper, whilst clearly hugely significant, was published some months ago and the agenda has developed significantly since then. Legislation is still awaited and other complexities, such as the green paper “Schools that work for everyone”, have entered the equation.

In finding a new title for the newsletter, the lack of clarity nationally about where education reform is at present, and indeed what reforms are being sought, was evident. What remains clear is that both nationally and locally the following factors are critical:

- A determination to address inequalities in children’s lives and their educational opportunities.
- A need to ensure that the education system (including early years) is of high quality, financially viable now, and sustainable into the future.

### **Academies**

All too easily, we can become distracted by issues of structure. Let’s look at the national and local position around academies. At the time of writing:

- 28% of schools nationally are academies (10.8% in North Yorkshire).
- Taking account of those in transition, we expect the percentage of North Yorkshire schools as academies to be 12.5% by April 2017.
- In North Yorkshire 88% primary school children and 64% secondary pupils are in local authority maintained schools.

Whilst the government's aspirations to have all schools as academies by 2022 remains, the priority is around schools which are in need of improvement where the intervention that is seen as most likely to lead to improved outcomes is becoming part of a multi academy trust. Currently 91.5% of North Yorkshire primary schools, 85% secondary and 100% nursery schools are good or outstanding.

In North Yorkshire, there is a challenge over capacity within individual MATs to take on more schools and indeed, at times, a reluctance to do so for small schools (primary and secondary) where due diligence highlights issues of potential non-viability.

**North Yorkshire's position is that we value and respect the concept of local families of schools. It makes sense on a practical level and importantly for those "customers" of schools – parents, young people themselves and the wider community – for schools in close proximity to be working together. That is why, by preference, we support local solutions to local circumstances.**

### **"Mixed MATs"**

A significant minority of our primary schools are Church of England voluntary controlled or voluntary aided. As in many areas of England, these schools are often the only school in a village, and the next school or schools down the road are community schools. Clearly, it is important to recognise and respect the character of all schools, whether aligned to a religious faith or not, and it is this that has given rise to much debate in areas of North Yorkshire as to whether – or rather on what terms, church schools might be able to join multi-academy trust arrangements with community schools with whom they have worked for decades.

Whilst there are memoranda of understanding between the National Society and the DfE, these have been open to interpretation in various ways. Robert Hill's blog at <https://roberthilleducationblog.com/> is an interesting national perspective on this, and we agree with his statement that "it makes sense for faith-based and community schools to be able to work together in MATs – whilst respecting and safeguarding their distinctive traditions." Locally, we are pleased that there have been some positive developments.

Recently, Pete Dwyer and Carolyn Bird met with the Right Reverend Paul Ferguson, Bishop of Whitby, and with Andrew Smith the Diocesan Director of Education for the Diocese of York and Richard Noake, the Director of Education for the Diocese of Leeds.

This was a very constructive meeting in that it confirmed the terms upon which voluntary controlled schools will be able to join "mixed MATs". The words below were provided by Bishop Paul to ensure that the note of the meeting was precise:

*Bishop Paul helpfully clarified the diocesan position on the composition of Trust Boards and the distinction between Company Members (i.e. those who appoint Trustee-Directors) and Trustees (Company Directors). Whilst the overarching and critical point is that the ethos and purpose of church schools should be ensured, and "lived" at all levels in a MAT arrangement, the technical point is that the Church should be confident in the composition of the majority Company Membership in such a way that it would then have*

*confidence in the composition of the skill- and experience-based Board of Trustee-Directors whom the Members appoint. The Diocese would not require there to be a majority of Members that are directly part of the Church's own structures. However, it would require that a majority of Members have a constitutional association with the Church.*

We very much welcome this approach and hope that it will enable discussions to take a practical and mutually supportive direction, particularly in some of the more rural parts of the county and especially where local primary schools want to come together with their local secondary school/schools.

**As ever, the local authority stands ready to become involved in any such discussions; our approach is to help where we can, not “get in the way” and support schools to develop their thinking to a point at which a decision can be made, whether that be to form a trust, a federation, or to maintain the status quo. All can be appropriate responses; forming or joining a MAT is not a requirement.**

## **School funding**

By now all schools will have seen the second stage consultation on the national school funding formula. Whilst the proposals include a welcome national redistribution which may benefit some North Yorkshire schools, funding pressures will remain an issue for all and we need to continue to look imaginatively and creatively at how we best use resources. As such, the agenda for change is still there. North Yorkshire Education Partnership will be discussing the consultation on the 26 January.

## **Green paper: “Schools that work for everyone”**

The green paper covers a lot of ground, and when one stands back from the detail, much of it is around ensuring a supply of good school places, and only secondarily and rather incoherently, concerned with selective places as being in the Prime Minister's view key to that. Nonetheless, the selective element has been the most commented upon since the green paper was published.

North Yorkshire County Council has responded in full to the consultation; our response is [on the Education Reform page here](#). The Council also passed the following resolution which has been sent to the government:

*“The Council welcomes the Government's commitment to addressing issues of poor educational attainment and lack of social mobility in certain areas and parts of society.*

*“North Yorkshire County Council calls on Government to pursue these aspirations through existing policies to ensure all schools are good or outstanding and through the recently announced Opportunity Areas, other than the creation of new grammar schools or further increasing academic selection. The focus should be on addressing the most pressing issues facing schools – the provision of primary school places, recruiting enough qualified teachers, addressing pressures on nursery schools and schools' budgets, through fairer funding for rural areas.”*

The Council and the Education Partnership both want to ensure that focus is maintained on school place planning and funding. There are considerable concerns that the proposals within the green paper could have a detrimental effect on school place planning and adversely affect viability of schools, a concern in any area but particularly in rural areas where there are few alternative places, coupled with issues of availability and cost of transport.

As the response says, all too easily, in this context, meeting “demand” from some parents can result in threats to the basic viability of the provision that many more depend upon.

We have been surprised to see North Yorkshire named in a recent Education Policy Institute report as one of only six areas where additional selective places would make sense. This is not our interpretation.

It is clear that the green paper has prompted a good deal of national debate and we await the government’s response with interest.

## **A North Yorkshire “Learning Trust”?**

As the agenda moves on, so must our collective response to it.

The vast majority of local authority functions in relation to children, their education, safety and wellbeing, will continue; views that the end of local authorities is nigh are far off the mark. Yet the environment in which those important responsibilities are carried out will certainly change.

At its meeting in November, the Education Partnership decided to look again at its role and remit in the context of a potential North Yorkshire Learning Trust which would bring together a wider group of interests, including Further and Higher Education providers, the LEP, academy trusts, independent schools and training providers. There is real potential for building on the Education Partnership, the Children’s Trust and the School Improvement Partnerships to create a dynamic agent for change and support for all education providers in the county.

A workshop will take place early in the Spring with proposals coming forward during the year for implementation by September 2017 at the latest.

## **Reflections at the start of 2017**

We welcome the fact that schools of all types and sizes are thinking seriously about the things that matter; how they can provide education of quality and how they can do that on a sustainable basis. We celebrate the successes of schools of all types in North Yorkshire.

We are pleased that school led school improvement in North Yorkshire is developing fast and where schools do get into difficulty our and their first port of call will be other North Yorkshire schools or academy trusts which may be able to help. As such, the discussions in a number of places where North Yorkshire schools are looking to form into multi-academy trusts are often very positive. Similarly we are pleased that we have had good joint discussions with existing academy trusts leading to a series of bids being put forward for new primary schools. We are sure this will continue in 2017.

We do want to emphasize that there is no pressing imperative to join multi academy trusts as a matter of urgency, unless a school is in difficulty or is likely to become so in the near future. Decisions for others can and should be taken on a more measured basis. To assist with those

reflections we would again point you in the direction of some of the excellent [guidance that is available for governing bodies to use in considering options.](#)

Our preference remains for local high quality partnership developments and we welcome the potential for mixed community/church MATs which preserve the characteristics of all schools within them. This should not be viewed in anyway as being parochial or insular – we must of course also build partnerships and access learning from best practice nationally and internationally. All we suggest is that when considering structural forms high quality local partnerships have considerable attractions.

**Importantly, we stand ready to help facilitate discussions, provide advice and support. Don't hesitate to contact any of the people below who will link you in to that support.**

### Your Local Authority contacts:

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