



## **Parent/Public Consultation Meeting held on Thursday 10<sup>th</sup> November 2016**

### **Co-Education Proposal for September 2018**

Michael Bailey welcomed parents and other interested parties to the meeting and introduced himself as Chair of the Trust Regional Governing Body and also stated that he worked closely with Holcombe Grammar School. He stated that the consultation meeting was regarding a proposed application for Holcombe Grammar School to become co-ed from 2018. He introduced Ms Juliet Diaz as Principal of the school and Mr Stuart Gardner as CEO of the Thinking Schools Academy Trust.

Mr Bailey explained that the format of the evening would be to ask Mr Gardner to explain the proposed consultation for co-education provision for 2018; for Ms Diaz to add any comments and then to ask for questions from those present before concluding the meeting.

Mr Gardner showed a PowerPoint presentation (copy attached to these notes) and added additional comments

#### **Slide 1 – The Process and timeline of the Consultation**

Mr Gardner stressed that this was a consultation period, being the second application made to the DfE. Having considered local feedback from the last application it was clear where we stood at present. The consultation period included two parental/public consultation meetings and a parental 'drop in' session. The consultation period ended on 3<sup>rd</sup> January 2017, following which the Trusts Regional Governing Body and Directors would meet to review the consultation feedback and make a decision about whether to move forward with the proposal.

#### **Slide 2 – Response to question 'Why was the last application not approved?'**

Three reasons given for the DfE turning down the application:

- School did not demonstrate sufficient wide support in the local community
- Concerns raised regarding possibility of reducing the number of selective places for boys
- Concerns raised regarding possibility of having a negative impact on other schools

The School was surprised and disappointment by the decision

#### **Slide 3 – Response to question 'Why are we reapplying now?'**

The Trust's Regional Governing Body looked at whether to reapply for co-education status and decided to do this now for the following reasons

- Still a compelling argument in favour and believe this is the best way forward for the school

- Belief that the education landscape had changed since the first application with the new DfE Green Paper more open to changes in admissions for grammar schools
- There was a small group with vested interests who objected but the school does not believe that this represents the broader view of the community

**Slide – Response to argument that ‘the proposal is not supported in the local community’**

Going forward we want to better understand the points made by the DfE regarding local community support. The total number of responses was low and the Trust is looking at two mechanisms for getting broader feedback from the community via focus group feedback on co-ed provision in Chatham, Walderslade and Rochester and looking to employ a company to conduct work for the Trust to gauge wider public opinion. We want to be confident that this is something that the general public want and need to evidence that.

**Slide – Response to argument that ‘the proposal would reduce the number of selective places for boys’**

The Trust is clear that it is prepared to accommodate boys from Medway and would go over its PAN to meet those needs. Before the development of Chatham South/BORA buildings the site accommodated some Year groups of 146. It is now capable of accommodating considerably more. 60/40 is the normal boy/girl split nationally in co-ed Grammar Schools (and also at Rainham Mark). Even with the addition of girls, Holcombe Grammar School can accommodate all the boys that the Local Authority identifies as wanting a place. However, we would be surprised if we get 60/40 in the first few years; more like 80/20 or 75/25.

**Slide – Response to argument that ‘the proposal could have a negative impact on other schools.’**

Mr Gardner recognised the potential impact on other schools in the area which is why he wrote to the Regional Schools Commissioner to ask if our school and another local grammar school be allowed to work more closely to allow both to be more effective. Regarding numbers, the populations of the two schools concertina on a regular basis and this is hard to manage operationally and financially. Both schools have been severely impacted by the actions of other grammar schools in the area who have added one or two forms to Year 7 over the last five years. There were no objections or prevention to these additions.

Mr Gardner stated it was all down to parental choice and parents don’t have that choice at present; he had asked Rainham Mark if they could supply information to him regarding their catchment details as he was interested to see if pupils from this area were able to access attend a co-educational school. If students in this area are able to access co-ed provision then this may show that the need for a co-ed option in this area was not needed; however, if very few students outside the Rainham area were able to access co-ed Grammar provision then this would support the argument to provide a co-ed Grammar option to service this part of Medway.

**Slide – Response to question ‘Why make this proposal?’**

Mr Gardner stated that parents should have the choice to send their children to a mixed selective school in this area

He also stated that Holcombe Grammar School had close connections and significant collaboration with New Horizons Children’s Academy whose students attend Holcombe

Grammar School for Maths, Science and Sports. Therefore, it is natural for parents to consider Holcombe Grammar School as a natural progression. However, as it stands at the moment only the boys would be admitted which is not fair on those girls that may wish to attend.

Holcombe Grammar School also works hard to support The Victory Academy and it would be of benefit for a mixed co-ed grammar school to support a mixed co-ed high school. DfE own guidance supports grammar schools with 6-8 forms of entry to be effective and efficient.

In addition at present the school is underutilised, and, therefore, not efficient in offering support and opportunities to students.

#### **Slide – Response to question ‘How will the school change?’**

There would be no change to our current boys if the school was to become co-ed as current students would still be in ‘boys only’ year groups. Holcombe Grammar School is known for its ethos of being a caring school and not simply because it is a boys school; co-ed is evident already in its sixth form; therefore it is not centred on its gender status.

He concluded by saying that this gave an overview of the journey the school had been on; It is important that we get this consultation right and will not go forward unless we felt it led to a compelling case.

Mr Bailey thanked Mr Gardner for his input and asked if Ms Diaz had any comments. Ms Diaz emphasised that it was all about parental choice. She stated that she had had a number of communications recently from girls attending all girls schools who were not happy; she drew on her own personal situation whereby her own son and daughter went to single sex schools but she felt that co-education would have been better for both. A number of Year 6 parents with daughters had been in contact as their siblings attended this school and were interested. Rainham Mark is a long way away and it was not fair that parents did not have a co-ed option in this area of Medway.

Mr Bailey assured all present that this proposal was being carefully considered

- Looking at parental choice in the area
- No real evidence at last application of the actual effect on local schools
- Engaged with parents at this school who wish to become co-ed
- The Regional Governing Body supports the school in making a further application to the DfE having learned one or two things from the last application
- Having visited the school on a number of occasions he was impressed by the number of girls in the sixth form; questioned a number of staff about the interaction between boys and girls and all positive – girls state that this is what they want.
- Have had several applications from girls wanting to attend but have had to decline unless exceptional circumstances.
- If parents voice that this is the way they want to school to go then we have to consider their wishes

Mr Bailey then invited any questions and comments from those present.

Introductions of those present highlighted a Holcombe parent, interim Head of Chatham Grammar School for Girls (CGSG) and the Chair of Governors at Chatham Grammar School for Girls, also a Medway Councillor.

The Holcombe parent stated that in her opinion there is already a mixed grammar school in Medway and three other single sex schools for girls, thereby giving plenty of choice for parents. However, there were only two boys' grammar schools; one of those was oversubscribed; therefore, Holcombe Grammar School provided a need for boys only. There was also the fact that girls matured more quickly than boys and this could cause problems. Ms Diaz said that she could understand this but reiterated that it came down to personal views. She agreed that girls matured more quickly than boys but saw this as a benefit of balancing the environment.

A CGSG colleague asked where the 60/40 ratio boys to girls came from. Mr Gardner stated that these were LA projected members.

Mr Gardner said to the CGSG contingent that he hoped it might be possible to work in partnership to ratify provision in the local area to the benefit of both schools and that the Trust would be open to such talks but would of course respect any decision made by CGSG.

Mr Bailey stated that the Trust would be instructing professional advisors to help gain further evidence from the community of what they wanted.

The Interim Head at CGSG asked about the Trust widening the net of responses and if this involved a campaign of some kind and were there any details. Mr Gardner stated that there was a desire to gain the opinion of the wider community, ie Rochester and Walderslade and that this would be an open process for everyone to see as response last year was poor. At present a number of parents choose their school because of free travel, ie, if you live in Hoo then the Maths School is deemed your nearest grammar school and travel is free.

Mr Gardner said he was keen to get wider opinion and had the view of talking to secondary and primary parents to find out if girls when they were in Year 7 would have chosen Holcombe Grammar School if it had been co-ed when they made their choice and would be happy to share that information when received.

Mr Bailey made it clear that there would not be a campaign but first approaches had been made to canvass local schools; this would go towards building a stronger case

CGSG asked for more details on the 'professional advisers' undertaking this work. Mr Gardner made it clear that it would be a company that specialises in this type of work to include focus groups and canvassing; an area that the Trust has no experience in.

CGSG stated that it sounded like this was being put across in a light to get the decision the Trust wanted. Mr Gardner stated that if, from evidence gained, that the public wanted a single sex grammar school then that would be it; however, if there were a significant group of parents interested in co-ed provision in this area then we would continue; no-one has asked this question of our parents in decades, Mr Gardner stated that Rainham Mark was the school which had grown the most over the last 5 years.

However it was important to obtain quantitative data rather than qualitative data and that he hoped by the end of the consultation period we would all be better informed.

CGSG said that a number of schools would be damaged by this proposal, especially Fort Pitt as this was the nearest girls school. He asked if Fort Pitt had responded at the last consultation. Mr Gardner confirmed that they had but stated that if co-ed was the wish for

parents of this school and a significant group of parents in the local area then he couldn't not go ahead because it was not right for another school.

The Interim Head from CGSG stated that the previous application had been looked at by the decision maker and all facts would have been taken into account, including the demography of the area and the proposal was rejected. Mr Gardner asked him how he knew that those facts had been taken into account. This interjection was felt to be inappropriate; Mr Gardner apologised if he had caused offence. His apology was accepted.

Chatham Grammar School for Girls representatives asked what happened to the minutes that were being taken. Mr Gardner replied that they would be published on the school website; they replied that they would send in a separate response to the consultation.

Mr Gardner stated that Chatham Grammar School for Girls had a vested interest in the co-ed process not happening and questioned whether a vested interest should override the preference for a co-ed school in Medway if that is the opinion expressed by parents during the consultation.

Mr Bailey stated that it is all down to parental choice; however, he understood and respected any effect it could have on Chatham Grammar School for Girls.

Mr Gardner asked how Chatham Grammar School for Girls would feel about the two schools merging and said he would be open to talks on this if they were.

There being no further comments, Mr Bailey closed the meeting at 7.25pm and thanked the school for its hospitality in hosting the meeting.