

Thomas Rotherham College: Report on Public Consultation on proposal to become an Academy and join Inspire Trust

The public consultation into Thomas Rotherham College's intention to become an Academy and to join Inspire Trust was conducted between 1 May and 16 June 2017.

The consultation was publicized on the College's website (with supporting documents) and in the local and national press. It was drawn to the attention of staff and students via email, parents/carers via text and student applicants for September 2017 via letter.

A public meeting was advertised in the consultation documentation (and these emails) and held on 22 May 2017 (it was attended by around 20 people).

There have been several full staff meetings since the start of the Area-Based Review process in September 2015 at which emerging options for TRC have been discussed and a single item meeting during the consultation period on 26 May 2017.

A meeting for students was also publicized via email but there were no attenders at this.

Responses to the consultation were sent to the Clerk to the Corporation. One external response was received, from the Principal of a Further Education College in the region. This supported the proposal. The other responses all came from College staff. There was a collective response from the Association of Teachers and Lecturers and one from the National Union of Teachers which consisted of 14 individual responses. There was a response from the Unison representative relaying the concerns of a member of staff and there were additionally 6 staff responses submitted directly to the Clerk.

Of the staff responses there were 3 that expressed unqualified support, one that welcomed the idea of a MAT but had misgivings about the size of the current one and a majority that expressed concern or opposition- either to the idea of Academization or to a decision on whether or not to join Inspire Trust being taken now- or asked questions.

The main concerns and reservations (also incorporating comments at the staff meeting) are set out below, together with (in italics) the response of supporters of the proposal when the consultation was discussed at the Corporation:

- Has the election produced a climate where better funding for Sixth Form Colleges and relief on VAT are possibilities? Should we defer until we see this before giving up our independent status?

The counter argument is that there is no clear indication that there is to be a reversal in government policy of this nature. The public sector pay freeze seems to be the main area of policy under debate, suggesting that any funding increase would need to be spent on funding this. Also, we have already secured two extensions on the original MAT application deadline from the Education Funding Agency in order to consider our options fully.

- Can we ride out the remaining years of the demographic dip drawing on our reserves before the upturn of the 2020s?

The problem with this approach is that 3 years of deficits in the meantime would produce an unsatisfactory financial grading and intervention by the Sixth Form College Commissioner,

with a curtailment of the College's freedom of action. Also, even if the College fills to capacity in the 2020s, funding levels per student are likely to remain low and as a stand-alone college we would lose the economies of scale and infrastructure savings possible in a MAT, as well as the VAT and rates relief, which will all allow the liberation of funding for educational purposes.

- Does joining Inspire Trust represent a takeover by Oakwood/Inspire, whose ethos is as yet unclear to TRC staff, and a loss of TRC identity and autonomy?

Inspire Trust has in shadow form reframed its membership, Board and Executive leadership in response to the prospect of TRC joining as a large organization with an equal number of students to the existing Trust. TRC is represented at all levels. If the proposition is accepted that TRC needs to be part of something bigger, then Inspire Trust seems to be the organization in which TRC autonomy, identity and ethos are most likely to be best preserved. The risks of standing alone are that the College could in future be absorbed into an organization not of its choosing.

- Are terms, conditions and jobs under threat in the long-run?

TUPE will protect pay and conditions on transfer and any possible future restructuring would need to be carried out with full negotiation with unions. Inspire Trust has not altered previous national/local authority pay and conditions in its schools and these are very similar to Sixth Form College Association ones. The threat to jobs is greater in a stand-alone position, given the deficits projected for the rest of this decade.

- Will multi-site teaching result – and is this desirable/effective?

The Inspire Trust Chief Executive has made it clear that staff teaching on more than one site would only happen where this is beneficial to the students and the staff involved. He acknowledges the importance of individuals' specialisms, while also seeing the benefits available in some cases to students and colleagues from working across sites.

- Is the MAT big enough, with no definite growth strategy, and is it in danger of being swallowed by a larger one?

The Trust does have a growth strategy which it is actively pursuing with other schools. The dangers of being swallowed are also there if the College maintains a stand-alone position.

- Will contributing to the Chief Executive's pay be a burden on College funding?

In a MAT all institutions make a contribution to central costs. TRC will benefit from the salaries of some current, solely TRC-funded posts being shared, as well as from the management expertise of central post holders – Oakwood is graded outstanding for leadership and management. Also, Inspire Trust has a track record of restraint in senior salaries.

The issues raised at the Public Meeting are set out below, together with the responses of College and Inspire Trust representatives at the meeting (in italics)

- Should TRC be 'college-facing' and not 'schools-facing', especially for technical levels and apprenticeships?

TRC is sticking to its strengths and not duplicating locally the provision of the RNN group.

- Loss of identity and ethos

There will be autonomy within Inspire Trust, and there are dangers in standing alone of being absorbed in a larger entity with less protection of identity.

- Is the MAT big enough?

The MAT will ideally grow and a strategy is in place for this.

- Will other partners feel we are becoming Oakwood's 6th Form?

All our publicity is geared against this incorrect perception. TRC will continue to recruit students from across South Yorkshire and there will be no preferential treatment for Oakwood students either in admissions or while on course. Also there are growth plans for the Trust.

- If the MAT is in future judged to be failing might it be broken up and TRC forced into a MAT not of its choosing?

This is a risk but the risk is also present if we stay independent and falter academically or financially.

- Is the financial benefit of VAT worth the upheaval?

The decision is not simply being taken for VAT; there are broader savings and these will protect education budgets and free up expenditure on students. The decision is also a strategic one, embedding TRC in the emerging local educational landscape.

- Will the curriculum be narrowed?

The financial savings will protect minority subjects, and Oakwood have equally preserved a broad curriculum – the institutions share a belief in this.

- Also some support and some questions (e.g. sharing of good practice)