

Division(s):

CABINET – 15 July 2014

New Primary School for Bicester: report on selection process for potential providers and approval of Preferred Option

Report by Director for Childrens' Services

Introduction

1. The Cabinet meeting of 4 September 2012 approved a process for the identification of sponsors for new academies to meet the needs of population growth such as the one at North West Bicester.
2. The approved specification for Bicester sought a provider for a new two-form entry primary school in the eco development to the North West of Bicester.
3. The specification did not impose restrictions on the nature of provider – e.g. faith organisations, or existing providers – given that the local consultation was inconclusive on these issues.
4. The specification invited interest from providers able and willing to work with the county council to promote inclusive opportunities for the most vulnerable children and have a strong focus on equalities, early intervention, and supporting the needs of the local community.

Background

5. The agreed process has now completed the following stages:
 - i. Assess expressions of interest and then invite detailed bids from three or fewer providers to show clear plans of how they will contribute to the raising of education standards, add diversity of choice and which best fits the local requirements and meets the needs of those within groups offered specific protection under s149 Equality Act 2010.
 - ii. Assess bids against criteria and rank in order of preference. Agree a preferred option to be approved by Lead Member for Children, Education and Families or Cabinet as appropriate. As this is only the second time this process has been applied it has been brought to Cabinet.
6. Four expressions of interest were received. These were assessed according to criteria derived from Department for Education (DfE) Academy / Free school presumption paper February 2014 and also from the council's specification document for Bicester previously agreed by Cabinet. A scoring system was used to assess the strongest applications. As all 4 providers achieved high scores in some but not all areas, at this initial stage all 4 were taken through to the shortlist.

7. The four shortlisted providers were:

The Bicester Learning Academy. This is the academy trust containing The Cooper School and Glory Farm Primary school. The Trust is due to be established in July 2014. It is an essential criterion that the proposed providers have been formally assessed and approved by the DfE as a sponsor before they could be considered. The Secretary of State indicated that the Bicester Learning Academy would not be agreed as a sponsor within the required timeframe and therefore the application was withdrawn.

Chapel Street Community Schools Trust. This organisation opened the Tyndale Community Free School in Oxford City. It has opened two other free schools and sponsored two failing primary schools in the last two years in London and the North West. The bid was submitted in partnership with the Oxford Diocesan Board of Education and the Bicester Community Church.

National Education Trust. This organisation has a strong record of providing school improvement services. In the last 18 months it has sponsored 2 failing primary schools in the South East. The bid was submitted in partnership with the 'Learning through Landscapes' organisation which has a nationally recognised track record of working with schools to enhance and use the outdoor learning environment.

The White Horse Federation. This organisation originated from a group of outstanding schools in Swindon. It currently has 7 schools with a further 2 to join in September in the Swindon and Wiltshire area. The group contains primary, secondary and special schools. It opened a new primary school in 2012. It has established a strong record of improvement in all of its schools. Those which were failing have rapidly improved to good and several are outstanding.

8. The shortlisted providers were asked to complete a more detailed application form and make a presentation to a panel consisting of officers and the Cabinet member for Children Education and Families. An officer from Cherwell District Council with a particular responsibility for the eco –town development was also invited. The providers were again scored against specified criteria.

The highest scoring provider by a clear margin was The White Horse Federation.

Financial and Staff Implications

9. There are none arising directly from this report. However, once an approved sponsor has been confirmed by the Secretary of State there will be a need for significant and on-going liaison with council officers.

RECOMMENDATION

10. **The Cabinet is RECOMMENDED to agree**

- (a) **The White Horse Federation as the recommended provider to be submitted to the Secretary of State for Education for final agreement;**
- (b) **The Cabinet is RECOMMENDED to agree that in future the preferred provider for a new school should be approved by Lead Member for Children, Education and Families rather than Cabinet, unless there are exceptional circumstances.**

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Background papers: Cabinet paper – 21 May 2013

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