



Lord Agnew Kt DL

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email to: <Caroline.Pryer@ponteland.academy>

16th March 2018

Dear Caroline

Thank you for your letter of 12 March, providing further detailed information about your significant change application to raise the age range at Ponteland Community Middle School (PCMS) from 9-13 to 9-16.

As I said previously, I am sympathetic to your reasons for wanting to expand your educational offer and I appreciate your efforts in providing the further detail to support this. However, and having considered the information, I have to conclude that I cannot approve your application at this point as there are too many issues that still need to be addressed. I would like to reassure you that this does not mean I will not be prepared to review the position at a future point. I genuinely do appreciate that PCMS is an outstanding school and the work you are doing there. For this reason, I would very much like PCMS to work with my officials to see if there are ways to address those issues for reconsideration in the future.

To enable me to reconsider your case, I will need additional definitive information and assurances on a number of issues. I have set these out below and hope that these are helpful as you consider your next steps:

Capital funding and site

I need to be assured that any proposal to expand the age range of PCMS is affordable for the trust. This means securing the required capital funding in its entirety and / or being able to securely demonstrate the expansion is affordable. We need certainty on this. As I explained in my previous letter, capital funds from the department are heavily oversubscribed, and on the basis of your current application, it is highly unlikely PCMS will be successful. I also note the bid was only for the first stage of the capital required and I would need assurance about how the entirety of the requirement would be funded, if the first stage was successful in a later CIF round or through other routes.

Your letter points to a range of other potential sources of funding. For example, you suggest PCMS would seek to enter into a commercial loan arrangement. This would be contrary to the Academies Financial Handbook. Any other sources of funding or leases would need full discussion with the ESFA before we could consider them as secure and assess whether they made the project

affordable.

I also note that Northumberland County Council has told the department that there is not agreement to use the Ponteland High School site and that there would be a number of barriers to overcome to do so.

PCMS's financial position

I would also need to be assured upon reconsideration of this proposal, that the significant change was affordable. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

Basic Need

I fully appreciate your views on the need to provide good and outstanding places for children. I am also aware of the concerns of some good and outstanding neighbouring schools and their objections to your proposals and the need for Local Authorities to very carefully consider place planning. I hope that over the coming months, local partners can work together to address the challenges and tensions, so that the very good education on offer in Ponteland can improve standards across the wider area. I would need to fully understand the potential impact of your proposal and the plans with local partners to mitigate the risk to other good and outstanding providers.

Curriculum and Staffing

In order for me to reconsider your application, PCMS will need to address concerns raised by the Headteacher Board. I recognise the work PCMS has done so far, but I do not underestimate the challenge in offering an outstanding KS4 curriculum. We would need to see more detail of your proposed curriculum plan, the staffing model and the affordability of the offer and I will need to consider the advice of the Headteacher Board in the light of this.

DfE guidance

I have sympathy with your arguments about raising standards. However, for clarity the guidance that you quote in your letter is that for decision makers considering proposed changes to maintained schools i.e. LAs and the Schools Adjudicator. Decisions on proposed significant changes to academies are, of course, made by the Department. The relevant guidance is available here: https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/504321/Making_significant_changes_to_an_open_academy.pdf

It says:

Potentially contentious proposals: full business case required

Where a proposed change sets a precedent or is potentially contentious, a full business case will usually be required, regardless of the academy's Ofsted rating and whether the type of change being proposed is eligible for the fast track process. Examples are those which:

- reduce places in an area of basic need; and

- which have received objections from the LA and/or neighbouring schools that the proposed change will undermine the quality of education provided by other 'good' or 'outstanding' schools in the area, by creating additional places where there is already surplus capacity.

Where proposals are particularly controversial and could attract public or press attention, RSCs may choose to escalate such proposals to ministers for a decision.

In closing, I hope this comes across as intended. While I cannot agree to your significant change proposal at this point, I do hope we can get to a position where I can reconsider the issues this case has brought to my attention.

Thank you for writing to me on this important matter.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Theodore Agnew'. The signature is written in a cursive style with a long, sweeping underline that extends to the right.

THEODORE AGNEW