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## The Birth of a School Academy in North Norwich: a case study<sup>[1]</sup>

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**ABSTRACT** This article raises the question, 'Is the rapid expansion of the school Academies programme consistent with the Government's policy of enabling socially disadvantaged local communities to participate in making decisions that shape the quality of their lives?'

### Introduction

On Monday 7 January 2008 Norfolk County Council Cabinet voted in favour of a proposal to establish an Academy School in North Norwich to replace the Heartsease High School of which I am a Community Governor. The sponsors are Mr Graham Dacre, an Evangelical Christian and businessman, and the Bishop of Norwich, the Rt Rev. Graham James. In early March Ed Balls, the Secretary of State for Children Schools and Families, ratified the decision and thereby gave birth to Norfolk's first academy, named 'The Open Academy.' Procedurally he was required to take into account a Feasibility Study commissioned by Cambridge Education Associates (CEA).

The experience of the governors, staff, parents and local residents of the CEA Feasibility Study carried out on behalf of the Secretary of State, and of the consultation process in general, was accompanied by increasing feelings of powerlessness to influence the outcome. This is in spite of Norfolk County Council's Cabinet Member for Children's Services pronouncing at an early stage that the governors would have a major say in shaping the outcome. If the Heartsease experience is anything to go by, the so-called consultation process that precedes final decisions about establishing Academies at both local and national government levels is at variance with the Prime Minister's pledge to empower communities in socially disadvantaged neighbourhoods to participate in the decisions which shape the quality of their lives.

What follows is a case study of how a local school community was rendered powerless, over a period of twelve months (2007), to influence a decision that will now shape its future and that of its children. It shows how a consultation process that included a feasibility study commissioned by central government enabled 'structures of domination' to come into play to effectively stifle local voices. These structures distanced local government from local people by aligning it to central government as an implementer of national initiatives rather than as a creator of spaces for local initiatives. They created a 'hierarchy of credibility' that rendered the oppositional voices in the community nonsensical. The true picture of the situation was assumed to reside only with those aligned to the small cabal of County Councillors that made up the County Council's Cabinet (composed entirely of members of the Conservative party and none of them representing areas in urban Norwich), those executive officers in charge of 'Children's Services', and the prospective sponsors. The most widely read local newspaper in Norfolk – the *Eastern Daily Press* – eventually declared a barely concealed alignment with those in favour of an Academy (see *Eastern Daily Press*, 2 October 2007). The declaration coincided with the County Council revealing the 'findings' of its own public opinion survey. This enabled the newspaper to claim that its position was also aligned with the voice of the people. By the autumn of 2007 the opposition realised that it was probably powerless to resist what now appeared to be a foregone conclusion from the start.

Given the standardised form government commissioned feasibility studies take, this case study by an insider may illuminate the process of giving birth to Academies more generally. It suggests that:

The formal process of determining the feasibility of an Academy is an effective way of suppressing dissent from members of the socially disadvantaged communities in which they are set.

If this hypothesis generally holds, then the Brown government needs to seriously reflect about the extent to which its decision to increase the number of Academies to around 400 is counterproductive, if it genuinely wants to empower some of our most socially disadvantaged communities. Indeed, such empowerment might well depend on restructuring schools as engines of neighbourhood renewal rather than simply as deliverers of a uniform set of nationally defined standards.

### **How the Heartsease School Governors Became Disaffected**

In January 2006 the governors met the Deputy Director of Children's Services about the prospect of establishing an Academy on the site of the existing school (see Minutes of Extra Governors' Meeting, 19 January 2006). The Deputy Director reminded the governors that the school had long been problematic because of its size (well below the 600 pupils mark as a measure of minimum viability for a secondary school), although there was a prospect of an increase in

numbers due to population growth in the area. However, he identified the school as still belonging to a vulnerable group of schools with respect to performance (it had been in special measures from September 1997 to March 2000) although the Authority had been delighted with progress made over recent years. Although the school did not now satisfy one of the criteria for establishing an Academy – that the school to be replaced was weak and failing – it did satisfy the other two; namely, that it had had poor General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) results (as determined by the 2003 figures) and was situated in an area regarded as one of social deprivation.

A decision in favour of an Academy, he said, would depend on a feasibility study and this could go ahead only with the agreement of the governors. A decision was needed by the end of February 2006. When asked whether it was likely that a feasibility study might go against an Academy being built, the Deputy Director said that this would happen if the study demonstrated that it would not attract sufficient numbers of pupils (800) and there was opposition from the community.

At the next governors' meeting on 8 February 2006 the Chair reported on a recent meeting he had had with the Deputy Director, who had said that if the governors voted in favour of a feasibility study they could withdraw from the process at any time, but felt that such a study would provide them with more information on which to judge the merits of the proposal.

On 20 February 2006 the Heartsease governors met the prospective sponsors in the presence of the Deputy Director of Children's Services and a Department for Education and Skills (DfES) Adviser. The MP for Norwich North, Dr Ian Gibson, was present as an observer (he was opposed to the proposal to replace Heartsease School with an Academy from the start, unlike Charles Clarke, the MP for Norwich South).

After the meeting the governors voted for a feasibility study with conditions, having been reassured by the DfES Adviser that this would not be a vote in favour of an Academy. Several governors had reservations but the reassurance that at this stage they would be committing themselves only to a feasibility study, plus the invitation to state 'conditions' for the study, swung the vote to 13 in its favour 'with conditions' and 3 (including the author) against. The governors were much later informed that their decision had been misrepresented by the Director of Children's Services at a meeting of the County Council's Scrutiny Committee in the autumn of 2007 at the end of the formal consultation period. The Committee met after questions had been raised by Councillors about the integrity of the County Council's own public survey. The Director of Children's Services evidently told the Committee that the Heartsease governors had voted in favour of an Academy at the 'expression of interest' stage.

At the top of the list of conditions specified for the feasibility study by the governors was:

That the study provides spaces for extensive public discussion within the community and this area of the city about the desirability of the

proposed academy and the feasibility of its stated goals and purposes.

Also included was a reference to a very successful sixth form partnership between Heartsease and two neighbouring secondary schools in North Norwich (referred to as the Kett Sixth Form Centre). The condition specified that any Academy should strengthen rather than disrupt the partnership.

The feasibility study was launched in January 2007 and included a questionnaire that was distributed to households in North Norwich (to be completed by 20 August) plus three public meetings in the area over the summer; people were also invited to give their views by telephone and via the Internet. The promised outcome was a Public Consultation Report as part of a Feasibility Report to be completed in September 2007 and submitted to the Secretary of State.

By September 2007 the governors as a whole had not, and at the time of writing have still not, received a draft copy of the Feasibility Report that they believed they would have an opportunity to comment on, and had become increasingly disillusioned with the way CEA and Children's Services had handled the consultation process. The latter appeared to be more concerned with arrangements for replacing the school with an Academy than with listening to concerns and anxieties being expressed at the grass roots. The governors increasingly came to feel that they had been bypassed and were now surplus to requirements.

After much deliberation the governors voted by a significant majority to oppose the proposal, having learned some time previously that they had no power of veto and that their vote would carry no legal weight. In the press (*Eastern Daily Press*, 13 September 2007) the Deputy Director of Children's Services stated that he would be disappointed if what he had heard about the vote were correct, and that the academy project was 'a great opportunity for the community around the existing school.' Two months later in the lead up to the County Council Cabinet decision, and following the County Council Scrutiny Committee meeting in mid-October – where by a majority of one, the members voted against a proposal to refer the proposed Academy back to the Cabinet for further analysis – the governors of Heartsease issued the following public explanation for their opposition to the Academy.

**Reasons why the Heartsease Governors cannot support the replacement of Heartsease School with an Academy**

The Governing Body wishes to respond to the consultation proposal to close Heartsease High and is concerned about the negative view of the present school presented by participants in the debate about the school's future.

The governing body does not feel that it was fully informed at the start by Children's Services. It became aware that discussions had taken place with other parties prior to any discussions with Heartsease Governors e.g. with the UEA V-C and Departments of

Education and Environmental Science. On requesting information about the proposed academy, governors were given this on a side of A4 that appeared to be hastily put together without too much thought. In spite of feeling it was not consulted at a sufficiently early stage of the discussions, the governing body, following a meeting with the proposed sponsors and a DFES adviser, voted (by a large majority) in favour of a feasibility study with conditions. It regrets that this decision appears to have been represented to County Councillors on the Council's Scrutiny Committee as a vote in favour of the academy. The governing body clearly did not understand its decision in these terms (see minutes attached). It had been assured by the DFES adviser present at the meeting that it had a right of veto at any stage of the consultation process. It later learned that it had no such right. As a result a certain amount of disillusionment set in that was exacerbated by the questionnaire distributed by Cambridge Education Associates throughout areas of Norwich.

Heartsease governors were dismayed by the biased and unscientific nature of the questionnaire distributed by CEA. The questionnaire sent out a message to the effect that Heartsease does not measure up to the vision it outlines of what a good school consists of, while the proposed academy will. Yet it provides no evidence in support of this message. Agreement with the vision signalled agreement in favour of the proposed academy. It is sad to think that the Christian sponsors of the proposal and the County Council formally endorsed this poorly constructed questionnaire on its front page. The questionnaire was claimed as a form of 'vote', which it was never outlined to be.

During the consultation process the governors became aware that the characteristics of the proposed academy were constantly shifting. They were unclear about whether this signalled a genuine rethink in response to the consultation process or was mainly strategic to ward off the opposition. When confronted with evidence that Heartsease could no longer be regarded as a failing school, the governors learned that this was no longer a necessary condition for closing a school down and replacing it with an academy. What was more important was the potential of an academy with its 'new-build' and enhanced resources to attract more pupils and their parents and thereby render the school viable in terms of numbers. Both sponsors did not wish to represent the new academy as a faith school as they saw it. With respect to Religious Education the academy would comply with the Norfolk Agreed Syllabus, and it seems that the curriculum autonomy, which characterised the first phase of academies, would be restricted within the requirements of the National Curriculum as with other state schools.

From the standpoint of the governing body it became increasingly unclear how the proposed academy structurally differed from the existing school, other than further diminishing accountability to the local community through its publicly elected representatives and school governors.

This had been a matter of concern for the governing body from the start. The sponsors' efforts to meet this concern, with promises to include parents and other local community members on the governing body, did little to allay fears that in exchange for their less than 10% investment of private capital they and their appointed trustees would have a very large measure of unaccountable control over the use of the remaining 90%+ of public capital. However, for many governors this conviction was mitigated by the belief that the proposed academy might nevertheless benefit pupils in the area. Such benefits became increasingly difficult for governors to discern in the light of the school's recent performance data.

This data has shown that Heartsease:

1. Is a satisfactory and improving school (OfSTED Report 2007). Nearly all SIDP targets for autumn 2007 were met.
2. In 2007 the school achieved a 40% 5 A\*-C pass rate for the first time (5% above the target), compared with 14% in 1998. Using value-added criteria, it was once again in the top 25% of schools nationally.
3. Pupils in 2006 and 2007 achieved A-level results, that when measured against value-added criteria, were amongst the best in the county (top 10).
4. The school was in the top 100 schools for improvements to results at Key Stage 3. (DCSF)
5. Had a percentage of sessions for which pupils were absent that was just above the school target of 10%, but which nevertheless constituted a good achievement by representing a 1.4% improvement over the previous year.
6. Numbers have risen to 495 for this academic year making a more viable size. New buildings in the area of Sprowston would further secure the size of the school.
7. The Kett organisation is held up as a model of good collaborative practice.
8. Has demonstrated a strong capability for self-evaluation. The outcomes of the self-evaluation process coincided with OFSTED findings and the view of the local authority, but with the added value of enabling the school to take responsibility for identifying its own improvement needs and developing effective strategies to meet them (see SIP Annual Report).
9. Has strong and effective leadership demonstrated by the head teacher and senior staff (see SIP Annual Report).

The sponsors have been challenged at public meetings to state how the proposed academy would improve the school and the performance of pupils in what appears to be one of the most rapidly improving schools in the country. They have failed to do so. Given this, many governors have grown increasingly sceptical about the benefits the proposed academy might bring to pupils in the Heartsease area. Hence the governing body voted in the autumn of 2007 by a large majority that the Heartsease School should not be replaced by an Academy. Its scepticism has been recently reinforced by Terry Wrigley's recent research on 'Academic success of the Academies programme' that was carried out at Edinburgh University and takes into account the report of the National Audit Office (February 2007).

The findings include what Heartsease Governors have become only too aware of; namely, that:  
There is a democratic deficit in the governance of academies, and in the process of establishing them.

However, in addition they state that:

1. The academies have had only marginal success for their most successful pupils. The 2006 GCSE results show a value-added increase of only 4 percentage points when compared to the 2002 results of the schools which they replaced.
2. The academies show no improvement for the most disadvantaged pupils. Results may have increased from a different catchment to the school.
3. The academies have produced no evidence of significantly enriching the curriculum. There have been modest innovations in work-related curricula but few new subjects have been introduced.
4. 'In some cases, the pupil population has been re-engineered to exclude more disadvantaged pupils, even under the guise of "fair admissions".'

Hence, while the proposed academy at Heartsease currently embraces the inclusion of all pupils, over time competition with other schools may lead to an erosion of the 'Open' ethos without any legal redress.

5. Governors have general concerns over the increased exclusions at other Academies which impacts on the inclusive nature of schools.
6. Academies are finding it difficult to achieve, as the Audit Office report confirms, widely acknowledged conditions of school improvement; namely, closer collaboration between schools in an area and between schools and their local communities. The Heartsease Governing Body strongly believes that school improvement in disadvantaged communities must go hand in hand with community regeneration.

They are also concerned that the Local Authority lacks a long-term future plan for the county with regard to Academies and how they might benefit the raising of standards for all the children of Norfolk. The dismantling of the Kett agreement and, under Academy rules the necessity to have a majority of Academy Trustees on any joint management body is also another concern.

The governors of Heartsease have arrived at the conclusion that there is little evidential basis for establishing an Academy to replace the existing school. The decision of the County Council to go ahead with this replacement does not even have the warrant of questionnaire findings from surveys carried out by Cambridge Educational Consultants and the County Council itself. Response rates were far too low to provide valid measures of public opinion. (Version 2, 27 November 2007)

The statement was sent to the County Council and released to the press. The *Eastern Daily Press* published a good summary of the major points, describing it as a last bid to derail the proposal. I think that in constructing it, we, the Governing Body of the School, had more or less accepted that there was little that could be done at this stage to influence the cabinet decision. We simply wanted to make the reasons for our opposition clear to the local community and the general public in a coherent form and correct any impression that Children's Services had given that we had inexplicably reneged without good reason on our original views. Most of the points contained in the document, both about the desirability of replacing the school with an Academy and about the authenticity of the consultation process, had been made by governors at various meetings and in a variety of contexts. For example, in May 2007 the author produced a critique of the questionnaire issued by Planet Public Relations for Cambridge Education Associates and distributed across North Norwich. After pinpointing specific ways in which the instrument was biased and unscientific, the critique argued that it was not in the main designed to elicit people's views about whether Heartsease School should be replaced by an Academy but rather to transmit the message that there will be one and that answering the questions provided an opportunity to have a say in how it will shape up. I concluded that the fact that the Christian sponsors and the County Council had endorsed the questionnaire by allowing their logos to be printed on the front cover raised questions about their integrity in allowing a document of such poor quality to go out in their name.

The author's critique summed up the feelings of many governors about the consultation process, as it seemed to be emerging. It also elicited a response from some, if not all, County Councillors representing communities in North Norwich. They were disturbed to find the Council endorsing such a poor quality product, and a copy of the critique found its way to its Chief Executive. However, in addition, the Council carried out its own opinion survey, as it was legally obliged to do so.



The critique was also distributed to the MP's Committee of Inquiry into Academies that met in the House of Commons on 12 June 2007. The meeting was observed by some Heartsease School governors. In spite of it getting wide circulation, and being presented verbally at a public consultation meeting and over local radio, no response to it was forthcoming from CEA and the prospective sponsors. Indeed throughout the whole consultation process CEA met the governing body as a whole on only one occasion, the last scheduled meeting of the summer term, 2007. This was the meeting at which concerns were raised that the questionnaire had not been distributed to the Plumstead Estate, probably the most 'disadvantaged' area in the neighbourhood. CEA countered by saying that they had investigated this by sampling some addresses on Plumstead Road and that those addresses had received the questionnaire. What they didn't know, or tried to conceal, is that Plumstead Road, a road of private housing and shops, doesn't run through the Plumstead Estate, which is still mostly an area of council housing. Hence the later complaint by parents that many had not received copies of the questionnaire.

In general CEA appeared to show little enthusiasm for meeting with the governors as a group to seriously address their growing concerns. Indeed, as indicated earlier, the governing body was given no opportunity to make a formal response to a Report of the Feasibility Study before it went off to the Secretary of State. The governors' final statement (reproduced above) was not so much a last-minute bid to derail the proposal as an expression of its feeling powerless to influence the outcome.

**Parents say, 'We have not been given a proper opportunity to voice our opinion'** (*Eastern Daily Press*, 4 October 2007)

As the formal consultation process drew to a close a group of parents organised a petition in the Heartsease area against replacing the school with an Academy. Some 550 parents and local residents signed it, stating that they will not send their children to the proposed Academy. The Chair of Children's Services reported response was to express sorrow that 'this type of feeling has sprung up at the last minute' when 'there have been many opportunities for people to make their views known.' She pointed out that both the Council and the CEA surveys had shown a majority in favour of an Academy. What she apparently failed to grasp is that many parents and residents in the local community did not experience the consultation process and its instruments as opportunities to authentically express their views. This might explain why the response rates to both questionnaires were very poor, as local MP Dr Ian Gibson pointed out (*Eastern Daily Press*, 2 October 2007). The Council's own consultation elicited 62% of just 258 respondents in favour of the proposal. This is hardly a sample size that warrants pressing confidently ahead with it. Yet on this basis councillors and indeed the *Eastern Daily Press* (2 October 2007) were pronouncing that the people had spoken. When it came down to identifying where these people came from it was discovered that the questionnaire had been

distributed beyond the boundaries of the city and that many respondents were not residents of urban Norwich, let alone members of the local communities surrounding and near the school. Indeed inasmuch as it could be accessed via the Internet, respondents could have resided across the country and indeed the world. Certainly some county councillors, who were opposed to the Academy proposal, believed that pressure had been applied by the sponsors for church members outside as well as inside Norwich, across Norfolk as a whole, to respond in favour of an Academy. Hence the referral of the process to the County Council Scrutiny Committee where one Labour Councillor was reported to argue that it 'smelt of corruption.' Indeed the parents who organised the petition have advised that the vast majority of local residents that have signed the petition received neither the County Council's questionnaire, nor CEA's, in the first place! As for the CEA survey it elicited a narrower majority in favour, 49/41%, but as we have seen, even that result may have been distorted by the unequal opportunities the questionnaire provided for the expression of authentic views.

### **The School Staff Speak Out**

Shortly before the governors issued their explanation for opposing the academy at their September vote, three-quarters of the staff signed a petition saying that they were appalled by the proposal on the grounds that it placed education and public resources in the control of private individuals and failed to acknowledge the achievements of the existing school, now listed as one of the top 100 improved schools in the country for its Key Stage 3 results.

The fact that governors, staff, and parents/local residents declared their opposition in the final weeks leading up to the Council's decision is surely indicative of their frustration with a prolonged two-year consultation process that favoured the expression of pro-academy and anti-Heartsease School attitudes on the basis of very weak evidence.

This determination to force compliance with a proposal that had little evidence to support it was criticised by the Liberal Democrat spokesman on the County Council a few days before the cabinet met in the New Year. He accused the Council's Conservative leaders as they stood on the brink of a decision to close Heartsease School of 'blindly chasing the government's 30 pieces of silver' (an extra 20 million pounds). He argued that such a decision would do nothing to 'improve the bad image of consultation' that had developed in the process leading up to it (*Eastern Daily Press*, 5 January 2008).

### **The Norwich City Council Voices Dissent**

The Norwich City Council has received positive feedback from the Government about its bid for unitary status. In July Dr Ian Gibson MP had urged the Government to put the proposal to replace Heartsease School with an Academy on hold until the unitary status issue had been settled. Matters are now in the

hands of the boundary commissioners. With the impending prospect of becoming responsible for Norwich schools, the City Council referred the Academy issue to its Scrutiny Committee, who took evidence from a range of interested parties, including the sponsors and CEA, at a meeting in early August 2007.

In the light of this evidence the Scrutiny Committee recommended that the City Council should oppose replacing Heartsease School with an Academy. The full Council backed the recommendation on the grounds that the money to be invested in an Academy would be better spent improving schools across the city. Many interpreted the decision as largely 'political', given the tension between the County and City Council on the unitary status issue. However, a systematic list of reasons for opposing an Academy can be found on the City Council's website. The *Eastern Daily Press* (9 August 2007) pronounced that the City Council opposition was a 'Big Setback' for the long-term prospects of the Academy proposal, given that it is likely to acquire unitary status shortly. However, arrangements have been made to put the Academy into effect in the existing school buildings for September 2008. It seems that neither the City Council nor the local Member of Parliament have been able to halt the imposition of Norwich's first Academy.

### **Some Concluding Remarks**

What appears to characterise the 'consultation process' is the absence of debate and discussion, and the disregard for reasons and evidence. Good arguments about the 'accountability deficit' that an Academy would bring, and the morality of placing a substantial and continuing amount of public money in the control of one or two private individuals, or about the lack of evidence that establishing Academies improves the quality of teaching and learning, or significantly overcomes the achievement gap between pupils from socially deprived neighbourhoods and the rest, all appear to have fallen on deaf ears. It does not appear to worry those who are promoting Academies that there is no strong evidential basis for them, or that they pose an 'accountability deficit'. In their eyes Academies are so self-evidently a good thing that the idea that they may not bring educational benefits to the socially deprived is unthinkable. Hence the most frequent response to the dissenting voices depicted above is one of being appalled by such opposition when the case for an Academy is regarded as so self-evidently of benefit to the children in the area. One member of the County Council Cabinet, for example, is reported as saying after the Cabinet decision in favour of an Academy, that he was saddened by some of the opposition and that 'If we don't accept the 30 pieces of silver we will be guilty of betraying the children of that part of Norwich.' Note how the area of Norwich that will be affected by the decision is portrayed in terms that distance it from the experience of the speaker. From such a position the case for an Academy appears to be self-evident and therefore requiring no further discussion or argument. When local politicians, officials, and prospective sponsors are allowed

to get away with this kind of response in the face of good arguments and evidence we truly know where the power to shape decisions lies. Certainly not in the local communities that Academies are supposed to benefit.

### **Postscript**

The author circulated a draft of this case study to a broad cross-section of people known to oppose the proposed Academy, some community, parent and staff governors and local councillors. The intention was to check for factual accuracy and to assess the extent to which the author's interpretations of the events and situations depicted were shared by other voices of dissent. Amongst the comments received was the following from a County Councillor who has been outspoken on behalf of his political party in opposing the proposal.

There is a postscript to your case study. The sponsors for the Academy have now advertised for a Principal at a salary of £100,000 pa. This is before the Minister has given the go-ahead. It is before the board of the Academy has been established so other governors such as parents and staff will have no say in this. It is also before the number on roll is known. The salary level for heads in state schools is determined by the number on roll. It is also, I believe significantly above the salary for the current head, and thus, as xx has pointed out [a fellow County Councillor] it means less money to be spent on the kids.

The process of establishing an Academy to replace Heartsease School reached the stage where the 'accountability deficit' that lay at the core of the opposition's case became clear for all to see.

However, government ministers remained blind. On 30 January 2008 a delegation from the Heartsease Campaign Group, consisting of a local county councillor, two governors (including the author), two parents and a teachers' representative met with the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families (Ed Balls) and the Minister of State (Lord Adonis) in the House of Commons. Dr Ian Gibson, MP for North Norwich, on behalf of the Campaign Group had requested the meeting. However, 'the wind was rather taken out of the sails' of the delegation by the Secretary of State's announcement at the meeting that the current head teacher, an atheist, had been appointed Principal-Designate of the proposed Academy. Such continuity of leadership is a rare event to date in the Academy programme as it had unfolded, and appears to contradict the rhetoric that accompanied it about the need for a radical change of leadership. Evidently the sponsors felt that there was no problem about appointing an atheist to promote a Christian ethos in the proposed Academy. The delegation understandably interpreted the appointment as at least partly aimed at disarming objections to the Academy, particularly those surrounding the sponsors' intention that as an organisation it would have a distinctive

Christian ethos. Politics, it seems, is no longer limited by language that possesses stable meanings.

This case study was part of the documentation submitted at the meeting with Balls and Adonis, which also included a petition signed by over 500 local residents saying they would refuse to send their children to an Academy controlled by one of the sponsors. The parents who organised the petition made it very clear that the local residents felt they had not been properly consulted about the proposed Academy, and they challenged the Secretary of State to say how many additional signatures would make him change his mind. Not surprisingly, he refused to commit himself. The parent delegates subsequently gathered 1000 additional signatures to the petition, which Ian Gibson presented to Ed Balls on their behalf. The local councillor in the delegation critiqued the County Council's handling of the consultation process, and this author explained the governors' decision not to support the proposal on the grounds of inadequate consultation with governors and local residents. It was explained that the governors had been led to believe they would be able to comment on the Feasibility Study Report before it was sent to the Secretary of State, but they never received a copy. When this author challenged Ministers to say whether they had received this Report (due the previous autumn), they admitted that they had not.

On 4 February Ed Balls wrote to Ian Gibson. In his letter he referred to the delegation and expressed the hope that it had found the meeting 'helpful and constructive' and 'felt they had a proper chance to express their views.' He also adopted the 'official view' of the County Council and Cambridge Associates about the adequacy of the consultation process, but addressed none of the delegation's specific criticisms of that process. However, he was at this point clearly aware of the level of opposition, which was subsequently substantiated by continuing local press coverage. His final decision was expected on 11 March. It was announced, in favour of the proposed Academy, over a week in advance of this date – reportedly to prevent any further destabilisation in the situation. Lord Adonis informed Ian Gibson of certain concessions that the Government was prepared to make, concerning the provision of Religious Education (will follow the Agreed Syllabus for Norfolk Schools), membership of the group of Trustees (to include the Principal of Norwich City Further Education College), and policies regarding exclusions and the admission of pupils with special educational needs. The delegation did not experience these as 'concessions' since they did not significantly depart from intentions that had been previously stated by the sponsors themselves.

One member of the Campaign Group expressed the view that the Group had won some battles before finally losing the war.

### Acknowledgements

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### Note

- [1] As indicated above, the author alone accepts responsibility for the accuracy of the facts reported and their interpretation.

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