

Running a 'converter' Academy: Considerations and lessons learned



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Whitburn Church of England Academy

Whitburn Church of England Academy context 2010

- 11-16 Anglican School.
- 970 pupils.
- Intake slightly above national average based on KS2 SAT results.
- No faith or aptitude (Maths & Computing) admissions criteria.



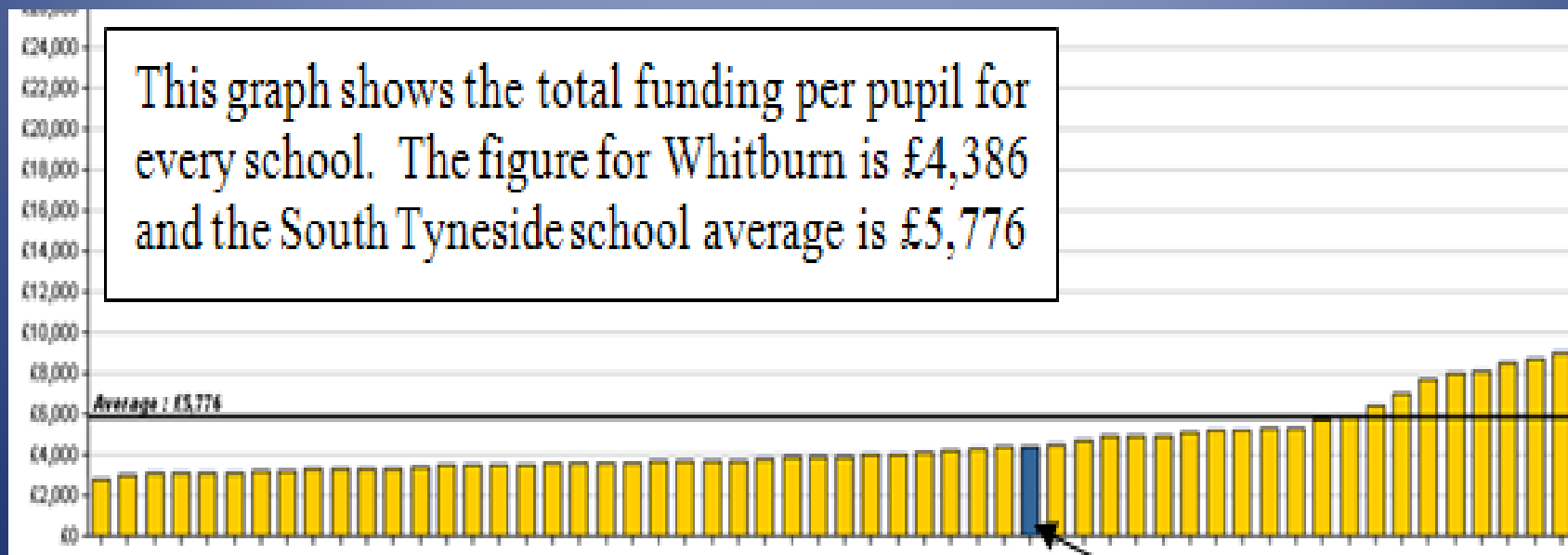
- Heavily over-subscribed
- Serves Whitburn and the surrounding villages.
- Also draws in pupils from South Shields and Sunderland.
- On the border between South Tyneside and Sunderland LAs.

Conversion

- June 2010 – SMT/Governor discussions on possible benefits of conversion. Provisional interest registered with DfE. Consultation process with staff, pupils and parents.
- Governing Body met June 22nd 2010 to consider benefits. Unanimously agreed to convert.
- Application to convert completed 8th July.
- TUPE process started on 12th July.
-Months of questions, delays, ect.
- Academy order signed December 2010
- School re-opens as Academy 3rd January 2011, the first VA school to become a convertor academy.

Key reasons for our decision to convert

- We already enjoyed a high degree of autonomy as a Voluntary Aided School
- Underfunding issues over many years



- Greater choice on how we spend our funding

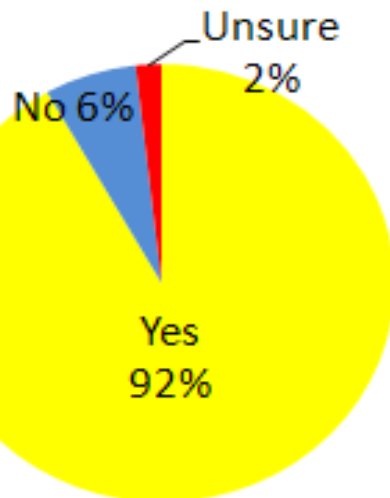
Key reasons for our decision to convert

- LA opposition to our aspiration of opening a Sixth Form
- Strained relationship with LA over a number of years with issues over re-build and possible closure
- Strong existing links with local schools outside of the LA structure e.g. through Diocese
- Greater curriculum freedoms

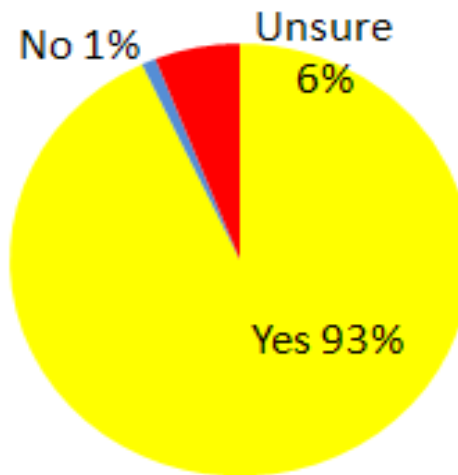
Conversion Process

- “Outstanding” designation meant that we were “pre-approved”
- Anglican status made conversion more difficult, complex, time consuming and expensive
- Very strong support from all aspects of school community – Should we convert?

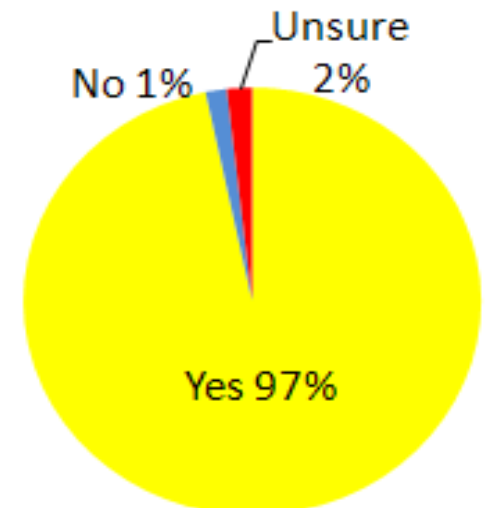
Pupil Responses



Staff Responses



Parent/Carer Responses



Conversion Process

- Vociferous opposition from LA and Labour Party

REJECT A DIVISIVE ACADEMY FOR WHITBURN

The Tory Government has advised “Outstanding” schools like Whitburn C of E School that they can apply to become an “Academy” – the Tories say this is about giving Schools more freedom but the Labour Party believes it centralises power to London.

- Loss of detached playing fields
- Massive increase in the cost of some Service Level Agreements with LA
- Huge workload for senior staff

New systems

- Funding – now through EFA
- Governance – governors are also Directors and Trustees
- Financial regulations – much more stringent than before e.g. Responsible Officer, Accountant
- Taking on our catering provision
- VAT – grant initially but now HMRC registered
- Procuring additional services and Service Level Agreements – enhanced tendering leading to best value. Re-scoping.

The Pros

- Largely business as usual – same relentless focus on teaching and learning!
- Improved funding (at least in short term) – similar to situation under Grant Maintained
- More reliable payment schedule, with transparency and accountability
- Able to pursue Sixth Form Expansion
- New catering service very popular & successful
- Sharpened focus on value for money in all aspects of procurement

The Pros

- Despite initial opposition, we now have a much better relationship with the LA and remain part of the 'family of schools'
- More outreach work and school to school support
- LA services being scaled back anyway, so LA maintained schools now have to take on extra responsibilities anyway e.g. Free School Meal check
- Good opportunity to re-evaluate all of our work and its impact on pupils

The Pros

- Decision not take advantage of 'freedom' to change staff terms and conditions was good, at least in the shorter term
- More influence on local decision making through representation on Schools Forum
- Strengthened our relationship with the Diocese
- Has further increased our sense of community
- Ironically we now have excellent relationship with the LA!

The Cons

- Very steep learning curve!
- LGPS Pension liability – can be an eye watering figure!
- Complete change of processes required in many areas e.g. role of Governing Body
- Time required for TUPE process
- Conversion costs well in excess of £25,000 grant
- Lack of expertise from DfE in early conversion of VA schools and issues of their capacity given the scale of change.

The Cons

- As an early convertor we had to 'beat our own path' with very limited support at times – much easier now for more recent convertors
- Additional costs for services formerly provided under LA central spend element of budget (but net increase in funding comparing new costs to additional funds)

Whitburn today

- Now up to 1080 pupils and will be around 1300 within next 2 years due to expansion post-16
- Over 130 staff directly employed
- Turnover is over £5 million per annum



What have we achieved as an academy?

- Re-scoped curriculum to better meet the need of pupils
- New Sixth Form opened September 2015
- Sixth Form building largely funded from capital grant from ACMF (now CIF)
- Saved up additional funding from LACSEG/ESG to pay for Sixth Form start-up
- Teaching School and National Support School status (June 2014)
- Best ever GCSE results & Pupil Premium Award
- All stakeholders happy with decision to convert

Some Key Questions

- What are the benefits for your whole school community?
- Have you consulted all stakeholders?
- Can your structures cope with the additional demand, particularly in relation to finance?
- Are your Governors ready to be the employer?
- Are you ready to be, regardless of your title, effectively the CEO?