

Our consultation had to stand up to intense scrutiny



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COLUMNIST



> Michael Gove in 2012, the year of his Downhills decision

IN March 2012, the Secretary of State, Michael Gove, decided to issue an Academy Order stating that Downhills Primary School in Haringey should be converted into an academy sponsored by the Harris Federation and that Haringey Council would cease to maintain Downhills Primary School.

The Secretary of State reconstituted the governing body as an Interim Executive Board (IEB). He then asked me to chair the board and lead the consultation process regarding the Secretary of State's order.

Downhills was to become nationally prominent, even notorious, as a major test of the relationship between the Secretary of State and parental choice, local communities, central and local government and those for and against academisation.

My first reaction was to say no. My own personal view is that invitation is always better than forced intervention and that would be my preferred way of operating. I also accept there are occasions when imposed solutions are the only way forward.

In the end, I accepted the role, but at the same time made clear my own philosophy..... The Board would operate transparently and in keeping with the Nolan principles of public life. We would be highly consultative and carefully test all alternatives. The best interests of the children would be our central concern.

Downhills Primary was a school with a long history of underperformance. Following the Ofsted inspection in January 2012 the school was judged to require special measures because it was failing to give its pupils an acceptable standard of education.

Downhills was at the centre of an extremely vociferous national and local campaign against the imposition of academy status and the Harris Federation in particular. The 'Save Downhills' campaign included demonstrations, picket lines, numerous letters, very active blogs, petitions and a specially constructed website. The school's internet email had been used to promote the campaign, and the teaching staff had undertaken a one-day strike. It was within this context that the IEB was asked to work.

On March 12, 2012, a few days

before I arrived at the school, the previous governing body conducted its own ballot with regard to the academy. Out of the potential 515 responses to the ballot 147 voted against converting to an academy with Harris.

The Board and I considered it was critical that the consultation process was beyond reproach. We proposed to widen the consultation and included the option that Downhills should remain a local authority school as well as the option to become an academy or become an academy with the Harris Federation.

Due to the high degree of scrutiny that we were under, we carried out one of the most rigorous consultation exercises ever undertaken with regard to academy conversion. We held 18 meetings, answered 258 individual questions and responded to 29 letters or emails. There were three separate parent drop-in sessions and special meetings for the Turkish and Somali parents. We engaged translation and interpreting services to ensure all minority groups were fully communicated with and able to participate. We also commissioned Populus to run an independent poll so that we could hear the voices of parents, who may be reluctant to go to the meetings. We engaged with the wider community including the local MP and the neighbouring Children's Centre.

The consultation process began on Friday April 20 and concluded on Friday June 1.

Two hundred and twenty (94%) of the respondents stated that they did not want Downhills to become an academy, stating they were in support of Downhills school staying a local authority school.

Populus interviewed 100 parents and carers of children attending Downhills Primary School. This survey found that 80% supported the school remaining under the control of Haringey LA.

When constructing the IEB's concluding report for the Secretary of State we returned to the core principle that the best interests of the present and future children within Downhill Primary School are paramount.

We decided not to provide a rec-

ommendation to the Secretary of State. In the concluding part of our 20-page report, we simply outlined the situation and alternative ways forward. We clearly stated that the overwhelming view of the parents was that they did not wish the school to be an academy.

We reported that there was a general consensus that radical structural solutions were important at Downhills to deliver and sustain rapid improvement at the school. We had confidence that the Harris Federation would be able to deliver the solutions that were important at Downhills to ensure and sustain rapid improvement at the school.

We also stated that we would not recommend a period of further consultation as we believed there is a need for whoever leads the school to be absolutely focused quickly on the improvements required within Downhills. A further period of instability and lack of clarity with regard to leadership and governance would not be in the best interests of the children.

At 3pm, I emailed our report to the Secretary of State and within two hours the decision was made. Downhills was to convert to be an academy, sponsored by the Harris Federation, with immediate effect.

Whilst the staff, parents and LA considered the process had been fair and transparent, the parents disagreed with the Secretary of State's response and sought a judicial review. The High Court Judge said that 'given the school's 'egregious' past performance, the decision was rational.

The new academy opened in September 2012 sponsored by Harris. By 2014, the Ofsted Report described the school as good across all areas with outstanding leadership and management noting that pupils' progress has improved rapidly since the academy opened in 2012.

The voice of parents and the local community and the best interests of children were central to this decision. These concerns are at the heart of education decision making. In the end, the best interests of children are paramount.

■ Les Walton is chair of the Northern Education Trust.