

Peacehaven Heights Consultation on the Proposal for the School to become an Academy with STEP Academy Trust

Parents Meeting 29th September 2021 at 6.00pm

Penny Gaunt, Chair of the IEB, introduced herself and explained that the consultation is about Peacehaven Heights joining STEP Academy Trust and emphasised the importance of the trust it is proposed the school should join. IEB members (Simon Chandler, Claire Roberts) and STEP representatives introduced themselves. Abby Kilgarriff, Tim Mills, Ben March, Paul Glover, Dafydd Gough.

The IEB and representatives of STEP Academy Trust gave presentations. The presentations are available on the website

During the meeting a range of questions were asked and some questions had been submitted prior to the meeting. Answers were given to all but one of the previously submitted questions as part of the presentation. The remaining question was responded to at the meeting

Questions asked during the meeting:

There was a question about the IEB's view that there are no disadvantages to PHP becoming an academy with STEP.

Penny stated that the IEB can see no disadvantages with regard to the school joining STEP academy trust. For a school just to become an academy may present disadvantages if the identified trust was not appropriate but to join STEP Academy Trust would be beneficial to the school.

A parent who had previously submitted a question expressed concern that her question had not been answered properly.

STEP provided an additional response and Penny Gaunt stated that the revised response would be placed on the website

There was a question previously submitted about the number of former STEP staff and policies in use.

It was clarified that there are no ex-STEP employees at Peacehaven; AK is a STEP employee and two other members of staff have been seconded from STEP to provide additional expertise and capacity to support our SEND provision and our school improvement strategies. We have not adopted STEP policies, We have used ESCC model policies, or from The Key, adapted for the school. The Behaviour Policy originated from High Cliff but it is not a STEP-wide approach.

There was a question submitted about AK being appointed permanent full-time HT, as she is currently shown on Peacehaven and High Cliff websites as the headteacher.

It was confirmed that AK is full time at PHP, though also listed at High Cliff.

There was a question submitted about whether, if conversion proceeds, there would be full commitment and focus for Abby to remain at the school for a set time frame.

It was explained that she would be bound by the same contract as all headteachers.

There was a question submitted about the structure of the Academy Committee.

It was explained that every STEP school has a Local Governing Body, though some work over 2 schools, with 8-12 members, including 1-2 parents, 1-2 staff and also community representation through co-opted members. AK also explained that some parents are co-opted, which gives greater parental representation on the board. Subsequent to the meeting, it was confirmed that each committee has 6 – 10 members.

It was asked if Peacehaven and Telscombe would have separate committees, or will there be a merged GB, and will AK cover both schools.

AK explained that she is committed to PHP and has stepped away from High Cliff; the school needs a full time HT and it would not be possible to take on another school, as each school would need a full time head. AK would not want to take that on, and STEP would not allow it, as it would not be sustainable. It was added that the governance structure will be looked at. STEP operates both models, with success.

There was a question submitted about staff, as a staff survey last year showed a proportion would leave in the event of joining an academy.

It was explained that the survey was completed in 2019. PG explained that staff have told her that they are now positive about what is happening in the school and the support and CPD opportunities on offer, as well as Abby's leadership.

There was a question submitted about STEP keeping current staff and incentives/ CPD for teachers. It was explained that there is heavy investment in staff, including bespoke STEP CPD via the Teaching School Hub, with good resources and expertise. Being a large organisation offers opportunities for progression and promotion – several examples were provided. There is also a teaching school, and an operations section, and opportunities for staff to progress to senior leadership, or subject and key stage leadership.

It was asked how the high turnover of staff following STEP's involvement with Telscombe Cliffs will be prevented at Peacehaven.

It was explained that there was a Memorandum of Understanding with Telscombe Cliffs to support Teaching and Learning at the school. Abby is the established leader here at Peacehaven and there are now strong professional relationships among the staff, with a positive atmosphere. A member of the audience confirmed that staff are currently happy. STEP has high staff and leadership retention. Keeping good teachers is a priority, as recruiting new teachers can be difficult.

STEP advised that the TC consultation is online and invited parents to look at the website.

Parents asked that as there is pressure on academic achievement, how will it be possible to manage children and ensure an element of fun. A point was made about the removal of children wearing their own clothes to school on their birthday.

AK explained that staff are not seeing children under pressure, as that is not how teachers are working. 'We meet them where they are and raise standards.'

A question was raised about pupil wellbeing and nurturing children. It was explained that this happens every day, both incidentally and via the cohesive PHSE curriculum, which includes explicit mental health and wellbeing sessions, and online safety teaching, for at least an hour per week. This is important due to the societal problems of the pandemic, lockdown, home learning, increasing anxiety and mental health and wellbeing issues, so that all children are not only welcome and accepted, but able to identify feelings and how to deal with them, giving a sense of personal power and an emotional readiness for secondary education.

A parent explained that there were parts of the curriculum the children loved, such as the swimming pool, and Beach School, that the IEB removed. It was asked if STEP can reassure parents that nativities, sports day, world book day, parent reading with children in school, etc. will continue.

It was explained that some activities were stopped due to the pandemic. PG commented that the closure of the swimming school was not well communicated to parents, and the letter that was sent to parents was too late. The decision to close the pool was due to health and safety, and finance issues. However, this issue is not relevant to the consultation, which is about the future of the school.

A parent thought the closure of the pool is relevant, as the school lost enrichment opportunities and that the IEB seems focused just on reading, writing and mathematics.

AK explained that the curriculum is broad and balanced. School trips are now being planned three times per year, with visitors to school on the opposite terms on the proviso that COVID restrictions remain lifted. World Book Day will continue. Enrichment was impacted by the pandemic and will be put back on track. It has been hard to plan due to COVID.

A parent expressed dissatisfaction with recent communications about the removal of children wearing their own clothes on their birthdays, the book scheme, and the playground, which led to conflict.

Penny explained that not wearing school uniform on birthdays would be unusual for a range of reasons and, for some children, who may not be as fortunate as others, the experience could be potentially embarrassing. The reason for the change was not to reduce fun but in the interests of all the children across the school. PG asked why anyone would have a view that the way forward is only to focus on reading, writing and mathematics and reduce children's enjoyment. Staff and children at the school, have reported that children are enjoying their learning, and PG feels that children are honest, and they have given her their opinion.

A parent requested examples of children expressing their enjoyment from PG.

PG explained that she had met groups of children in June and the children reported to her that they enjoy phonics and whole class reading because it helps them, they feel safe and can talk to teachers, that bullying has reduced, and playground behaviour has improved.

Penny asked parents to share what they saw as the disadvantages of joining STEP.

A parent asked why STEP would have more resources than the LA.

CR explained that the LA receives less funding from the government, in line with government policy that schools will be self-supporting or part of a trust. East Sussex retained some responsibility for school improvement, and does more than statutory requirements dictate, but the resources are not there for intensive support to continue for any length of time. East Sussex is growing a system of academies and maintained schools working in partnership. Outcomes in PHP in 2019 were the 2nd lowest in the county; only 25% of the Y6 children were secondary ready, as the parents were advised at the initial meeting with the IEB in September 2019.

In response to a further question about the level of support the school would receive from STEP, it was explained that the STEP Teaching School Alliance has been working with local authorities to establish networks of communication and resources, developing staff and CPD. The Alliance is now the Teaching School Hub.

A parent commented that he felt that parents' views are not being taken into account; businesses serve customers. School 'customers' are the government; parents are service users and do not fill the bank account, so there is no mechanism for parents to have a say.

STEP explained that pupil numbers will affect the income into the school so it will be important to ensure parents want their children to attend the school.

It was asked how parents are consulted.

STEP explained that there is a working partnership with parents across all its school.

PG also explained that maintained school funding comes from the government via the LA.

A parent expressed concern about the number of changes at the school and the lack of fun at the school.

Penny explained that nobody wants children to be unhappy and not to have fun. There will be challenges. The IEB wants to help children enjoy learning and prepare for the future. When people say Peacehaven Heights was brilliant and fantastic, it is difficult to understand this view when three

quarters of children left with standards which meant they would find secondary school very difficult and this would also impact on their self-esteem and confidence.

CR confirmed there had previously been a 3-year decline in results – children were not making the progress they deserved to make.

Wendy Wiltshire (Deputy HT) explained that she conducted pupil voice with children through the school who said they enjoyed the new approaches to learning, they felt safer, they enjoyed reading, and the less confident readers liked rehearsing it. Boys enjoyed the whole class aspect of the lessons, and the re-teaching so that a topic is embedded before any movement to the next. WW expressed concern that some children are reporting the opposite at home.

PG asked parents with real concerns about their children's happiness to come in and talk to the class teacher, and to WW.

A parent asked what STEP feel the unique personality of the school is.

STEP explained that, if PHP joins STEP, this will need to be learned and understood. Children are articulate, polite, and intelligent; there would need to be discussion with parents and the community to learn the unique identity of the school.

AK explained that there have been changes of leadership at the school and its authenticity of personality has changed; what do we stand for as a school, and what are the expectations for our children's education? Community engagement has not happened this year due to the pandemic. This week will see the first assembly and gathering of the whole school.

It was asked if STEP will heed the comments made and review decisions that have been made, such as the removal of Beach School.

AK explained that until the school was in a stronger position and the current curriculum was firmly embedded there would be no further changes.

A parent asked about the new approach to phonics, which staff say the children enjoy.

It was explained that now we are able to do so, parents will be invited to attend a phonics lesson, whole class reading, etc., so they see first-hand what the children are doing in class.

A parent expressed concern about initiatives added, removed, or changed without their knowledge

AK explained that she is not aware of some of the things mentioned; she is the 6th leader since 2019. She became interim headteacher during lockdown when some things ceased to exist or could not happen. As things return to normal there should be more clarity.

In addition, AK explained to parents that she want to strengthen the PTA.

It was asked why Beach School was removed? AK explained that children were spending more time at beach school than reading, which impacted on learning. Children attended a weekly 3-hour session of Beach School every other term and read for ½ hour per day.

AK also explained that the school needs to cover statutory areas. PG explained that AK, with the support of the IEB has prioritised children learning to read, as this is fundamentally important to their future life and enabling them to access the full curriculum.

David Dowling (newly appointed DHT) informed parents that he is independent of STEP. He explained that there are fantastic onsite grounds and the curriculum is 'spot on.' Parents are visibly anxious, but he asked parents to trust what leaders are trying to do. Trips are being planned and the children are learning in a fun environment. Parents should talk to staff if there is anxiety. He cannot comment on the pool and the beach school, but he is open to ideas from parents and asked them to come and talk to him.

A parent questioned the assertion that staff are happy as previously they had taken industrial action.

PG explained that a few months ago, staff did express concern about becoming an academy, but she is confident that the position has now changed.

There was an attempt to receive a further question from an online participant, but the technology prevented this.

PG thanked parents for their comments and questions. She noted the concern about communication and assured parents that this will be reviewed and improved where necessary. She also urged anyone with concerns about their children's happiness, wellbeing and the curriculum to discuss these with the class teachers or members of the SLT. PG also urged parents to complete the consultation online, via parent mail, or a paper copy, and explained that the IEB will look at all the responses after closure of the consultation, and a decision will be taken whether to proceed or not.

A parent asked what would happen if most parents vote 'No.'

PG explained that there will not be a vote, as this is a consultation not a referendum. If there are very many negative responses the IEB will look closely at the reasons why. However, a fundamental in principle dislike of academies would not necessarily be a reason not to proceed.

A parent asked how STEP would feel if there was an overwhelmingly negative response.

STEP confirmed that they would take that very seriously, as it would be necessary to have parents on side to move the school to outstanding.

The meeting closed at 20.12