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Case Study: Wapping High School, London

Overview

Wapping High School is a proposed co-educational secondary Free School that will serve the families of Wapping, Shadwell and Limehouse in the Tower Hamlets area of London. The vision is to provide a school that is inclusive (representing the diverse demographics of the area) and that delivers strong academic results through an emphasis on personalised learning. A new school would also address the shortage of secondary school places in the local area. Wapping High School hopes to open in September 2012 with 81 Year 7 pupils (27 pupils per class), and plans to grow to 405 pupils.

Background

The group behind the Wapping High School proposal originally came together two and a half years ago when, as parents with children in the same primary school, they recognised that there was a problem with a lack of secondary school provision for families in the local area. The local secondary schools are very stratified or segregated (both in terms of ethnicity and the number of pupils on free school meals). There is also a projected shortage of local secondary school places from 2013, which is expected to increase each year. This project initially grew out of a desire to encourage the Council to open a new school. When that was not successful, and the Free Schools policy was announced, the group decided that this presented a good opportunity to address the local problems.

The plan for the school has evolved slightly since the early days of the project, mainly because of the shift from a proposed Council-run school to a Free School. ***“We were relieved when the Free School model came along. We didn’t feel that the Council would be willing or capable of taking on board the things that we wanted to achieve with the school. It is not that we wouldn’t want to work with them, but we haven’t found them to be particularly supportive.”*** The vision for the school, however, has remained fairly constant. It has matured, and developed greater detail, but the ideas about extended days, enrichment programmes, personalised learning, and a transparent admissions policy were there from the outset of the project.

The Group

There are three key players in the Wapping High School group who are the Members and original Directors of the Trust. Kerstyn Comley is an engineer by trade who, having recently completed a doctorate, is working full time on this Free School project. A second director has a background in the hospitality industry and does extensive voluntary work within the community, including serving as Chair of Governors for a local primary school. He has been able to devote three to four days per week to this project. The third team member is director of IT for a housing association. Two new directors were added to the original three - a former headteacher and education consultant who has experience of setting up academies, and another parent. The directors have been meeting on a weekly basis since May 2010.

The Wapping High School team also established a steering committee that has been meeting monthly since October 2010. The steering committee includes local parents (the members wanted representatives from several different primary schools), a teacher, an

architect, two people from the Local Authority (one of whom is also a parent and works in safeguarding, the other represents Children's Services), and someone from Contour Education. The steering committee member from Contour originally joined the Wapping project as an interested party - prior to taking up employment at Contour - having met the group through an NSN event. In April 2011 Contour was appointed as project manager for the group following a procurement exercise. Contour has provided support pro bono.

“When the new application form came out we decided that we would not be able to complete it without pro bono help from somewhere. We put out a tender for the contract and Contour was successful.”

In addition to the Directors and the steering committee, the group has also been able to call on the expertise of a list of special advisers who are interested in the project including a management accountant, education experts, and other people that they have met through conferences. For the most part, the team has been assembled as a result of individuals asking to get involved - people who live locally and were able to give quite a lot of time to the project. There are a few people that the group has actively approached, for example the parent who is also an architect, and the Local Authority representatives.

Application Process

The Wapping High School group initially submitted a proposal under the original Free School application process (proposal, followed by business case) in December 2010. They met with the DfE in January, were given some positive feedback, and were expecting that they would be approved to progress to the business case stage in February 2011. They were surprised when it transpired that their application had not been approved and that they had to go through the new application process.

The new application process was ***“a phenomenal amount of work!”*** The team were working at least twelve hour days in the run-up to submitting the application.

“We were regularly getting up at 5:30am and still working at 10:30pm. At 3am on the Saturday morning before I was due to go on holiday we still weren't done.”

Each of the three original members took responsibility for different sections of the application form. They received input and support from both Contour and NSN, reviewing what had been written and offering suggestions. They also had helpful input from a local secondary school that provided example figures to help them complete their financial plan. Two of the team members have a great deal of project management experience. Setting small deadlines and targets helped to keep the project on track.

The most difficult aspect of the application for the Wapping High School group was the premises section, but this was owing to local availability rather than the requirements of the form. The evidence of demand section was the most time consuming and laborious section of the application.

“I remember going to the NSN conference in April 2011 and meeting people who had just decided, at that moment, to apply for a 2012 opening, and we had already spent months trawling primary schools, sports centres, etc. to get evidence of demand. I didn’t expect that these new groups were ever going to be able to get the evidence of demand needed in time. The amount of time required for this can’t be underestimated!”

Relationships

When the Wapping High School group were trying to convince the local Council to open a new school they conducted a survey of 260 families in the local area to ask if they were satisfied with local provision, and whether or not they would be interested in a new school. This turned out to be a useful preliminary exercise and they used it as a starting block for establishing support for their proposed Free School. When the group decided to pursue a Free School application they developed a relationship with a local estate agent who agreed to sponsor the printing of 5,000 flyers with information about the Free School on one side and a registration form on the other side. In October, November and April the group spent three days per week going round to local primary schools and talking to parents. They also contacted every local headteacher. Some were very supportive and even agreed to circulate flyers to parents, others were a bit more hesitant about the plans.

“We felt that schools that were church-based were more willing to support us than non-faith schools that seem to feel more beholden to the Local Authority.”

The group has run ads in local newspapers and attended community events to raise interest in the school, and have worked to ensure that different members of the community know about their plans. They have met with local stakeholders from a range of churches and mosques and have tried to pinpoint key community representatives. A significant donation from a donor who wished to remain anonymous allowed the group to develop a high-quality website for the school. The donor had an existing interest in education projects and felt that the website would promote dialogue about education and schools in the area.

Wapping High School has not had much success in developing a fruitful relationship with the Local Authority, although they have had a number of meetings with them. ***“We found them to be extremely frustrating. We are a proactive group, but they have kept us at arms’ length.”*** The political situation in Tower Hamlets is slightly unusual, with an independent (formerly Labour) elected mayor. The Labour and Independent councillors have taken the stance of opposing Academies and Free Schools.

“We have had some very disappointing meetings with the local councillors. They don’t oppose us, but they also won’t actively support us.”

The group has had a lot of contact with NSN from the start of the process. They have been to nearly all of the conferences and events that NSN has run. ***“It is such a new process that we were anxious to be kept fully up to date.”*** They found NSN’s guidance document helpful, and accessed NSN support for their application. ***“I was astonished at the speed of turnaround from NSN in those last few weeks before the application”***

deadline.” They hope that in future NSN will be able to provide more support with networking and fundraising.

Media

Wapping High School has had more media coverage than many of the potential 2012 Free Schools. They have had local coverage through links with two local reporters, and there has also been interest from the Evening Standard because they are a London school. An invitation from NSN to attend a speech given by Michael Gove also provided an introduction to a number of journalists. The coverage was increased when Academy Award winner Helen Mirren pledged her support for the school.

“The whole process has been a rollercoaster. In a low moment I wrote to her [Helen Mirren] because I knew that she was local, and by the third day she had agreed to do it.”

Education

The three original members of the Wapping team have all had some connection with education, albeit not as teachers. Their area has a very diverse cohort of young people with diverse needs, and they recognise that there are things that the local state schools do not do very well (eg. provision for children who are gifted and talented, or children who are at the bottom end of the spectrum). ***“We were all very interested in personalised learning. The local schools say that they do it, but they don’t really.”*** They have undertaken a lot of research, and have become increasingly committed to the idea that personalisation will be the foundation of the school’s curriculum. ***“We want a straightforward, balanced curriculum, but equally we recognise that the school will be small and we accept that we won’t be able to offer lots of different subjects.”*** The group appreciates the importance of formal qualifications as stepping stones, but does not feel that this should be the main focus of the school.

“Parents seem comfortable that as long as we are giving a good grounding in the fundamentals, providing lots of examined subjects is not essential.”

The group is more concerned with the fact that in their area, because of the high level of deprivation, many young people do not have the opportunity to do other enrichment activities. This is either because of cost implications, or because they have not developed the habit of taking on extra activities. The school will have a compulsory enrichment programme to broaden the minds of pupils including citizenship, civics, critical thinking, presentation skills, and other subjects that will help them with their studies. For one hour at the end of every day, children will also be required to take on an additional enrichment activity of their choice ranging from football to journalism to choir to polo. This will involve strong support from the community.

“We already have pledges from the community to deliver 12 of the 16 courses that we would run in the first year.”

Recruitment

The group did not identify a Principal Designate as part of their application, but they provided full details about how they intend to approach recruitment. ***“Ideally we would like to find someone who has considerable knowledge of the area of personalised learning, or someone who would be willing or excited about being trained in that area.”*** They will also be looking for a candidate with experience of working with young people in areas of deprivation.

“Our school will have such a diverse student body. We are expecting 48% of pupils to have free school meals.”

Premises

Identifying suitable sites for the school has been a real challenge for the Wapping group. Kerstyn wonders if the DfE application process is perhaps in the wrong order. ***“Premises is such a fundamental part of the proposal. It would be better to go back to a two-tiered application system, first outlining vision and securing premises, and then preparing a full application.”*** The proposed location for the school, right next to the City of London, means that the cost of buildings is very high and the group expects that the Government will not be prepared to spend the level of money required to secure a site. The fact that groups are not able to negotiate for premises at the application stage is very difficult.

“We are so passionate and so involved with what we’re doing. Not being able to resolve the premises issue ourselves is really frustrating - we are just floundering.”

The group did prepare a list of possible sites for their application. They identified these sites by walking the streets in their target area, visiting estate agents, and contacting the Council. They would have liked to have access to the property databases that PfS have at their disposal. Although they heard that PfS had done a search on their behalf, they were not given a chance to explain their requirements. The group is concerned that the question of a suitable site for the school will be a stumbling block for approval of their application.

Reflections

In addition to the question of a site for the school, the Wapping High School group found that hardest part of the process was the uncertainty of going through something for the first time. It has been an interesting journey though in terms of ***“all the people we have had to meet and the places we have had to go... It has also been interesting to learn about the politics around here.”*** The group is still awaiting the results of their application, but they were discussing what might happen if the school was not approved. They have put a great amount of work into this project, and would be keen to demonstrate for the future (for example on CVs) the extent of the work and effort that has been undertaken.

Kerstyn’s advice for people starting out on the process comes back to the question of premises. Her feeling is that groups should identify a viable site solution before putting

the time into the application. While this is not a requirement for the application, her sense is that it is important to ***“sort out your premises and make sure that it is viable before you put pen to paper.”***

In principle, Kerstyn thinks that parent-promoted or community-promoted schools are a great idea. ***“This has the potential to unlock that deadlock. People were trying to do more for their community, but they didn’t really know how.”*** Her concern, however, is with funding and whether there will be sufficient funding in the current climate to open these new Free Schools.

The new application process has been a challenge, but the Wapping group do not see a problem with the rigour of the new system.

“It has been very difficult, but it should be. It should be a very rigorous process.”

www.wappinghigh.org