

July

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Case Study: The Free School Norwich

Overview

The Free School Norwich will be a new primary school for 168 pupils (aged 4-11) in central Norwich. The vision for the school is based around three core aims:

- Offering a broad and balanced curriculum;
- Emphasising and focusing on developing the individual child (partly through personalised learning opportunities in the local community, making the most of local experts); and
- Supporting the needs of working families.

In order to cater for working families, The Free School Norwich will offer a low-cost, year-round extended school service allowing children to be cared for from 8:15 to 5:45. The year will also be divided into 6 terms of 6 weeks (Harvest, Christmas, Winter, Spring, Whitsun, and Summer) with a different holiday structure to reduce the cost of family holidays taken during traditional school holiday periods.

The school will be one of the first Free Schools to open in September 2011, and will initially have 96 pupils in Reception to Year 3, adding one year group annually up to Year 6.

The Free School Norwich application was submitted in the first application process which consisted of a short initial proposal, followed by a business case.

Background

Although there is now a committed team working to set up the school, The Free School Norwich is very much the brainchild of the founding Principal, Tania Sidney-Roberts. Tania has worked in education for the last 20 years in a variety of roles and settings (including both independent schools and state schools in deprived areas) and has completed a range of professional development (including the NPQH). Although this will be her first headship, she has always known that she wanted to be head of a school, and has had a clear picture of what her school would be like. Tania perceived a real need in the local community for wrap-around care, reinforced by her own experience as a working parent. Her sense was that the traditional school structure and schedule was simply not compatible with the schedule of working parents. Opening a school that catered for working parents, while also making the most of the expertise within the community, presented an opportunity to make a difference to the lives of many families in Norwich.

While Tania would be the first to admit that the vision for the school was quite sketchy last August, she does not believe that it has changed drastically in the period between submitting the initial proposal and opening the school. That sketchy outline has simply become more concrete and detailed over time, and is now ready to go.

The Group

While the writing of the initial proposal was a one-person effort, there is now a diverse and dedicated team working to make The Free School Norwich a reality. In addition to

Tania Sidney-Roberts there is a Vice Principal (Darren Webster), a team of Governors with a range of experience, School Secretary and Bursar, an army of volunteers, community partners, plus teachers, TAs, and extended school staff who will start in September. Putting together the initial team to support the application through the business case, set-up, and pre-opening stages all happened very quickly - within two weeks. Once the initial application had been accepted (with the resulting media coverage) Tania found that people came to her to offer their support. She was able to choose governors who could offer the various skills or experience that she felt the project needed (eg. financial, legal, curriculum).

“Do not underestimate the amount of work your governors will need to do!”

The Governing body was organised into committees according to their areas of expertise while the school was being developed (premises committee; finance committee; admissions team; curriculum committee; PF committee; personnel committee). Tania stresses that building a team of parents who have not been involved in setting up and running a school will not be sufficient. The Norwich group includes a qualified accountant who has been school governor for the finance committee; retired headteachers with experience of recruiting school staff for the personnel committee; a building consultant for the premises committee; teachers who have had responsibility for curriculum development on the curriculum committee; a former headteacher as well as a Local Authority schools admissions adviser on the admissions committee. The group also has a PR adviser - the only paid role.

In terms of workload, Tania herself has been working 14 hour days since the initial proposal was accepted, while the different committees have had peak weeks throughout the process, sometimes working through the night. She uses the example of a cricket team to describe how the team works - putting the strongest possible team members in to bat to deal with different types of bowler (or hurdle) as required.

The Free School Norwich has also been working with Cambridge Education; appointed quite late in the process as project managers, Cambridge Education have also been supporting recruitment. Community partners are a key element of this Free School, and the group has been working closely with a number of them including local theatres, Norwich City Football Club (who will provide PE), Indigo Dyslexia Centre, and other local businesses and organisations in Norwich.

The Free School Norwich group is well organised and well supported, with a range of experience and capabilities.

“People have underestimated how strong we are as a team - they are in for a shock.”

Premises

The Free School Norwich will open in September 2011 in a leased Grade II listed Georgian building. Although media coverage has focused on the fact that at one point the building was a former Aviva office block, the site has required only very minor work to adapt it for

school use. The building work, which amounts to not much more than partition walls, a kitchen, and a playground, is expected to take just 12 weeks and cost under £700,000.

The process of identifying the site was fairly straightforward. There are a number of buildings available in Norwich at the moment. Tania phoned estate agents, visited a number of properties, and took advice from a family friend who is a building consultant. When she visited the Georgian building (conveniently located next to the bus station, which was considered important for families on their way to or from work) it was in pristine condition and she knew that she had found the site for her school. PFS then became involved in securing the building and are now overseeing the conversion work.



Application Process

There was an element of fate in the inception of The Free School Norwich. Although Tania had always thought about running a school she was not particularly familiar with the Free School policy until she heard something on the radio during the summer of 2010. It was the end of August, and she quickly decided to submit an initial proposal (this was the first round of applications when groups had to submit an initial proposal before being invited to prepare a business case). Tania did not expect to hear anything further and was surprised when the DfE rang her the following morning. She was told that the DfE had already identified the first 15 groups that would progress through to the business case stage, but that they would now meet again to consider the Norwich application because it appeared to be so strong. Tania spent the day nervously waiting to hear and eventually received a phone call inviting her to come to Westminster the following week because her application would be progressing to the business case stage. In her own words, *“I haven’t sat down since!”*

Preparing the subsequent business case was a three-month job. Tania described this stage as do-able, with the help of lots of different teams of people as well as PFS, DfE, and NSN. The teams reported back to her and she compiled all of the information for the business case. The business case was submitted to the DfE in December 2010 and was approved in January 2011.

Relationships

A crucial part of the Free School application process is establishing support for a new school. This turned out to be surprisingly easy for The Free School Norwich. As soon as the initial application was accepted and the news was picked up - with some relish - by the local media there was a great deal of interest in The Norwich Free School. Since the application and acceptance happened so quickly, there was public curiosity about the mystery person behind the new Free School. As one of the first Free Schools, Norwich has been approached regularly by local and national media and has had a lot of coverage (including a regular slot on a local radio channel). Each time a story appeared in the press the amount of traffic to the school’s website increased drastically. The website, incidentally, was built by Tania overnight in one night using a blank site from One.com and Microsoft Publisher - *“I had never done anything like it before, but it is surprising just how much you can learn from scratch very quickly when you really need to.”*

A new, professional website produced by the group's ICT company (CIVICA) will be going live shortly, but the initial site helped the group to gather evidence of demand quickly.

While the group did go out into the community to do the required parental demand surveys, most of the interest and parental support developed organically. This was helped by a good relationship with the Local Authority who have looked after the admissions process for the school. Norfolk County Council sent out application packs to parents with school-age children, including information about The Free School Norwich. This suggested to parents that the school was being endorsed by the LA, and generated further support for the school. The result is that the school is four times over-subscribed for September 2011.

The Free School's relationship with community partners is an integral part of the school vision. The relationship with other schools, however, has been more mixed. The Free School Norwich has found that many schools are keen to be linked or involved with the Free School (eg. supporting transition to secondary school, joint music programmes, etc.) While most of the local schools are coming round to the idea of the Free School, there are still some that continue to be staunchly 'anti Free School'. These are mainly primary schools that are concerned that the Free School will take pupils away from their roll (something that Tania is quick to refute). Tania feels that the objectors are becoming more isolated as The Free School Norwich develops links with more and more schools. And, with the support of the Local Authority and the local community, Tania is already talking about the next schools that she will open, following the model of her first school.

“The Free School Norwich is not going away, and I am going to open more schools.”

The Free School Norwich has engaged with the New Schools Network throughout the process of setting up the school. As one of the first Free School groups to go through the process, there have inevitably been a lot of unknowns and a lot of questions. Tania has valued the personal service and support from NSN advisers who, she felt, really got to know her group and her project and worked to find answers as quickly as possible to the questions along the way.

Education

The curriculum team within the Governors of The Free School Norwich, including Tania, has been working to develop the innovative curriculum for the school. The first 7 years of the school's curriculum is now established and ready to go, and the school will take delivery of all curriculum materials in August. Tania feels that the curriculum at the school will be very different from other schools - ***“truly broad and balanced, with less emphasis on the SATs.”*** The curriculum will focus on meeting the needs of each individual child and developing their potential. This will come partly from the links with community partners; all children will be taken out into the community for one afternoon each week and will be able to choose from a programme of activities. This could include things like drama, cookery, sailing, studying environmental issues, and much more. Experts and professionals from the community will also be invited into the school, and training and opportunities will be tailored to the interests of each child. In addition to the core subjects, specialist teachers will be used for subjects such as language, music, and PE (Norwich City FC).

Recruitment

Tania, as Principal, formally took up her position in January 2011. The Vice Principal, Bursar, and School Secretary started at Easter, and the teachers, TAs, and other staff will start in September. The school has been spoiled for choice in terms of applications for positions. More than 200 people applied for the Secretary and Bursar posts, and more than 60 people applied for the 4 TA posts. The main challenge has been explaining to the countless strong candidates who meet the requirements why their application has not been successful. The school will open with 4 teachers, 4 TAs, 4 extended school staff, plus specialists and senior management. In total there should be 20 members of staff in September 2011, rising to c. 25 when the school is full. The principal will double as the SENCO when the school initially opens. All teachers will have QTS, and were stringently tested in English and Maths as part of the recruitment process. The Free School has also linked up with City College Norwich to ensure that extended school staff gain NVQ Level 2 or 3 in Children's Care, Development and Learning within their first year at The Free School Norwich - ***"because I want the very best for our children."***

The appointment of the principal was not as straightforward as it might have been. The DfE required the recruitment process to be open, fair and transparent which meant that Tania had to apply for the post that she had created. There was some interest in the post from other potential applicants, but none of them progressed to submitting an application. Recruitment was further complicated by the fact that the school governors already knew Tania, and therefore could not interview her objectively. In the end the DfE had to send an official out to interview her. This, combined with the obligatory national advertisement of the vacancy, meant that the process cost about £3,000. Fortunately lessons have been learned from this early experience, and the new application process has been revised to allow applicant groups to identify a Principal Designate in advance.

"I had to apply for my own post along with other applicants, but the whole plan for the school was still in my head at that stage and not on the table for another applicant to pick up and run with. It was a completely hollow exercise to go through."

Reflections

The hardest part of the process for Tania and The Free School Norwich group has been dealing with the media. Organising the school turned out to be straightforward in comparison to dealing with the press. Tania felt that she was thrown in at the deep end on September first last year, and if there is one thing she wishes she had known before the process started it is how to handle the media. She found it terrifying, but is now confident that she knows which political leaning different papers have, which reporters to avoid, which forms of media will help her to get her message across, and which ones are likely to distort that message.

The most surprising part of the process so far for Norwich has been the massive amount of support that has been offered. ***"I knew it was a good idea, but I wasn't expecting to be as over-subscribed as we are, or to have quite so many offers of support from the wider community."***

Tania is quick to identify her fantastic team of governors as the most helpful people in the process. ***“The team has not let me down once. They have worked through the night with me (despite their own full time jobs), never doubted me, and have been 100% supportive. They are like family now - and I am eternally grateful to them.”***

The whole process has been a huge learning curve for Tania and the team. Tania, who was a year 6 class teacher at this time last year, feels that she has had to learn absolutely everything along the way. The one piece of advice she would offer to others looking to set up Free Schools is to get a good team around them, with the right skills and experience.

She is, unsurprisingly, very supportive of the Free School movement and expects that more schools will open in the coming years, giving parents much more choice about the kind of school they send their child to. She feels that the Free School movement is a tremendous opportunity for people to come forward with innovative ideas about education to meet a massive demand that is not currently being met.

“50 years ago family life was very different to how it is these days - school worked then. Families are very different now - single parents, blended families, people from different social backgrounds - but the primary school structure hasn’t moved on to adapt to those needs. Having to pay out more than you earn in a week for childcare makes no sense. There is a huge group of parents in the community who need what we’re offering.”

Future

Tania is confident that The Free School Norwich is only the start for her. She is already thinking about the next schools that she will open, following the same model.

“I have only just started. There will be other schools using the same model, and we will fill them! The Free School Norwich is a brilliant example of how the Free Schools movement can work.”

www.freeschoolnorwich.org.uk