

Report to: **Lead Member for Learning & School Effectiveness**
Date: **21 December 2015**
By: **Director of Children's Services**

Title of report: **East Sussex County Council's (ESCC) Co-sponsorship role in Eastbourne Academy Trust**

Purpose of report: **To provide the Lead Member with information to support a decision**

RECOMMENDATION:

The Lead Member is recommended to agree that East Sussex County Council withdraw as co-sponsor for the Eastbourne Academy Trust and take the necessary steps to effect that withdrawal at the earliest opportunity on the appointment of a new sponsor.

1 Background

1.1 Since 2009, Sussex Downs College has been the lead sponsor for The Eastbourne Academy (TEA) with East Sussex County Council (ESCC) as the co-sponsor. ESCC has supported TEA during this period and the academy was judged 'good' at their last inspection in November 2012.

1.2 However, ESCC now has concerns about the current performance of the Key Stage 4 outcomes at TEA which decreased by 7% between 2014 and 2015 (provisional data). ESCC wrote to TEA on 14 October to express concern about their performance and identified the need for TEA to secure additional capacity in order to improve outcomes for learners. The Regional Schools Commissioner (RSC) also visited TEA in early November to discuss their current performance.

1.3 Sussex Downs College took a proposal to their Corporation on 22nd October 2015 to get agreement to withdraw as sponsor. The College wishes to withdraw from sponsorship of TEA because they do not have the capacity required to support TEA to improve outcomes and they need to place their focus on the challenges currently facing the College including post-16 area review. The Corporation agreed in principle to withdraw as sponsor and has contacted the RSC to confirm their intention. The RSC are in agreement with the decision and have begun to explore possible sponsor options. This provides an opportunity for ESCC to also re-consider its sponsorship.

2 Supporting information

2.1 Since May 2015, TEA has been exploring different ways of working in partnership with two local schools, Parkland Infant School and Parkland Junior Schools. These two schools have been in a hard federation since September 2015, and now form the Parkland Federation with a single governing body. During terms 5 and 6 last academic year, a series of meetings took place between governors and leaders of the schools, as well as senior representatives from the two sponsors, to explore how this partnership could be developed further. A report was then commissioned by ESCC to consider the options available to support greater collaboration between the Parkland Federation and TEA.

2.2 The report recommends that TEA seek a new academy sponsor in order to secure additional capacity to sustain/improve standards. It also recommends that the three schools consider joining together in a single multi-academy trust in order to provide a cohesive structure for quality education across the Hampden Park area. Governors at each of the schools are now considering the recommendations from the report.

3. Risks

3.1 The following risks have been identified and suggested mitigation is provided for each as follows.

- Loss of influence of ESCC in TEA: ESCC has very limited opportunity to influence TEA via its role as co-sponsor. Removing the conflict of interest created by acting as co-sponsor enables ESCC to communicate any concerns unequivocally and raise any concerns about performance with the RSC.
- Loss of ESCC badge/logo from TEA and sense of confidence this instils in the local community: ESCC will ensure that its commitment to the schools in the Eastbourne area is visible to the community by maintaining a strong partnership with the TEA and using ESCC's communication channels to share this with the local community.

4. Conclusion and reasons for recommendations

4.1 Sussex Downs College withdrawing as lead sponsor from TEA provides an opportunity for ESCC to review its co-sponsorship. It is recommended that the Lead Member agrees to the proposal that ESCC withdraws as co-sponsor for the Eastbourne Academy Trust.

4.2 The policy context has changed significantly since ESCC took the decision to act as co-sponsor. At the time TEA was established, acting as co-sponsor provided a mechanism to maintain close links with TEA. The policy context was less clear about the role of local authorities in relation to academy schools and acting as co-sponsor provided an effective way of securing an ongoing role for the local authority.

4.3 Now that the policy context has been clarified, acting as co-sponsor presents a number of challenges, in particular:

- ESCC discharges its responsibilities for outcomes in all academy schools via the RSC; acting as co-sponsor creates confusion in terms of accountability and may place ESCC in the position of raising concerns with the RSC about an academy school where it acts as co-sponsor
- Acting as co-sponsor for some academies and not for others creates an unequitable relationship between ESCC and its academy schools and this compromises ESCC's responsibility to champion educational excellence across all its schools.

4.4 TEA needs significant capacity from an established and effective academy sponsor to secure rapid and sustained improvement. TEA, the Parkland Federation and Sussex Downs College are committed to maintaining and building on their close partnership.

4.5 The Lead Member is therefore recommended to agree that ESCC withdraw as co-sponsor for TEA and take the necessary steps to effect that withdrawal at the earliest opportunity on the appointment of a new sponsor.

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