Stakeholder Consultation Outcome for Proposed Merger

On 29th March 2017, Bedford College (Bedford) and Tresham College of Further and Higher Education (Tresham) issued a joint stakeholder consultation proposal on its plans to merge as a new college.

The consultation document laid out proposals for Tresham to merge with Bedford under a ‘Type B’ merger arrangement which would entail Tresham dissolving from 1st August 2017. This merger model was proposed as the most compelling option to meet the needs of key stakeholders in the area.

The consultation ran from 29th March 2017 to 5th May 2017, providing a five-week window for stakeholder responses, allowing for the Easter break.

Executive Summary

Multiple channels were used to raise awareness of the consultation and stakeholders were positively encouraged to respond:

- email raising awareness of the consultation process sent to multiple stakeholders including staff, existing students, employers, high schools, MPs, local authorities and media outlets
- consultation brochure and questionnaire made publicly available on both College websites
- social media awareness raising
- letter sent to the Secretary of State
- local press advertisements placed in the Northants Telegraph and in Beds on Sunday newspapers
- national press advertisement placed in The Guardian newspaper

As at the end of 5th May 2017 (the consultation response deadline) eighteen responses had been received. Broadly the responses received were very positive in support of the proposed merger plans. Due to the small number of returns, the comments have been collated:

Support for the merger – 88% in favour of the merger

Benefits identified included:

- Further opportunities for people in both areas
- Wider Higher Education curriculum development
- Potential to diversify curriculum offer
- Securing the future of further education North and East Northants
- Economies of scale
- Wider range of opportunities for students, staff and local businesses
- Improving the performance of Tresham College

Some areas of concern were raised in relation to:

- The potential impact upon the Bedford College financial position in view of inheritance of Tresham’s current debt position
- The potential impact upon Bedford College’s reputation
- Willingness of staff from the different colleges to adopt new practices going forwards
Retaining local identities

Responses to the consultation paper from local government showed support for retaining the Tresham brand as well as looking to ensure that a presence remains in Kettering, Corby and Wellingborough going forwards.

Widening provision – 94% support for widening opportunities

Areas identified for potential prioritisation included:

- Professional development of staff
- Remunerated progression opportunities for staff
- Higher Education, including degree level apprenticeships
- Business Engagement
- Student support services
- Employment pathways to progress students into jobs in the health and construction sectors
- Adult skills
- Closer working relationships with local schools to improve the profile and reach of various educational / training offers

Share good practice to raise standards – 100% support

Areas identified for potential prioritisation included:

- Higher level teaching skills and support for staff in achieving post-graduate qualifications
- Student support for those with learning difficulties to improve access to all courses
- Teaching quality including for work based learning

Some areas of concern were raised in relation to:

- How good practice would be determined and ensuring that it is spread across staff in a meaningful and directed manner
- A smooth transition to new arrangements and the potential impact on staff at both colleges

Adverse impact of merger – 53% expressed concern about some groups being potentially disadvantaged by the merger.

Key areas of concern were predominantly around the impact upon staff:

- Potential risk of staff redundancies
- Increased travel between campuses for both teaching and support staff
- Potential increase in workload for some support staff

There was also concern raised that some students may have to travel further for specific courses such as Higher Education.
Response to issues raised

The Boards of both colleges are considering all the concerns raised through the consultation exercise. Whilst it is evident that the clear majority of respondents are in favour of the planned merger, the purpose of the consultation was to confirm not only the degree to which the proposal and aims are supported but also to understand more clearly any concerns felt by those affected.

In light of some of the specific concerns raised, our response is as follows:

Will staff or students have to move between sites to undertake/teach their course?
It is not expected that either staff or students will have to move between Bedford College and Tresham College to undertake/teach their courses as a direct result of the proposed merger.

Will different subjects/courses be delivered at different sites or will the same subject be taught at several sites? How will that impact on student choice?
It is planned that the curriculum offer will remain the same at Bedford College and Tresham College, enabling students to continue to choose from a wide and expanding range of subjects at their preferred campus.

Why is Bedford College merging with a less secure college and not taking it over?
A merger involves the mutual decision of two organisations, usually of similar size, to combine to become one organisation which will result in significant benefits to both. Both the Bedford College and Tresham College governing bodies and senior management teams are fully supportive of this merger.

What safeguards will be put in place to ensure Bedford College remains a 'good' college?
The best aspects of the quality processes from both colleges will be used for the new college, with the Quality team working across the combined organisation. Activities will be monitored at department, campus and whole college level to ensure good practice is identified and built upon, and weaker practice is identified and effective intervention takes place.

How will centralised services work across multiple sites?
There are already models in place where service areas work across a number of campuses and this approach will be extended to the new merged organisation to ensure services to staff and students are available at all main campuses. The details of how this will work in practice are currently being developed for each service area.

In conclusion

We have welcomed and are grateful for the positive response received through consultation on our plans to merge the two colleges. We aim to take the above and all other issues raised into account in our future planning and we will continue to maintain a dialogue with learners, staff, employers and our communities to provide a clear mutual understanding that will help ensure long-term success for the merger. We look forward to a new era in further education when, from 1st August 2017, the plan is for the two colleges to combine to form the new college.