

## Quakers in Yorkshire

### Bootham School presentation October 2024

#### Introduction

My apologies for not being able to attend this Quarterly meeting in person. Our term dates are not aligned with those of The Mount due to our continuing Saturday school programme (more of which later) and for Bootham half term began yesterday. As you will know, Bootham is a boarding school and relies on the international market to fill its space – as such the last week of October sees me on a packed trip to Singapore, Hong Kong and the Chinese cities of Nanjing (twinned with York), Suzhou and Shanghai. There I will be meeting current and prospective parents as well as Old Scholars. In Nanjing I will be representing the city of York in more formal meetings.

#### Last year

The past year was my first in post at Bootham and a very busy one for me, with many challenges to be faced. The financial picture for all independent schools is very difficult. The new Labour government made three announcements in August which have significantly impacted upon our budgeting assumptions.

Firstly, VAT on school fees is due to be introduced from January 2025. While it was a flagship policy in their manifesto, we were led to believe that September 2025 would be the likely start date. We have told parents that our fees will increase by 12% in January rather than the headline 20% VAT rate – we will be able to do this in part by reclaiming VAT on goods and services we buy in – which accounts for half the difference; the remainder is coming from efficiency savings which we have put in place. Inevitably this is hitting a number of our families hard and we anticipate a slightly reduced school role as affordability is reduced. In that sense it is a regressive tax which will have the greatest impact on our least affluent families. The countrywide drive of children from independent schools to the maintained sector will increase pressure on our already full secondary schools and significantly reduce the net gain to the Treasury.

The timing of the introduction is also a concern. Rachael Maskell, our local Labour MP, spoke to an audience of students and parents from both Bootham and The Mount in September. She explained that the various stages through which the legislation needs to pass through both Houses will make royal assent before the Christmas break difficult to achieve. The detail is not clear – and schools are still being told not to register for VAT with HMRC yet.

There will be challenges to this tax – a tax on education. No other sector of education – nursery or university is taxed, and the implication of it being the closing of a loophole is entirely wrong. Education is a public good and there should be no barriers placed in its way. Under EU law this policy could not have happened – education is exempt from such taxes in Europe.

The second financial hit comes with business rates relief, due to cease in April 2025, at a significant cost to the school, but one which will be felt most in the following academic year.

And the third shock to our budget was the Government's agreement to increase teacher pay by 5.5% for this academic year – again, announced during our summer holiday. Our teacher pay is pegged to the state sector scale and we were anticipating something more in line with the 2% inflation rate.

Despite all of this, we are able to forecast a small surplus for this year, which can be reinvested into our site. Our student numbers remain strong – slightly above the average of the past five years, with around 500 in the senior school and 150 at Bootham Junior School. Some families have gone elsewhere – having priced in the VAT hike, but recruitment has remained strong, particularly into Year 9 – Upper Schoolroom and College – year 12. Financial savings have been identified through natural wastage in staff – with a number of teaching staff departing and not being replaced in full. Overall we have reduced the head count by 3-4 full-time equivalents.

Inevitably pressure is falling upon our charitable activities, including bursaries for children from less affluent families and involvement in the Independent-State Sector Partnership (ISSP). We will have to review the percentage of fee income provided for bursaries, and look at fundraising to fill the gap. The Governors and I are committed to the transformational bursary programme – offering free places to children who are matched with us through the SpringBoard foundation, and also working with local authorities to support care-experienced children. We also hope to be involved with the move towards reparations – for example led by the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust – and look at leveraging this through a 'reparations for education' scheme which might focus on children from the Caribbean islands or the UK West Indian community.

We are also seeking to increase our income from the letting of our site and facilities to outside organisations. Already our boarding houses are filled with language schools and activity camps through the summer break. There is more we can do. We will need to review our policy with regard to the ISSP activities, many of which we provide at no cost to all families in York, regardless of their ability to pay.

#### New developments for 2024-25

It would be wrong to dwell too much on the difficulties we face, when we do have such wonderful opportunities to give an outstanding education to our students. One of the best things we can do for the school-as-a-business is to ensure the education is first class across all areas. Already we had many significant strengths: this year we have introduced a number of new schemes which take us even further.

#### *GCSE curriculum*

The changes to our Seniors programme are particularly exciting. We have changed our standard GCSE programme from 10 subjects to 9 as a standard. Higher attainers are still able to attain 10 or more GCSEs through the new accelerated triple science route – which allows them to take three subjects in the curriculum time for two – and the off-timetable offer of Astronomy and (new for 2024) Psychology GCSE.

### *Let Your Life Speak – Lower Senior (Year 10)*

The changes have left curriculum time – an hour a week – for a new scheme which we have christened ‘Let Your Life Speak’. This sees students introduced to subjects we offer at A-level but which they do not otherwise encounter before: Economics, Politics and Psychology. A series of talks at the beginning of the year introduces them to organisations in related fields – mostly with Quaker links in their history. This term students heard from:

- Chris Worrall – Oxfam UK lead for climate justice
- Ruth Dixon - The Retreat – psychology & wellbeing
- Nic Burton – Quakers in business and contemporary ethical issues
- Bill and Sarah Shiels – The Past and Present of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation
- Edmund Sonuga-Barke – Protecting Children’s Neurological Development
- Bridget Holdom – Quaker Peace and Social Witness

Towards the end of the course they will embark upon an independent project in one of these fields of study. The programme melds careers, study skills, citizenship and independent learning into a coherent programme. Student feedback so far has been overwhelmingly positive.

### *Volunteering – College (Year 12)*

In College, our first-year A-level students now each have one afternoon per week clear for Voluntary work. Kayleigh Oliver, our head of volunteering, has recruited a number of partner organisations, including many primary schools, who will accept our students on a placement. A long-term commitment to working in another institution beyond the safety net of Bootham will foster independence for our students and be more meaningful than many work experience placements. As well as being of benefits to the primary school children and charities that they work with, the placements will also help with our own students’ wellbeing.

### *Saturday school*

For the whole senior school, we have reviewed our Saturday programme. The disruption that came from regularly missing Saturday school – for leave weekends and as we moved into the holidays – was untenable. We have come at the problem a different way and we now have Saturday lessons every other week – which fits neatly with our fortnightly timetable. This gives a bit more family time for students and staff. Patterns of six-day weeks are broken up, reducing tiredness. School remains busy on many of these non-teaching Saturdays: on the first of these we had 4 netball fixtures against The Mount and 4 football fixtures against QE. At the same time, College Two were away on their Leadership weekend.

Boarders are benefiting as well, with a number of weekend overnight trips planned to some of the UK’s great cities, all of which host one or more of the country’s finest universities.

## Parents and Community

Saturdays are also our day for parental engagement. Activities include a running club, a book club, the parents choir and Reflect30 – a half hour meeting for worship for which there is an open invitation to all Friends. We also offer a series of talks for parents – usually on academic or pastoral issues by our own team, but occasionally see external speakers – most recently Rachael Maskell. Parents are then invited to join us for family lunch in the dining hall. In every school the triangulation between staff, parents and students helps produce the best outcomes in terms of wellbeing and academic success. By ensuring barriers are down to parents we make that much easier to accomplish.

You will know that over 90% of our families have no affiliation to Quakerism. We have worked hard to involve parents from other faith backgrounds – most notably by hosting an iftar during Ramadan for our Muslim families. Parents were delighted that we had thought to involve them in school life this way and we plan for this to become an annual event.

Our social action programme continues to thrive, with a number of charities supported.

## Strategic Plan

Governors asked me to develop a strategic plan for the next five years. I am pleased to say they approved the draft shared with them in June, which has three core strands:

- improving teacher efficacy (both individually and collectively);
- confidence and creativity – incorporating aspects of academic confidence; wellbeing; physical and sporting confidence and the championing of the creative arts.
- community and sustainability – key Quaker testimonies which we want our students to have close to their hearts while they are with us and after they leave.

This year will be spent developing the plan, identifying some key performance indicators (KPIs) and embedding several new initiatives this year.

## Friends School Council (FSC)

Finally, a brief report on the Friends School Council. Remarkably, from next September I will be the longest-serving head among the English independent Quaker schools, such has been the (entirely coincidental) turnover among the various Friends' schools.

At the executive committee meeting on 25<sup>th</sup> September we returned once again to the issue of the dispersal of funds from the now sadly closed Saffron Walden school. As heads we are keen to see these support bursaries across our schools, with a particular emphasis on Quaker families and children who would benefit most from a transformational bursary (often those in the care system).

### And finally

Bootham has received national recognition this month in the Award of the Independent School of the Year for Environmental Achievement. Claire Hollis, who runs our Social Action programme was able to accept the award on the school's behalf in London on 8th October. The award recognises the work done over many years by BEAST (Bootham Environment And Sustainability Team) with notable projects this year around fast fashion, climate justice and an investigation into what actually happens to our recycling. We are delighted that Bootham's team are being patterns and examples in this field.

### Conclusion

Bootham is in good health, despite the political and financial challenges we face. The best thing we can do in response is to continue to offer a first-class education to children across all aspects of what we do, and to ensure that the local community - and those further afield - become aware of us when they consider their choices of school.

Word of mouth is our greatest marketing tool – I ask for your support in spreading the word about our Quaker schools – for families of all faiths – and commending us and all we do to friends, family and acquaintances.

DAS 13.10.24