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BEING OR BECOMING AN ACADEMY: A PANEL DISCUSSION

Panel:

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Considering joining an Academy

Governors should research any MAT or Academy Chain they are thinking of joining. Due diligence is a two-way responsibility. There is ample material available online **(TB)**.

Each MAT is different and differently structured. Governors should consider the governance model they feel would be the best fit, moving forward. The MAT Scheme of Delegation is instructive in this respect **(NS)**.

The converting governing body should agree upon the model for future governance and be firm about that decision otherwise it may be difficult to make adjustment. Recently experienced this in a long discussion with a school considering conversion. The maturity of a MAT can be an important consideration because promises made may not be deliverable as the Trust itself is changing, as it learns from experience. Proposed converters must be conscious of this as a risk factor and determine whether this is something they can live with **(MS)**.

Potential converters should check all information sources such as school and Trust websites, Companies House, relationships with other organisations (other Trusts or local authorities etc.) and DfE. **(NS)**

What if relationships do not work?

This is why due diligence is so important. There are few practical options. Application to dissolve arrangements can be submitted to the Secretary of State, but this would require exceptional circumstances and will not be considered for at least 7 years. Even if the application is agreed then the likely solution would be re-brokerage from amongst a list of preferred group of alternate providers. This may change as the current White Paper has new provisions about MAT transfers. Re-brokerage can also occur if the MAT is underperforming. **(TB)**

There is power to dissolve a MAT trust and re-broker member schools. This is an exceptional set of circumstances and is likely to be used very rarely used. Essentially, the arrangements are final except in limited circumstances. **(PB)**

Why would a Good maintained school consider conversion?

Academisation is not just about struggling schools. A good school could join a MAT and bring its collected knowledge and skill base to improve others. There is also a strategic question, namely whether the Local Authority has sufficient resources to provide effective support for maintained schools, long-term **(NS)**.

Schools need support in their work and joining a MAT is one way to guarantee this. It broadens the support package available. The Trust's central administrative team, if strong enough, can take the weight of day to operations leaving leaders and teachers free to concentrate on educational matters and continue to improve educational outcomes for children **(TB)**.

Whether intentional or not, individual maintained schools have often in the past found themselves in active competition , seeking to improve their own reputation, possibly to secure favourable treatment from LA or to maximise admission numbers. In practice, Academies have not gone down this route. There is solid evidence that MAT's network and co-operate. For example, they often act jointly in providing to the LA **(AB)**

A Trust, with multiple schools are often in a better position to retain good staff and to provide career development and promotion opportunities **(NS)**

Future Developments – The Education White Paper

Do not know what will emerge from such policy statements. It is still a discussion paper in effect. It is unwise to allow such matters to unduly influence current planning. **(AB)**

Academies in practice, work closely together and there is a great deal of information sharing on good practice. What compete this to continue. Equally, they are open to

sharing information and good practice with maintained schools and the local authority. There is much to be said for 'try before you buy'. **(TB)**

Very often statements of intention in White Papers are nebulous and never develop. Much of the current White Paper has yet to be discussed or enter public debate. Currently, only Grammar Schools are being discussed in any detail and that debate is limited. There are more pressing issues than structures. For example SEND provision is and remains a real issue and there are proposals in circulation about this. This is a more pressing matter as it is about delivering real results for children. **(NS)**

What is the role of local governance in an Academy?

Primary oversight lies with the Trustees of the Academy, but local governance in schools remains important. It varies between organisations and depends on what powers are delegated **(NS)**.

Governance is different between academies and maintained schools. What remains common between the two models are the key duties of school standards and continuous improvement. In an academy local governors can do this without routine operational matters getting in the way. **(PB)**

The connections between Trust and local boards can be quite loose (e.g. finance). In other models, the local board can act much as it always has. The Scheme of Delegation governs this relationship. **(MS)**

The relationship between Trust Boards and local boards can be problematic. There are examples of local boards being removed and/or required to resign for challenging the actions of the Trust Board. It is important as local governors in maintained schools that you develop a clear view of what they expect moving forward and whether the model used in any particular Trust is suitable **(PB)**.

Autonomy is a two-edged sword. What if any benefit is there to the standard of governance and governors, if practice remains as it did before? Does the Board have the capacity to manage all challenges, moving forward? **(AB)**

There is the important issue of strategic planning to consider. This involves consideration of common aims and standards and ensuring that no-one is left behind. Secondary schools are very often cash rich because of their size whereas Primaries can struggle. The presence of Secondary schools in a Trust can support smaller schools in direct ways. The surpluses can be shared. **(AB)**

Scale is important. Common procedures and practices can bring real economies of scale. This is an important safeguard. It allows a Trust to better absorb the pressures caused by falling numbers and other external pressures (e.g. external budgetary constraints). This is in addition to supporting expenditure plans. **(NS)**.

Assets are protected by Trust documentation and also legislation. There are real practical protections against asset stripping, for example (e.g. school playing fields). There are a variety of powers vested in the Secretary of State to protect schools. **(TB)**

Standards and future School Improvement

OFSTED is currently trialling MAT inspections similar to those carried out within local authorities. It is expected that these will come online within the foreseeable future. **(NS)**.

The NGA also support governance within Trusts by voluntary inspections and internal reporting. It might be an interesting line of enquiry to ask whether a particular Trust has ever submitted itself to such a process. **(BGA input)**

Decisions about future provision and the structure of the school are matters for the local governing body. Advice and support is available from the local authority for those considering conversion **(PB)**.

Those thinking of conversion would do well to visit the Trusts in question rather than just talking to groups or individual Trustees. Most effective Trusts would be welcoming. **(Panel)**

The Trust can be a vital source of support during OFSTED inspections. There are only narrow windows within which to prepare for the full inspection. Staff from other schools and other leaders can provide a wealth of support within that narrow window. **(NS) (TB)**

This is not the only example. Due to the economies of scale identified earlier Trusts can prove to be very resilient structures in coping with external shocks. Covid 19 is a good example. Trusts locally took a lead role in developing risk assessments and sharing good practice in managing school attendance and providing continuing access to learning during the pandemic period. They actively supported single schools who did not have the same access to resources. **(TB)(AB)**