

St Bartholomew's School
Outcomes from MAT Consultation
Feedback Received from Consultees and Commentary from the
Governors' Working Group

The appendix is structured by category of respondent: Parents, and Staff.

The first part of each section includes in full all the written responses (individual responses are anonymised, then a short summary of the drop-in sessions. The final part is a commentary from the Governor's MAT Working Group on the key issues raised by that group of respondents.

All the feedback was considered by the Full Governing Body at its meeting on the 14th December, which agreed to proceed to make an application to the Department for Education to become a Multi-Academy Trust.

St Bartholomew's School

December 2017

Feedback from Parents

1. Letter from PA

Thank you for the invitation to put forward the PA's views on the MAT proposal at this consultation phase. The early presentation by Tricia was appreciated as was the chance to ask questions directly to Tricia and Campbell as Governors.

We asked dozens of questions to pin down the benefits.

We extracted that the MAT was there to protect the future of the school, to share resources and spread good ideas. The detail of the benefits to our school, our staff and our children and the school's finances were harder to pinpoint, in fact we finished without having this understanding.

The answers to exactly what the shared resources would be were vague. Are we sharing photocopiers, facilities staff, teachers? The potential for a more fluid transfer of staff between schools was raised; rather unsettling. The idea that shared educational support resources, eg therapists, might be more readily available was welcomed.

The 13 PA Committee members present could nearly visualise the need in the future to protect the intake of Year 7s and 6th Form students, both key points of entry to the school, but with St Barts being so currently successful without a MAT status the potential for the school to tip into decline was hard for us to imagine.

The financial benefits and risks were not presented and poorly understood. 5% of budget, perhaps, transferred to another layer of governance to buy?

The potential for MAT partner primary and secondary schools to have a smoother path for entry into St Barts (at Y7 and 6th form) was clear but if and how the MAT might include non catchment MAT primary partners needed fuller explanation.

The inevitability of the MAT, the government push and the 'being left behind' message were loud and clear. The comment was made that one could imagine that in 20 years time the 'MAT' would be reversed by a new government having become an unwieldy, budget lead NHS style school conglomerate, heavy on admin and burdened by buying in more expensive resources (who other than large corporations can do a 6000 payroll). The concern was that the MAT could drift away from children lead, education lead, local, grounded governance.

The continuity and strength of the Leadership Team was presented and fully appreciated as one of our School's best resources and it may be that St Bart's solid core is the single factor that allows us trust what we don't yet fully understand.

Debbie Carter

Chair of the PA on behalf of the Committee

2. Parent email 1

Thank you for notification of your intention to move to a multi-academy trust.

I can see that there could be some advantages, but I am concerned this could water down the school's independence and potentially its reputation. There would need to be assurances that it is not making any compromises on this, and on its ability to maintain its own broad curriculum. The last change did lead to some compromises and obligations on choice of subjects, so we must be careful.

3. Parent email 2

I would like to ask a question relating to St Barts Year 7 admissions policy under the proposed MAT

My family currently sit in the catchment area for St Barts and our son will be hoping to attend St Barts in Sept 2019.

Under the proposed MAT is there any possibility that the current admissions policy and catchment areas will change before the applications and confirmation of places for the Sept 2019 intake? I would be concerned if priority was to be given to pupils attending other schools within the MAT when formed.

4. Parent email 3

To whom it may concern

In principle I am very supportive of the school forming a MAT, if organised and implemented correctly there should be significant educational benefits to be obtained and opportunities for rationalisation and sharing of costs of central functions allowing in theory for more money to flow into front line education assuming that central government does not seek to claw back these savings (the record to date on such matters would suggest that whatever the political complexion governments will find it impossible to keep their hands off any such realised savings - normally by simply reducing the grant they provide).

However I have very real reservations regarding Central Government prescription of how schools must organise themselves, that goes back on the freedoms they promised schools when they became academies. It is inevitable that government would want to see some form of consolidation just to make education manageable from their perspective, but by pushing a one size fits all model on schools they will create a very real shortage of people with the requisite skills to manage these enterprises and whenever there is a shortage prices go up that could result in any notional savings disappearing in a rising wage bill for the centralised services. I can see no easy way that a MAT can avoid this moving forward, and without the requisite skills the risk of more MAT failures will rise and with it questions as to whether this is the best way to manage education. St Bart's historically has been very successful at negotiating its way through the hazards of government reorganisations and endless initiatives but in this instance I have real concerns that the school will find itself going up a cul de sac for which there will be no turning back.

However it is the Governance implications of becoming a MAT that cause me most concern and I am very disappointed that this was not spelt out in the MAT papers. The Chair of Governors in his covering letter states: "I want to assure you that the Governing Body will put in place the right governance structure and systems to support and improve every school in the MAT" but nowhere is it stated what this means in practice. I suspect that were parents made aware that converting to a MAT will result in less parent representation on the governing bodies that they would take a greater interest in the consultation process. Historically parents have proven to be far better at ensuring there is diversity both in backgrounds and ethnicity of governors on the governing body, whilst governors left to their own devices have ensured that the governing body is exclusively white and middle class. This does not make for a healthy environment for good decision making and the St Barts governing body I think is weaker as a result. The fact that each school will only have 2 elected parent governors under the proposed governance arrangements should have been spelt out and consulted on.

I also have some issues with the Q&A section of the consultation:

Will there be any changes to the Land and Buildings used by St Bart's?

No, the ownership and use of the Land and Buildings will remain unaltered by this change.

While this is strictly correct as long as St Barts is a single academy MAT, it is not the case as soon as another academy joins the MAT when Browns Meadow becomes a pooled resource. More should have been stated on the assets protected through the Foundation Trust and those assets that lie outside the foundation and as such which could be threatened in the future. Governors should be upfront about this and whether they are relaxed about this risk or taking measures to avert it.

Will the structure of the Governing Body change?

Currently St Bart's operates with a single body covering both the responsibilities of operating as an Academy Trust and as a School Governing Body. In the light of experience and new guidance from the DfE, the Governors have already agreed that they need to separate the accountability for these into two distinct bodies.

I am not clear as to what is the "experience" being referred to in this answer and perhaps this should have been explained more fully. Again there should have been greater clarity on the governance changes that will be entailed, that Governing Bodies will see their wings clipped by greater scrutiny from the Trust and Members and the fact that both these boards are by appointment only with no elected posts. It should also have been clarified that the School Governing Body will be halved in size with only 2 elected parent governors and so by the very nature of this reduction will not be able to carry the same workload as the current governing body and as such more of the governance functions will be pushed upwards to the unelected representatives.

I am very disappointed that there is no discussion of the role of the Members Trust, how it is initially appointed and how it appoints moving forward and the critical role it plays in the composition of the Trust governors.

Could you clarify the position of the church schools will they be part of the MAT?

If and when a Church School wishes to join the MAT, there will be discussions with their Diocese about what governance arrangements would be needed for that school to be part of the MAT. However, at this stage there are no proposals for any specific church involvement in the governance of the MAT.

What is unclear is that once this consultation is completed and assuming the school decides to proceed with its plans to become a MAT, that that is it. Parents and the wider community have no further say in the future of the school and the way that it evolves within the MAT. As such should a Church school become part of the MAT and as part of that deal the Diocese gets to appoint 25% of Members (or whatever the figure is agreed upon) then whilst the Church School population will be consulted on whether they are happy with this arrangement, parents of St Barts will have no say. Given this is such a fundamental change to the nature of St Bart's being a secular school welcoming all faiths this change in the governance arrangements without consultation seems perverse.

Could there be a point when the Trust might come in and make redundancies, as has happened in other MATs?

The Trust and its schools will not be able to avoid difficult decisions. However, if redundancies were proposed by one school, by being part of a MAT there could be opportunities to redeploy staff to vacancies in other schools.

I find this answer very glib. It is highly likely that as the MAT grows there will be redundancies in central functions otherwise it is failing to get the economies of scale it promises are achievable within a MAT. Given the current economic environment, which is not going to change within the lifetime of this MAT growing to its optimum size, it is very hard to envisage how this can happen without redundancies unless you are hoping that in the schools that join economies can be achieved through natural wastage.

In conclusion while I support the principle of a MAT I have huge reservations about the changes to the governance structures that will go alongside it and the one size fits all prescriptive arrangements set out by central government and I think the Governors of St Bart's need to be aware that agreement to go ahead with becoming a MAT does not give them carte blanche to change the governance of the school on which there has been no consultation but on which, once decided on what is the best model, there should be.

Parent Email 4 (received after the deadline and not included in statistics)

When the proposal to form the MAT arrived I did some preliminary research and resolved to submit a comprehensive comment. However time has run out and still no time available to do justice to the question. I therefore offer my apologies for that.

After the event therefore all I can offer is a word of caution perhaps unnecessary in the case of St Bart's. The academy regime is unstable due to the highly politicised nature of education in the UK. If you decide to proceed with setting up a MAT therefore please make it as simple as possible to cancel it with minimum collateral damage. The responsibility of governors is primarily to education at St Bart's.

Parent Drop-in Session

The drop-in session was attended by three parents, one of whom subsequently responded in writing (above).

In addition, the session was attended by a Governor from a local primary school who wished to understand more about the proposal and the extent of engagement to date with local primary schools.

The parental questions were along a similar line to the written feedback presented above. In particular, the attendees were open-minded about the principles of creating a MAT. The discussion focussed on their desire for a fuller understanding of the implications for current students and what were seen as the benefits to the school. The issues included matters such as the scope for sharing resources, the impact on the day to day operation of St. Bart's, the potential for changes to admissions arrangements and the extent of interests from other local schools.

Response from the Governor's Working Group

The responses are all seeking reassurance that key issues have been fully considered and evaluated by the School and the Governing Body in making this proposal, and that they are clear on the benefits to St Bart's of the proposals.

All of the issues raised have been considered in depth by the Governor's Working Group and included in the information presented to previous meetings of the Governing Body. We accept that in the earlier papers, in our attempt to be even-handed, the benefits of the proposals to St Bart's have not been consolidated and highlighted as much as they could have been.

The Benefits to St Bart's and its students

St Bart's is a strong and successful school with an excellent track record in student achievement and attainment; based on a broad curriculum with extensive opportunities for wider learning.

The School's history and ethos demonstrate that the school has always been willing to grasp new opportunities to improve the experience of its students and to play its full role as a leader in education provision locally. We view the proposal to convert to a MAT as consistent with that vision and history.

Our view is that taking this step now will enable us to maximise the opportunities and benefits for our current students as well as beginning to secure longer term gains for our future students. Central to our belief is that a partnership with other local schools will enable students to achieve more, based on a more seamless experience throughout their school career.

In terms of current students' day-to-day experience, we do not expect them to notice any change in the short term. However, as the MAT develops with local Primary Schools and, responding to feedback from students, their parents and staff, we expect to the MAT to enable students to benefit from:

- A more joined-up curriculum between phases, so work topics are not repeated unless necessary which should facilitate time to generate greater progress.
- Higher expectations in many subjects at KS3 through closer working with primary colleagues and an enhanced understanding of what students do at KS3.
- More consistency in use of language and assessment across phases which will provide better guidance for students and progression.
- Greater sharing of good practice which will improve delivery in classrooms across phases.

The creation of the MAT will not lead to changes in the School name, organisation of the school day, curriculum or pastoral support. Equally, whilst the MAT will open up new opportunities for the professional development of staff, we will ensure that this does not harm the educational opportunities for their students in this school.

Like all schools, St Bart's school budget is increasingly tight. Formal collaboration with other schools in a MAT will help us to make better use of our resources. National studies indicate that schools within a MAT are able to focus a larger proportion of their budget on teaching and learning. We expect that to be the case in our school. This will help us to sustain the breadth of curriculum choice that we know parents and students value at St Bart's.

We see the creation of our MAT as an opportunity to provide a better and more coherent offer of student and family support where this is needed to promote wellbeing. We are also committed to using this change to enable improved access to specialist support services, e.g. Family support, Education Psychology, etc. We expect this to enable more consistent support, for example across different schools, to be provided to remove barriers that we know can affect students' ability to learn.

Although we are focussed on the benefits to the School and its students from taking this step; the Governors have also fully considered remaining as a Single Academy. As well as the missed opportunities to benefit current students, Governors recognised that, in the current education landscape, remaining as a stand-alone Academy increased the risks of having change imposed on the school. It could also place restrictions on our ability to shape the future, building explicitly on the strengths and good practice of this School.

Specific Matters

Admissions

The Q&A available on the website confirmed that no changes could be made to the Admissions Arrangements without a further consultation. There is a long lead time for changes to Admissions Policy. In order to be compliant with the School Admissions Code, the earliest any changes to St Bart's admissions policy could take effect is for admissions to school in September 2020.

Church Schools

The Trust is committed to maintaining the existing ethos and characteristics of each of its Schools. This means that St Bart's will remain a community school, irrespective of whether at some point in the future the MAT includes any of our local (feeder) primary schools which have a religious designation.

This commitment to the individual school's designation will be protected by the Governance arrangements for the MAT and formally recorded in the governing documents. Further protection is provided by the requirement that any significant change of characteristics proposed in the future requires specific local consultation and can only be made with the agreement of the Department for Education.

As now the objectives and principles of the Trust will be set out in its Articles of Association, which under Company Law require the agreement of over 75% of the Trust's Members to change.

Focus of the Academy Trust

We agree completely with the comment from the Parents Association that the Trust needs to remain “children lead, education lead, local”. The arrangements being put in place for the Governance of the Trust are designed to further develop the capacity of the Trustees to ensure that these principles are central to the way it operates.

The Trust's approach will be to wherever possible enable decision-making at a school level, particularly around curriculum delivery and securing the school's place in its local community. This will ensure the unique history and ethos of each individual school continues to be relevant, influential and meaningful to students, staff and the wider community.

Governance

The Governing Body has previously decided to amend its Governance structure to reflect current Government guidance, and has followed the necessary legal requirements in making that decision. The change in structure is necessary irrespective of any decision about whether to become a MAT. These changes will provide greater clarity of responsibilities within the Trust and will introduce proper checks and balances between different parts of the Governance structure as required for Academies and more broadly across the Charity Sector.

The FAQs provided as part of the MAT Consultation state:

At least two members of each school governing body will be parents elected by their peers.

The requirement for a minimum of two elected parent governors, forms part of the national guidance, and will see them serve as part of a School Governing Body with a maximum of eleven members. In addition, it is likely that other existing St. Bart's parents will be appointed to both the School Governing Body and the Trust Board (appointed on a skills-led basis), so the views of parents will be well represented throughout the governance of the Academy Trust.

Land and Buildings

As is the case now, the majority of the land and buildings used by St. Bart's are owned the St Bart's Foundation. The exception is Brown's Meadow which is owned by the Academy Trust. The ownership will remain unaltered by this change along with their designation as the sites used by St Bart's, for the school building and the required amount of playing fields.

Staff Redundancies

The development of a MAT will not change the requirement for a School or Academy to operate within its budget allocation from Government. For many schools this already means taking difficult decisions about staffing both in terms of numbers and roles; and this will continue in a MAT. Compared to a single school in the event of a reorganisation, a MAT can provide more opportunities for staff to be redeployed particularly if its schools are located in a close geographical area as is our ambition for this MAT.

The Trust will continue to operate the same consultative arrangements with staff and unions used by St Bart's and will remain committed to ensuring that wherever possible staffing reductions are achieved through voluntary agreements

Shared Resources

There are a number of ways in which the creation of a MAT will enable the sharing of resources to the benefit of St Bart's and its students.

As highlighted above, some of these focus on the educational benefits arising from having a more coherent approach to the curriculum and to broader student and family support across the different schools. For example, in the language and practice of teaching and assessment, and in the sharing of a pool of specialist support services, such as family support workers, educational psychologists and welfare officers.

National studies have indicated that schools within a MAT are able to devote a greater proportion of their budget to teaching and learning. There are a number of ways in which this is achieved. These include the ability to make better use of the resources that each school including, for example specialist teaching where individual schools are unable on their own to sustain that expertise, in the light of continuing financial pressures. The MAT will also enable resources such as minibuses, or specialised maintenance equipment to be used more effectively by sharing them across its schools reducing the costs to individual schools, and to enable all to benefit from better procurement opportunities by working together. Finally, and particularly for schools like St Bart's which is already an Academy, a MAT enables the core costs of operating as an Academy Trust (e.g. Audit, Governance, Legal, Employment and Health & Safety) to be shared across all the member schools

Top Slice of School Budgets

All MAT's operate some form of top-slice of budgets to pay for shared services and the costs of operating as an Academy Trust. The top slice is less than Schools typically pay for local authority services, and the costs incurred by a Single Academy Trust, like St Bart's.

The plan for our Trust is to use a top slice of 5% of a School's budget to fund in broad terms:

- Services to meet the Trust's legal obligations (Finance, Governance etc.)
- Back office services (Finance, HR, Premises, IT, etc.)
- School Improvement Services
- Children & Family Support Services

Other Schools

Representatives from fourteen local primary schools attended an open evening at St Bart's in May about the plans to develop a MAT. Individual discussions have been held with four of those schools.

Feedback from Staff

Staff email 1

I was pleased to attend the staff MAT consultation on the evening of Tuesday 7 November, and I am grateful for your direct answers to my questions. One of your answers has given me concern and I have spoken about this with colleagues, including the ones copied to this written submission; I am aware that it was further discussed at a recent JCC meeting.

My concern relates to the future functioning of the Joint Consultative Committee (JCC) in the Multi-Academy Trust. The answer, as I understood it, was that a JCC would continue to exist, but only at a MAT level where union representatives would be present to meet with senior members of the MAT and there would be no requirement for a JCC at individual school level. Follow up discussion stated that schools could choose to have local arrangements that created something similar to a JCC. In discussion it was very clear that Governors consider the JCC to be an example of excellent practice and wish to retain it within the MAT.

I write to urge that our school retain a school level JCC; I feel that there is one main benefit that members of staff see of JCC – that their representatives in the Staff Forum Chair and Union Representatives have direct, unfiltered access to the Governors of our own school; you are, after all, ultimately our employers. Just from the general tenor of discussion at JCC, I suspect the Governors present get a feel for the mood of the staff and specific areas of concern. I know following my own discussions with those that attend JCC that Governors have acknowledged where staff are coming from and are open to a dialogue about it. This is reassuring to members of staff as we are confident that Governors will have both robust and honest, but also confidential discussions with school leadership about these concerns, doing your best to achieve the best possible outcome.

If the change to a MAT goes ahead, I would ask that St Bartholomew's retain its JCC attended by the chair of the Local Governing Body, the Headteacher of St Bart's, the Union representatives at St Bart's, the Chair of Staff Forum and such other persons as it is advantageous to have present to promote dialogue between us, the staff, and you, the Governors and our employers.

Staff Drop-in Session

The questions raised on behalf of staff during the drop-in meeting were as follows:

In a MAT, would staff be required to work at different sites?

Is there space for staff governors in the new governance structure?

Would there be any parents or staff on the Trust Board?

Staff currently value the JCC. Would this move to sit at MAT level?

When a MAT is set up, are the school's reserves taken over by the Trust?

Does the funding system become a block grant to the MAT instead of to individual schools?

Would we take on schools in special measures?

In addition to discussing the specific questions raised above, Governors asked about staff's general views on St. Bart's forming MAT. The response indicated that staff were realistic that a MAT would be the next step in the St. Bart's journey. Staff were reported to see greater benefits in a MAT made up of St Bart's with local Primary Schools than a collaboration with another Secondary School.

The JCC staff/union representatives have also confirmed their general support for the MAT, with no concerns having been raised with them, but they questioned the position of the JCC within the new Governance structure, as raised at the staff MAT consultation drop-in session.

Response from the Governors' Working Group

The questions raised by staff fall into four categories

a) Working across School sites

There are no plans to direct staff to work at other than their normal school.

However, it may be offered as a professional development opportunity, for example if the Trust took on a struggling school then there would be duty to improve that school, and staff could be given the opportunity for a secondment for a period of time as part of the improvement plan. There may also be opportunities for staff to work in more than one school, for example as part of an agreed career development plan, or to provide curriculum expertise and continuity across the Trust. These arrangements would always be subject to proper negotiations with Staff and Unions and would be voluntary for individual members of staff.

b) Governance

National guidance does not require an Academy Trust to have any staff governors. However, the Trust sees benefits in two staff governors (i.e. same proportion as we have now), being elected to the School Governing Body.

In line with good practice guidance the Trust Board will be appointed on a skills basis. There will be no automatic representation of staff or parents on the Trust Board, but both will have elected representation on the School Governing Body. The Trust in ensuring that it represents a breadth of skills and experience will include current or recent parental involvement in its schools as one of the factors to be considered.

As the employer, the Trust will retain a Joint Consultative Committee as part of its governance arrangements. This will ensure that we continue to have effective engagement with staff and Trade Unions. Because the Trust is the employer, the formal JCC for consultation on Pay Policy, Terms and Conditions and other employment matters has to be part of the Trust's arrangements. However, we also recognise the value that an open forum for dialogue has at a school level. Therefore, the Governance arrangements will also require individual schools within the Trust to also have appropriate means for engagement with their local staff, which at St Bart's would be a continuation of the format of the current JCC arrangements.

c) Finance

Each School within the MAT will continue to receive a specific budget allocation from the Government. This will be subject to a top-slice (proposed to be 5%) to pay for pooled central services provided to all schools by the Trust.

Each school will retain its own reserves or deficit. In the latter case, the school will be required to agree and deliver a deficit recovery plan with support from the Trust.

d) Supporting Schools in difficulties

The Trust may be asked by the DfE to sponsor a school in difficulties.

In that instance the Trust would consider the circumstances of the particular school, and would undertake a robust due diligence process before deciding whether to support the particular school.

The Trust would undertake due diligence on any school wanting to join the MAT.