



HOUSE OF COMMONS  
LONDON SW1A 0AA

2 November 2018

Dear parents and carers,

As I have been asked to give my views in response to the decision taken by the Governing Body and Senior Leadership Team at Sherington Primary School to give serious consideration to joining a multi-academy trust (MAT), I thought it would be helpful to write to you all.

I have already publicly stated that I am both puzzled and concerned by the decision to review Sherington's current structure. Sherington is an outstanding primary school which rightly takes pride in a broad curriculum that fosters academic excellence, creativity and confidence. I know of no pressing challenges that require the school to consider altering its existing structure, let alone a compelling case for rushing toward a decision in principle to convert to an academy and join a MAT in the near future.

There is no denying that state schools maintained by local authorities across England are under considerable pressure to join MATs. I know of a number of local schools that have done so, and some are thriving as part of local MATs, but one does not have to look far to find schools that have suffered badly at the hands of others.

The important thing to bear in mind is that the implications of joining a MAT are wide-ranging and that the decision is irreversible. Once a school has converted to an academy, there is no going back. That is why the decision to join a MAT is not one that should be taken lightly and why I believe it's important that parents and carers should properly examine the reasons given by the Governing Body and Senior Leadership Team as to why they are even considering a change in structure.

Supporters of the academy route argue that MATs are better placed than local authorities to help schools raise standards and that membership of one confers a range of additional benefits including extra support, economies of scale and efficiencies, and greater opportunities for teachers and other members of staff.

As I did when addressing those parents and carers who were able to attend the public meeting that took place on Wednesday 10 October at Charlton House, let me take each of those claims in turn:

#### **Performance**

Evidence of the ability of MATs to improve pupils' grades is limited and varied. While some are producing excellent results and have raised pupil performance, we also know that a considerable number are failing

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to improve year on year and consistently appear at the bottom of league tables. Put simply, there are lots of mediocre trusts out there and lots who are far more focused on expanding rapidly than improving quality. There is also the additional risk of the reputational damage that can be inflicted on high-performing schools within a MAT if other member schools struggle to maintain performance. Given that Sherington is already an outstanding school, I fail to see what it stands to gain in terms of significant improvements in performance from joining a MAT.

### **Funding**

With spending on pupils having been cut by 8% in real terms over the past eight years, the funding challenge facing all of our local schools is real. A considerable amount of work on the part of the Governing Body and Senior Leadership team has ensured that Sherington will remain in balance for the next three years, but unless we have a Government that ensures our schools are properly resourced the funding challenge the school faces in the years ahead will inevitably become acute. MATs, especially those that are larger, can make savings in areas such as payroll, catering, and grounds maintenance but I would caution against viewing the potential savings that might be made as a panacea for the wider funding pressures faced by schools across England. Moreover, with most MATs requiring member schools to top-slice a percentage of their annual budget to fund central services such as finance and HR (then varying the budget they devolve to each school within the trust), the school could find that it has far less control over its finances as part of a MAT than it does as a maintained school.

### **Governance and accountability**

Once a school converts and joins a MAT, it ceases to exist as a legal entity. It is no longer run by a local Governing Body and the Senior Leadership Team but by the Trust's board and all decision-making authority henceforth resides in the exclusive relationship between the Board in question and the Department for Education (DfE). Those on the outside, including parents and carers, have little say. Indeed, that authority can extend to scrapping governing bodies entirely as the E-ACT academy chain chose to do in its schools in 2016. That is why, in their February 2017 report into MATs, the Education Select Committee concluded that a significant number of parents across England believed that MATs were not sufficiently accountable to their local community and felt disconnected from decision-making at trustee board level.

### **Collaboration and support**

Proponents of MATs often argue that the model effectively fosters collaboration, provides member schools with support from partner schools, and teachers and other members of staff working in schools within a MAT with greater opportunities. It is undoubtedly the case that good MATs do just that. However, effective collaboration and support is not the sole preserve of MATs. State schools maintained by local authorities can enter into a variety of arrangements, from soft federations to hard governance federations, that have similar features to MAT models of school organisation without the need to convert to an academy.

### **Conclusion**

As your local Labour Member of Parliament, you will not be surprised to know that I have serious and longstanding concerns about the present government's education policies and the long-term implications of the fragmented, complex and opaque education system that successive governments have striven to create over the last eight years.



However, I have chosen not to explore those more general concerns above. Instead, I've attempted to bring home to you, as parent and carers, irrespective of your view about the principle of the MAT system, the risks associated with the decision to convert to academy status and join a MAT.

At a minimum, those risks should make the Governing Body and Senior Leadership Team think long and hard about whether there is a *compelling* need to consider changes to the school's structure at this point in time and also to consult extensively and meaningfully with parents and carers in the weeks and months ahead, not just about the pros and cons of alternative structures but also whether adopting an alternative structure should even be under consideration.

If any parent or carers has any questions that have not been answered above, please don't hesitate to contact me.

Best wishes,

Matthew Pennycook MP