

Future Directions Working Group:

Decision Note Stage 2

Executive Summary

The Governing Body (GB) and Senior Leadership Team (SLT) are obliged to set a strategic direction that is in the best interest of the school taking into consideration internal factors (school vision, culture, structure, performance and financial management) and external factors (local and national educational and political landscapes, funding). As part of exercising this responsibility, a joint “Future Directions” working group was established by the GB in Dec 17 to investigate alternative models for the way the school could be structured and funded. This working group aimed to take an objective and open-minded perspective, developing and following a clear and transparent decision making process. It was noted that while the school may be able to influence or manage internal factors, there are external factors that are largely outside our control and subject to significant change and uncertainty.

Options were assessed on the basis of their ability to impact three key ongoing challenges the group identified for Sherington:

- Financial sustainability & stability
- Recruitment, retention and development of high quality staff
- Sustainable school model in a changing environment

Each option also had to meet the following minimum requirements in order to be considered further:

- Aligns with Sherington values & culture
- Retains Sherington’s identity
- Based on local relationships
- Has clear net benefits (not net drain) for school resources (financial, premises and staff) and for pupils. Advances the school in some way.

The working group has followed a staged decision process, described in the Introduction below. The Decision Note for Stage 1 describes how a review of a range of options for the future strategic direction and structure of Sherington Primary School concluded that the three key challenges identified for Sherington might be met most effectively by either joining a MAT or remaining as a standalone state-maintained school. The review drew on informal discussions with local MATs and the LA, as well as on the personal experiences of the SLT in academisation, and wider research by the GB and SLT.

Stage 2 involved further desktop research using the criteria developed in Stage 1, to assess four local MATs that met the minimum requirements above. The process so far, including this research, was then shared at an extra-ordinary meeting of the full governing body and SLT on 15th June. Following open and frank discussions a ranking exercise was carried out for the MATs together with the current state maintained standalone structure against criteria agreed by the group. The meeting agreed that the potential opportunities available to Sherington through a relationship with Compass and Leigh Academy Trusts should be investigated further, together with the option to remain as an LA maintained school.

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1 Introduction

Strategic leadership is one of the three core functions of governance, and a key element in the role and responsibilities of the Senior Leadership Team (SLT). The governing body (GB) is obliged to consider what is in the school's best interests for the future. Making a decision on the future direction for Sherington is complex and needs to consider both internal factors (school vision, culture, structure, performance and finance) and external factors (local and national educational and political landscapes). While the school may be able to influence or manage internal factors, the external factors are largely outside our control and subject to significant change and uncertainty.

A joint "Future Directions" working group was established by the GB in Dec 17 to review alternative models for the way the school could be structured and funded; made up of governors (Kate Parker, Jon Bennett, Ross Bailey and Sarah Mirza) and the Senior Leadership Team (Karen Dennett, Amanda Burnell, Gail Tippett and Dan O'Leary).

The working group identified the following as key ongoing challenges for Sherington (the first two are in the top 3 challenges identified by The Key for 2017/18 across all schools in England, whether maintained, multi-academy trust (MAT) or single academies):

- Financial sustainability & stability
- Recruitment, retention and development of high quality staff
- Sustainable school model in a changing environment

This decision framework is intended to provide a clear and transparent process for the SLT & GB to combine and integrate the knowledge and experience we have gathered through a period of exploration that has included background research on teaching schools and MATs, social network analysis of the development of local MATs, and meeting with leaders and participants in three different MATs operating in the local area. The framework will allow us to compare options and plot a pathway towards a decision.

The framework allows the decision to be taken in several stages, with an increasing level of detail at each stage:

Stage 1: Options that will not further Sherington's strategic priorities are eliminated

Stage 2: Remaining options reviewed in more detail

Stage 3: More detailed review of shortlisted proposals and decision on way forward.

An engagement process with the wider community will also be initiated as part of Stage 3. Further due diligence work and financial modelling/scenario planning will be required following Stage 3.

Definitions and further information on MAT structure is provided in Decision Note Stage 1.

This report covers Stage 2 and is based on the MAT assessment criteria identified in Stage 1.

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2 Context

The context for this decision is:

- **Funding:** while the cash amount going to schools in England is rising, the funding per pupil is set to fall by 8% in real terms between 2014 and 2020 as a result of school specific inflation. (<https://fullfact.org/education/spending-schools-2020/>). Sherington's income in 2019/20 is currently forecast to be 6% lower than it was in 2015/16.
- **RBG:** 15 primary schools are academies (plus 1 in process of conversion), 61 are maintained. 10 secondary schools (plus 1 in process of conversion) are academies, 5 are maintained. 2 special schools are academies, 3 are maintained. Most primary school academisation has happened in the last few years, and formation and growth of MATs may continue. This together with the loss of the Education Services Grants, risks an erosion of funding for LA education services; and a change in the role of the LA, although the LA retains overarching responsibility for safeguarding and promoting the welfare of all children and young people in their area.
- **Academisation programme:** while the forced academisation proposed in 2016 has been dropped, there is a drive for schools to be working in partnerships of some form. It is possible that there will be a general drift towards MATs as the default model for education as a response to the continued real term reduction in funding per pupil, although this reduction impacts upon all schools.

From the discussions in the Full Governors Meeting on 15th June, three other important aspects to the context were highlighted:

- **Risk of isolation:** collaboration with other schools is a key part of Sherington's identity and a key strength that the current leadership team have developed over several years that has provided a significant positive impact on teaching & learning. Collaboration with existing groups of schools who are now MATs is likely to become limited/shallower in nature, with less influence, and training opportunities will increasingly reflect the MAT development priorities and way of doing things.
- **Limitation on career development opportunities:** while Sherington has an established career development pathway that provides excellent opportunities for staff, it is limited to the school setting, and constrained by the positions available in this setting. The SLT feel that over time this may impact recruitment and retention of senior staff, they are also concerned being able to continue to access a full range of high quality development opportunities for all staff that meet Sherington's needs.
- **Opportunity:** building a link with a local secondary school has emerged as a significant opportunity for Sherington; for staff in terms of training and development across both settings, and for pupils and carers in terms of providing a clear all-through education pathway, with a much smoother transition for the more vulnerable children. This could apply to both LA maintained and MAT models, in various forms.
- **Timescale:** the opportunities available with each local MAT change over time. In terms of LAT, the opportunity to play an influential role in the development of the primary settings in LAT's new local hub may be time-limited. This is an aspect of background context, and not a driver.

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Finally it is worth noting that MATs have an increasingly negative public perception. Two long-standing concerns, both of which have a growing body of opinion and evidence to support them (for example see

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/jul/30/outsourced-schools-parents-primary-academy-trusts>), are about the effective and appropriate financial management of MATs and the process by which forced academisation takes place in the event of poor school performance. There are local examples of both issues in Corelli College (now Halley Academy) and the John Roan School. The decision process undertaken by the Sherington GB and SLT needs to be as objective as possible, focussing on the specific MATs to be reviewed, while recognising and addressing these legitimate concerns.

3 Decision Process

Table 3.2 outlines the key steps in the decision process to date.

MATs in this section are initially identified only as A to F as discussions with them were informal only and did not progress to a point at which it would be appropriate to share their identities.

3.1 Stage 1: Decision tree & MAT assessment criteria

The framework is structured as a decision tree, see Figure 3.1. Stage 1 of the process reviewed various types of potential changes to school structure or role/relationships and identified that a MAT structure was the only alternative to the current standalone LA maintained structure that was worth further consideration. Criteria that the GB & SLT would need to assess in considering any specific MAT were developed, see Table 3.1. These criteria reflect the insights gained across all conversations with MATs so far, the experiences of members of the SLT in going through federation then academisation, and knowledge gained from background research.

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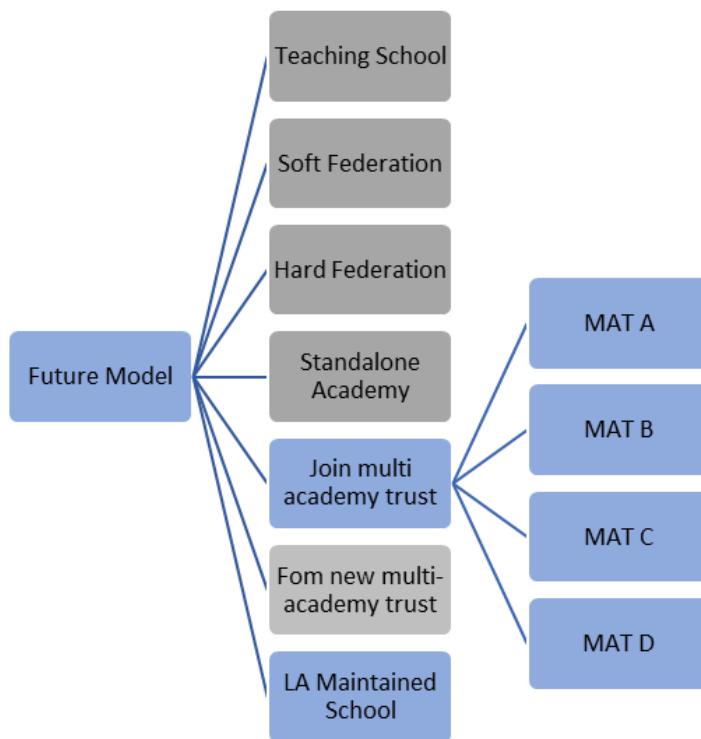


Figure 3.1: Decision Tree

3.2 Stage 2: Research against assessment criteria

Research for Stage 2 of the decision process was structured around these criteria (see Table 3.1) and collated collaboratively using Google Forms. This research was presented and discussed at the Full Governors meeting on 15th June.

Table 3.1: Criteria developed for MAT assessment

JOIN MULTI ACADEMY TRUST: CRITERIA FOR ASSESSING A MAT	
Local Context	15 primary schools in RBG are academies, 63 are maintained. 9 secondary schools in RBG are academies, 6 are maintained. (sponsor versus converter mix not known). Labour party policy is against further academisation and RBG is a Labour-led local authority. The council's view is that if fewer schools remain part of the local authority this weakens the overall local education provision. There have been a growing number of MATs locally in the last couple of years. All are single phase at the moment.
Impact on Challenges	<p>Financial stability</p> <p>MAT would need to be of a suitable size to benefit from economies of scale: at least 6 primaries or >3000 pupils.</p> <p>MAT would ideally need to have positive track record of at least 5 years.</p> <p>We would need confidence in their business plan and growth strategy.</p> <p>Needs to demonstrate strong financial management capability/expertise in staff & trustees.</p>

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JOIN MULTI ACADEMY TRUST: CRITERIA FOR ASSESSING A MAT	
	<p>Need to understand top slice, how it's calculated (e.g. including pupil premium?), and what it covers.</p> <p>Need to review remuneration of executive leadership team - level & trends.</p> <p>Need to understand what freedoms/flexibility individual schools have in budget planning and control. How is contingency managed across schools?</p>
	<p>Recruitment & retention</p> <p>Potential to share staff eg pool of specialist teachers.</p> <p>Joint planning for recruitment & retention - shared ongoing recruitment pool.</p> <p>Career progression prospects.</p> <p>CPD.</p> <p>The impact of MATs on staff recruitment & retention is not clear cut, as there is both internal and external movement. Aspects relating to recruitment and retention need to be understood in the context of specific MATs.</p> <p>Most staff employed by MAT should have base school stipulated in contract – the potential requirement for staff to move around all MAT schools is likely to reduce applicants for roles, unless the role is one that cuts across all schools.</p>
	<p>Sustainable school model in changing environment</p> <p>Yes - in comparison to other models reviewed. In comparison to current LA maintained model - unclear.</p>
Does it meet minimum criteria?	<p>Values</p> <p>Any MAT we look at must have aligned values.</p> <p>We need to see these values in action (school visits: eg teaching & learning, environment) and in the empirical data available for the school.</p> <p>Identity</p> <p>We need to understand the nature of the “delegated independence” that a MAT provides (and any future trajectory for this). Areas to review to include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Curriculum • Budget • Our “non-negotiables” • Leadership structures • Governance – including staff & parent voice <p>We need to understand what it looks & feels like “on the ground” to be a school in the MAT (eg looking at website, schools visits, letters to parents).</p> <p>Need to understand trustee board and how Sherington can have a voice and influence.</p> <p>Local</p> <p>MAT has to have a local presence.</p> <p>We don't want to be on the geographical fringe of MAT.</p>

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JOIN MULTI ACADEMY TRUST: CRITERIA FOR ASSESSING A MAT	
	<p>Net benefit</p> <p>There is no evidence to suggest that MATs bring significant net benefit or detriment, we need to assess the specific MAT. There is an opportunity to benefit from cross-phase relationship, but at the same time some of our best staff may be called on to work across the MAT. Existing leadership and administration functions in the MAT may impact our own staff. We need to understand the profile of MAT schools (in terms of performance) in order to understand how Sherington would fit and what the impact on Sherington would be. Reputation of individual schools is impacted by that of MAT, and vice versa.</p>

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Table 3.2: Decision process

Timing	Activity
Sep 2017	SLT review of MAT landscape and associated relationship networks
Dec 2017	GB agreement to establish working group
Jan to April 18	Various exploratory meetings with 4 MATs and LA, research into other models
29th April 18	Informal working group meeting to review findings and set out framework to assess all potential future models for school
10th May 18	Informal working group meeting. Review of framework. Discussion and agreement not to pursue some options. Parameters established against which to assess the specific MAT options.
21st May 18	Informal working group meeting. Review of process to date, and sense-check on progress so far
June 18	Research into MAT options against the criteria agreed.
5 th July 18	Share process to date with full GB. Present 1st stage decision for GB approval. Next steps agreed with GB.

Note: Document updated 18/11/18 to correct date of extra-ordinary full governors meeting from 15th June to 5th July.

3.3 Stage 2: Full governors' and SLT meeting

Attendance: Jon Bennett, Ross Bailey, Effie Robertson, Rosa Kaban, Sarah Mirza, Karen Dennett, Amanda Burnell, Gail Tippett, Dan O'Leary

Apologies: Kelly Powell

The extra-ordinary full governors' meeting of 5th July covered the following agenda:

- Review of decision process to date. Governing body understood and was in full agreement with the conclusions from Stage 1.
- Review of research undertaken for Stage 2. The following MATs were reviewed:
 - MAT A
 - MAT B
 - MAT C
 - MAT D
- The Future Directions Working Group explained that these MATs were chosen as local (or having local hubs) and were all ones that we had been able to meet with in as part of our research. No MATS had approached us, we made the first approach in all cases. MAT E had been contacted, however it had been difficult to get a response, a meeting was planned for the following week. It was agreed

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that the working group would also investigate the MAT F as another academy operating locally.

- The meeting agreed to rank the four MATs and the current LA maintained structure for Sherington against their ability to positively impact the following three criteria:
 - Financial security and stability (i.e. some evidence of lasting financial benefit, at as low a risk as possible)
 - Staff recruitment & retention, and development opportunities
 - Identity: retaining current identity, or having significant influence in building a new shared identity in a MAT
- The meeting noted that the ranking needed to consider what the “Sherington LA maintained standalone” option would look like in a few years’ time, recognising the trend (and uncertainty) associated with funding, and the requirement to plan for a future beyond the current leadership team. The meeting also noted that MATs may also change leadership and direction over time, in particular it was noted that the personality and leadership of the CEO tends to be a significant factor in the newer MATs, as the original driver behind their creation.
- The meeting also noted that while Sherington is currently an Outstanding school and likely to be a net provider of support to other schools in the MAT, at some point in the future it is possible that Sherington may be a net beneficiary of support from a MAT.
- Rankings were allocated according to how well those present felt each school met the given criteria, based on the initial conversations and follow-up research carried out, with 1 being for the option that met the criteria the least well to 5 being the option that best met the criteria. Rankings were used as a relative judgement to screen options to identify one or more that best fit Sherington’s needs, and were not in any way intended to be and should not be taken as an assessment of the performance or success of each MAT. The meeting discussed each ranking until consensus was reached. Due to work commitments, Jon and Rosa left the meeting before the ranking on “identity” had been completed.
- The issue of Regional Schools Commissioner (RSC) requests to MATs to take on failing schools was discussed. The authority of the RSC was unclear: whether they could oblige MATs to take on particular schools, or just exert strong political influence. This potentially adds an element of uncertainty to a MAT – a stable and secure MAT may unexpectedly end up taking on a significant financial and teaching commitment. We need to understand what voice or influence MAT schools have in the trust board decisions.

The ranking agreed at the meeting identified a shortlist of Compass Trust, the Leigh Academy Trust and the option to remain an LA state-maintained school as the options that might best meet the challenges identified.

The meeting agreed that the potential opportunities available to Sherington through a relationship with Compass and Leigh Academy Trusts should be investigated further, in parallel with those available through remaining an LA maintained school.

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Post meeting notes:

- The DfE guidance on the roles and remit for Regional Schools Commissioners is vague with respect to whether they can compel an academy trust to take on a failing school, the guidance focuses on the remit of the RSC to “broker” an agreement with a sponsor academy. However an interview in the TES from December 2016 (<https://www.tes.com/news/exclusive-national-schools-commissioner-warns-against-selection-within-mats>) together with an article in the Guardian from February 2017 (<https://www.theguardian.com/education/2017/feb/07/failing-schools-academy-sponsor-ofsted>), indicate that an academy trust cannot be forced to take on a school by the RSC.
- Karen Dennett had a conversation with MAT E a few days after the meeting. MAT E is a very large academy chain with 44 schools in and around London. While MAT E was not part of the ranking exercise, it is clear from this conversation and the available information that it would not be ranked above the existing top 3 options. In particular under the MAT E model it would be very unlikely that Sherington would be able to retain its identity.
- MAT F has one all-through school, and is in the process of taking on an additional secondary school. The trust was established in 2016. MAT F does not offer the economies of scale, nor the opportunities for collaboration across a variety of settings. It would not be ranked above the existing top 3 options.

4 Recommendations & next steps

The meeting agreed that the potential opportunities available to Sherington through a relationship with Compass or Leigh Academy Trusts should be investigated further, together with the option to remain an LA maintained school.

The governing body recommends the following next steps:

- Arrange Q&A sessions with the Governing Body and Compass, and LAT and LA for the Autumn term
- Engage the school finance advisor to develop a forecast for the financial impact of joining Compass or LAT, and to model various scenarios/sensitivities
- Develop an engagement plan for the school community, starting in September.

The ambition is to reach a decision on the way forward (subject to final due diligence checks) by the end of the year, dependent on the engagement plan agreed.

Report written by future directions working group, includes outcomes of meeting on 21st May, and the Full Governors Meeting on 15th June. It has been reviewed and approved by Sherington Governing Body