

Great Torrington School and DMAT Parental Consultation Meeting

Monday 10th January 2019 at 4pm in the drama studio

Present: Ian Newberry (Chair of Governors at GTS), Paul Jarrett and Lucy Meardon (Joint Vice Chair of Governors at GTS), Andy Bloodworth (Headteacher), Lesley Wall (GTS Governor), Doug Smith (GTS Governor and Town Councillor), Sam Meeson (GTS Governor), Peter Villiers (GTS Governor), Daryll Chapman (CEO DMAT), Susanne Kiff (CFO DMAT), John Launder (Governor DMAT), Siobhan Strobe (Parent and Town Councillor), Richard Irvine (Governor at Bluecoats and Parent), Susie Hold (Parent), Angie Fleming (Head at Bluecoats and Parent), Amanda Loud (Parent), Sarah Gabe (Parent), Laura Cooper (Parent and Town Councillor), Keeley Allin (Town Councillor), Des Maseby (Town Councillor), Yolanda Spencer (Governor at Bradford and Parent), Lou Leonard (Parent), Clare Heard (Parent).

Ian Newberry welcomed everyone to the meeting and introduced staff and governors from GTS, (4 of whom are also parents of children at GTS), and staff from the Dartmoor MAT, before giving a brief introduction to the process so far.

Three years ago the GTS trustees met to review the school and discuss a strategy and plan for the next 5 years. A number of options were discussed and analysed, along with potential scenarios and the advantages and disadvantages of these options. For GTS to become more outward looking and collaborative, it was decided a MAT would be the best option.

Governors investigated but didn't feel comfortable with any of the MATS in existence at that time and decided to look at potentially forming our own MAT. Numerous discussions were held with local schools and we went a long way towards planning and forming our own MAT. However, the educational landscape began to change and it became clear that the Regional Schools Commissioner (RSC), wasn't keen on the size of the MAT we were hoping to form.

During this process another MAT had come into existence, the Dartmoor MAT (DMAT). GTS was already working with the DMAT at the time through the Dartmoor Teaching School Alliance (DTSA), and a relationship therefore already existed. It helped us to understand each other's ethos and values and we began to have a conversation with the DMAT about potentially joining them. The DMAT formed in January 2018 and we began a due diligence process 6 months ago. We have looked carefully at budgets, premises reports, teaching etc. and the DMAT has applied the same principle to us. We feel we are moving in the right direction and the next step is to consult with our stakeholders and parents.

Ian drew everyone's attention to the Q & A sheet and DMAT presentation, copies of which were available to all during the meeting (and attached to these minutes). Ian then introduced Daryll Chapman, Chief Executive Officer of the DMAT.

Daryll joined Okehampton College in 2001. Okehampton had always been a very cohesive learning community and in 2011 it federated with 4 primary schools as part of a real commitment to ensure that education continues in our small rural communities. In 2014 Okehampton became a cooperative trust and began working much more closely with schools in the area who wanted to come together and work under the cooperative trust. It's those principles and values which stand for what we are working towards today. You do not have to be a cooperative school but you have to sign up to the cooperative values of the MAT.

2 years ago there was some talk of forcing schools to become academies. Okehampton felt they would be forced into becoming an academy so started talking to all of the schools that had been working together, they all believed in a collaborative way forward and were passionate about the rural schools. Okehampton had a real desire to work with children from the age of 2 through to 19 and for that reason the trust is cross phase, this is a deliberate decision.

The teaching school was granted to Okehampton College in 2016 and it has since become the fastest growing teaching school in Devon. They have also been working alongside GTS as the north Devon wing of the teaching school and supported them in their own application to become a teaching school. That coincided with Tracey Amos working as a DASH executive along with Daryll. Whilst working together they realised that that the values their schools shared were the same and both had a desire to fight to preserve the small primary schools. Even if a small primary school closed they would try to endeavour to provide some form of education in the village.

Daryll discussed the DMAT presentation, the schools within the MAT and their locations. Two of the schools within the MAT offer post 16 provision and this is something the MAT wish to preserve and continue with in their vision of working with 2 to 19 year olds.

Daryll discussed the governance structure of the MAT and the experience and skill sets of the members and trustees, all of whom have been connected with schools in our area for many years. The local governing boards of schools within the MAT continue to operate and if a school is functioning well it continues as it is. Daryll has discussed the amount of autonomy the heads would want if working as a collective and together they have identified that which they want autonomy and that which needs working on to be more aligned and also other areas to be standardised. E.g. alignment of policies.

DMAT is not a MAT actively asking other schools to join, however the RSC is aware that GTS is in consultation with DMAT. In addition, the new school in Okehampton, St James, started as a single academy trust and want to join the MAT. Daryll can't say it will happen, but all the signs are that the school will join in September. Other than that the DMAT is not looking to include any further schools as they would like a period of time to consolidate, after which time the MAT may look at other schools again.

All in attendance were then given the opportunity to ask questions.

Question – I understand that 5% of the budget is lost because of joining the MAT. What percentage is tied up in the existing trust? There is no percentage tied up in the current trust as GTS are a standalone school. There are a number of central services which we currently buy from outside agencies and those are the things that may change to support the 5% charge. For example, a central charge would deal with property insurances, legal costs etc. we would hope to see pooling of that resource would buy you more as a result. The expectation is to lose 5% but by buying resources together this will balance out.

Question – have GTS school staff been consulted and what was their views? Yes staff have been consulted and it would be honest to say that some had reservations. However we have had the same presentation and discussions and a lot of the fears have been allayed. The critical aspect for GTS is its values, if we were coming up against a MAT with a different value set we wouldn't have got to this stage. The uniqueness of GTS needs to remain. There are stories of Tesco MATS, all with the same uniforms etc., this is about a school maintaining its own identity. GTS have spent a long time creating its identity and values and the MAT would not change that.

Question – I like everything you are saying, however my concern is that we have no assurances it won't move in a different direction in the future. The DMAT cannot and would not give a guarantee because we are dealing with an ever changing world. The harsh reality is that any school with the wrong Ofsted judgement will have a MAT forced upon them and the likelihood of those schools aligning are very slim. The DMAT want to work together collaboratively and the only way to do that is in a MAT. The GTS governors have raised this is a concern too and as part of the due diligence process asked to meet with the trustees, other headteachers and other staff within the MAT to quiz them on their views and values, so that it wasn't just information from Daryll we were receiving. We wanted to see the desire for collaboration in depth across the board and across the schools. We are reassured that one person leaving wouldn't see a wholesale change in the way things are run. There is no cast iron guarantee in this world, but we feel to gain the benefits of working with the MAT, there is a risk. As with anything in life there are risks but we feel that gains far outweigh the risks and the rewards will be great. We don't have to do this, GTS is a good school in a strong position but we have been through this process to improve the outcomes for our pupils. We feel that for better cross fertilisation of ideas, the ability for teachers to gain experience from each other's and have more opportunities and access to resources, the MAT would enable this. We could quite happily do nothing for the next 5 years but as a group of governors we felt that working in isolation was not something that we would want.

Question – financially if a school within the MAT is struggling, what happens? We are not in a position to use resources from another school to support a failing school. We have to ensure all our schools are operating efficiently and economically. The DMAT first annual accounts will be added to the website shortly, they are open and transparent, please do look at them. As Head of GTS, Andy would always set the budget and the school would be in control of its individual finances.

Question – GTS currently has a board of governors from the local community with local accountability. Joining the MAT could mean that this disappears in the future and there is no way back. It seems a huge risk, it could be the end of local governance for the Torrington community and it's the only school in this area. Even a maintained school could have their local governing board removed if the school began to fail. The GTS governors have looked carefully at the schemes of delegation which details accountability and how it is passed down through the governing board. GTS governors would still hold Andy to account, outside of that is Daryll and outside of that is the child as ultimately it is our pupils who hold us all to account. Local representation is extremely important and that will continue. However there would be the ability for governors to work across schools too, for example if there was a shortage of skills or an extra governor needed to make up a meeting. Whether you are a maintained school, an academy or in a MAT you can always lose your governing board.

Question – you've spoken about pooling resources, sharing policies etc. Will everyone buy into this across the whole MAT or can schools buy into what they choose? As an example, if a school is being very successful with a certain GCSE exam board but the MAT decide that it makes sense for all secondary schools to offer the same GCSEs, we would not force the schools to change and lessen their success. As another example, we have recently looked at IT following a phishing attack on Okehampton at Christmas. We have managed to buy software which will stop this, it is something that individual schools couldn't afford on their own but collectively we have been able to buy this. This is an example of where all schools would have to buy in together. We will do collaborative purchasing but the individual schools will be involved and the support staff consulted. Utility bills, for example, we would involve all of the premises staff from the schools to work together collaboratively.

At times we really are working in isolation, another advantage of joining the MAT is the data available and the ability to benchmark against other schools in great detail. Yes there is some alignment but

it's a really useful tool and would be of huge benefit to all the schools in the MAT. We can then have a conversation with other schools about what is working for them and why. The league tables haven't created a great environment to collaborate and work with other schools. The MAT however, would work together to the mutual benefit for all pupils in all schools.

It's not just about GTS wanting to join the DMAT. The DMAT are equally excited about GTS joining, we are a good school and would be an asset to the MAT. Our Assistant Headteacher, John Stanier, has been working as a director of the Dartmoor Teaching School Alliance for the past 18 months and is well known to the MAT.

Question – could you explain a bit more about the teaching school please? The Dartmoor Teaching School Alliance (DTSA) is similar to the teaching hospitals set up and provides opportunities for CPD, teacher training and initial teach training. It was set up in 2015. As small rural schools, we can't afford to send staff to London for costly training events, however as a teaching school we put on regular CPD events for our member schools and are able to bring in specific people who are experts in their fields who we couldn't afford to bring to Devon before. Please google the DTSA and look at the range of work we offer. We also work with the Exeter Consortium and South West Teaching School Alliance which has created an even bigger entity. John Stanier has brought that to North Devon as there wasn't a teaching school here. It's a way of up-skilling staff and encouraging more people to come into the teaching profession. We have a number of different directions for people to come into teaching. This encourage teachers to come back into their locality too. We have been advertising for people to work in the federation and have recruited people who have seen the potential career progression and opportunities within the MAT. We are now attracting teachers back into the south west which will improve the quality of our staff.

Question – you mentioned sixth forms earlier, are you looking at increasing this capacity in Devon? Yes we are. There has been a political move to create very large post 16 establishments. If we could put on provision on existing sites we would, or we would look at the area and the different schools needing to access provision. There is a 'black hole' of post 16 provision and SEN provision in Devon. We could potentially look at satellite provision to enable pupils to access provision and enable pupils to stay within their local communities.

Question – collaborative working takes time, how will it affect GTS? Collaboration is beneficial if you find time for it. This will mean aligning timetables and meeting structures. Andy has been working at Holsworthy earlier this year, he found it of huge benefit and helped to affirm his skills, he then felt ready to apply for the headship when the opportunity arose here. We can't force collaboration, it must be mutually beneficial and we won't allow staff to spend time outside of school if it has a negative effect on our pupils. This isn't about being detrimental to children.

Question – who holds the MAT to accountability? The Regional Schools Commissioners office and we have our first meeting with them next week. They will challenge us on school performance, capacity etc.

Question – does that include financial accountability? Yes. We will talk about the finances of all schools in the MAT and we also report to the ESFA and are audited, exactly the same as here at GTS. Our first set of accounts has been finalised in December for August and are being filed with Companies House now and will be on the DMAT website within the next week.

Question – how do you ask for more money? The central recharge was done in consultation with headteachers and we talked about what was going to be included in that, it goes to local governing

bodies to be agreed, it's very open and transparent. As educationalists we have to think like a business, it is a sad state of affairs.

Question – it's disturbing listening to schools talking about running as a business. If being a stand along academy is no longer the best option, and collaboration is important, have you considered returning to being a maintained school? This was one of the options GTS governors considered but we felt it would be a backward move and we would lose all of the freedom we gained when becoming an academy.

Question – academisation is on the government policy, MATS are an ideological thing, it's also about looking beyond that at the future are children are going to inhabit. Do you feel you are perpetuating the move towards privatisation of education? When looking at our options we realised that the LA and Devon County are shrinking. If we went back to the LA we would go back dramatically. Babcock now have very little resource to buy provision and the quality is questionable. We are hoping that the MAT would help us to provide a better provision for our young people.

Question – will the MAT purchase services from Babcock? We have just today commissioned the services of an ex-HMI lead with a proven track record of school improvement. He will be doing reviews for us in all of the secondary schools, 2 days initially and then on a termly basis. We've never had this before and it will allow us to identify areas of school improvement. We have an ex-primary Ofsted headteacher doing the same thing with our primary schools. We have a director of safeguarding in the MAT who was formerly the lead for Devon. One area yet to be filled is SEN and we are keen to find a suitable colleague to join us as it's an area of huge importance. The DMAT buy very little because we want to be in a position to choose what we buy. We're not sure what level of support will be available from Devon for maintained schools. We will have specific people with specific skill sets available to our schools, that is of huge benefit and very attractive and provides– opportunities that individual schools simply could not afford.

Question – there is not enough evidence to prove whether MATS improve the outcomes of children or reduces the gaps between deprive and struggling children. What is your view on this? Disadvantaged youngsters is very cohort driven. As an example, Holsworthy were given an award for their work with pupil premium pupils only a few years ago, within 12 months they had gone completely in the opposite direction. That's the same school and same staff. The schools which became academies first were all outstanding, then it was changed to outstanding and good schools. As academies have increased, so all schools have been allowed to convert. I don't feel empowered to give a direct response. A MAT does allow us to target the leads for pupil premium etc. to work together and focus on what is working. In addition some schools have higher SEN number so it's hard to compare. However we have an opportunity to address this.

There being no further questions, Ian advised the meeting that the minutes from the meeting today would be added to the school website within the next few days. The full GTS governing body are meeting on the 29th January to make their final decision and will take on board everything raised to date and at the meeting today. The decision will be notified to all, either that GTS will continue as a standalone trust, but continue to work with the DTSA, or that we will join the DMAT.

The DMAT trustees will be doing the exact same exercise as well and would have to satisfy themselves that GTS doesn't pose a risk to the MAT.

The final decision has not yet been made, GTS governors will vote on the 29th January, it's an extraordinary meeting and will be minuted but the ballot will be in secret.

Meeting closed at 5.35pm