

## OXFORDSHIRE GOVERNORS' ASSOCIATION

Spring Open Meeting held on Monday 5<sup>th</sup> March 2018 at St Gregory the Great Catholic School in Oxford.

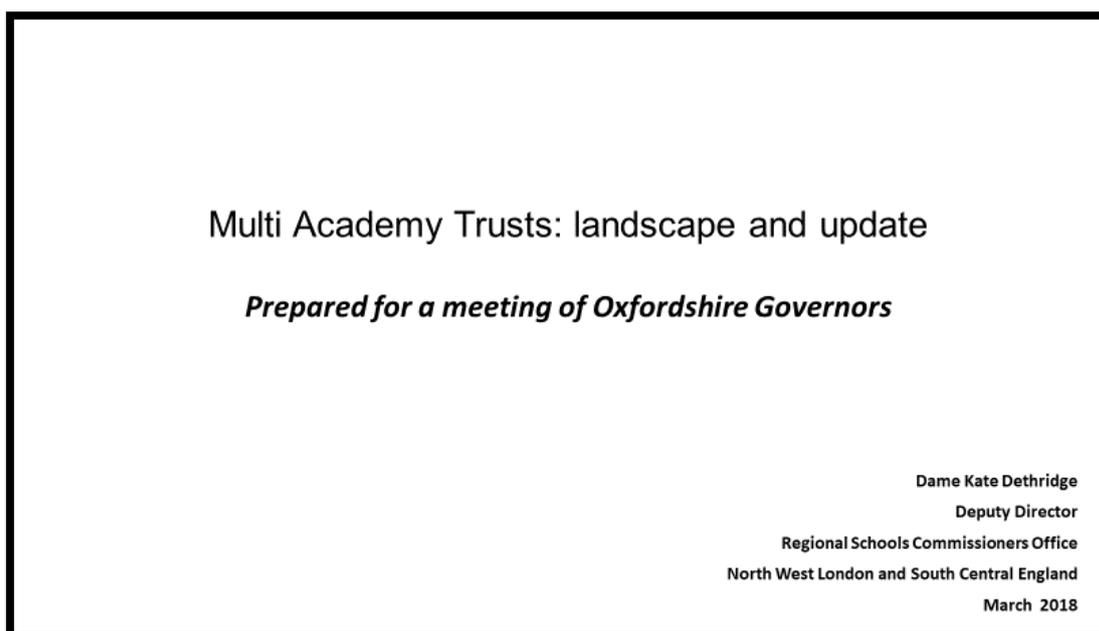
### *Improving Schools in the Academy Age*

**Notes of a presentation by Dame Kate Dethridge, Deputy Director, DfE in the office of the Regional Schools' Commissioner.**

Carole Thomson (CT) welcomed Kate Dethridge DBE (KD) and outlined her background as a Headteacher, a National Leader of Education, a Fellow of the National College and a consultant on programmes for new Heads and prospective Executive Heads. CT also explained that KD has been a panel member on various DfE groups, has written the standards for Teaching Assistants and has recently published 'A Practical Guide to the Early Years Foundation Stage'.

KD agreed to take questions during her presentation and added that any questions which could not be answered on the spot would be taken away for the DfE to provide answers after the meeting.

Paper copies of KD's presentation were available to all attendees.



KD outlined the 3 main aims of her presentation, which were:

1. To explain the role of the Regional Schools Commissioner (RSC)
2. To focus on school improvement
3. To explore thoughts and options on academisation

# 1. The role of the Regional Schools Commissioner (RSC)

## What do RSCs do?



KD explained that the role of the RSC has changed in the 18 months since she started work there. The focus when she arrived in post was entirely on academisation, and this has changed. There is a different climate now and the focus is on schools working collaboratively in different ways, with the emphasis on school improvement. The RSC works with schools in difficulty, whether they are standalone academies, part of a Multi Academy Trust (MAT), or LA maintained. These are usually schools that have been judged as 'Inadequate' by Ofsted. The RSC looks at MAT options for failing schools, ensuring there is the capacity to support the rapid improvements needed.

The RSC also administers some grants, such as the Strategic School Improvement Fund (SSIF).

KD added that the RSC has no powers in schools judged as Good and Outstanding by Ofsted but works with those schools for the purpose of sharing good practice.

**Question from the floor:** Brenda Williams (North Kidlington Primary School) – There is a problematic lack of understanding amongst Governors and parents about the role of the Schools Commissioner, academisation and schools funding. How can this be addressed?

**Response:** KD accepted this is an issue and suggested that Governors are the conduits for this information. She concurred that the Fairer Funding Formula for schools has been a polarising issue.

## North West London and South Central region (NWLSC)



- Covers 27 LA areas
- 7 Dioceses
- 374 Primary academies
- 339 Secondary academies
- 114 Sponsors
- 109 Free Schools

### The role of the Headteacher Board (HTB)

- 'Outstanding' school leaders from a range of different academies or Trusts- Primary, Secondary and Special.
- Co opted members as well as those who were voted on to the group-3 year tenure.
- A Non Executive Director of a Trust
- NOT a decision making body but an advisory one.
- Offers support, challenge and local intelligence to the RSC
- In NWLSC currently meet every two weeks to discuss a range of issues (Sponsor matches, sponsorship, Trust growth, significant change etc.)

KD advised that she had been a member of the HTB prior to taking up her current position; she summarised the role of the HTB.

**Question from the floor:** Carole Thomson (Fringford Primary School / Bicester Learning Academy) – How recently have these school leaders been judged as 'Outstanding'? There can be several years between Ofsted inspections and the framework is regularly changed.

**Response:** KD noted that the judgement taken into account is that of the leader and not of the school. She added that appointments are subject to a vote and co-opted positions are

appointed by the RSC. There are 8 members of the HTB, which is not a decision-making body, but offers support and challenge to the RSC. The HTB meets every 2 weeks and discusses things like Educational Advisor visits, Raising Achievement Plans, potential solutions, the impact of proposed MAT expansions on other local schools, the balance of MATs (for example, the ratio of 'good' and 'outstanding' schools to 'requires improvement' and 'inadequate' schools). KD added that the HTB would advise against MATs of all good and outstanding schools and also against large MATs moving into local communities where a local alternative would be preferable.

**Question from the floor:** Revd Jason St John Nicolle (Blewbury and Hagbourne CE Primary Schools): Are the minutes of HTB meetings available to the public? **Response:** KD confirmed that they are. She noted that they currently only record decisions but consideration is being given to make these more informative and transparent.

## 2. Focus on school improvement

**The academies landscape is changing...**

- **What's happening?**
  - Quality not quantity key
  - 79% academies now in MATs, and rising
  - Local, organic – not just 'big chains'
  - More sharing of learning across MATs
- **RSCs role evolving**
  - Still decision making!
  - Failing schools
  - MAT development
  - SSIF role
  - Partnership working
  - Share learning about schools

Department for Education

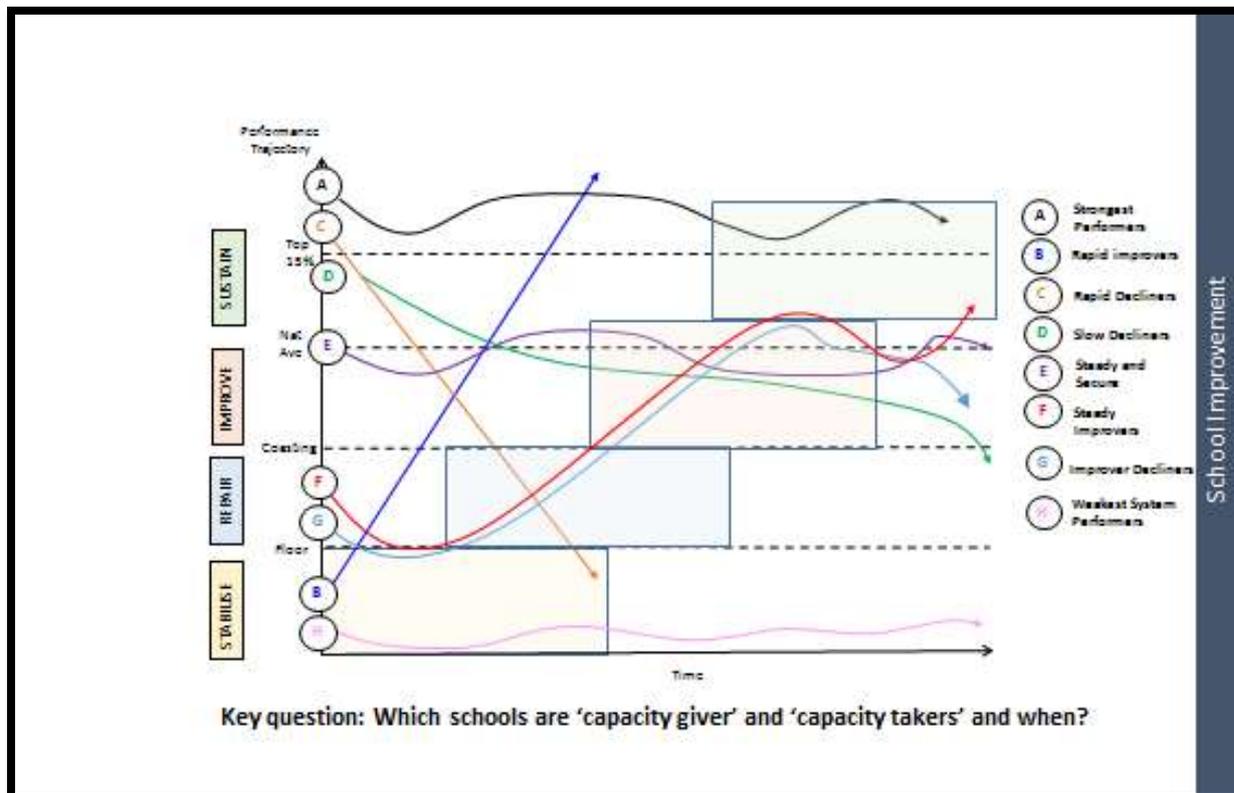
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KD stated that MATs must be supporting the improvement of schools and could apply for funding from the Strategic School Improvement Fund (SSIF). She noted that 18 months ago, it was possible to form a single academy trust, or an empty MAT (i.e. only one school at the point of conversion), but this almost never happens now. The vulnerability of single academies was noted and KD explained that there is now a focus on schools joining MATs.

**Comment from the floor:** Brenda Williams (North Kidlington Primary School) – Within North Kidlington Primary School's local partnership, the RSC gave one school to a Swindon-based MAT. This has damaged the coherence of the local relationship between schools. The Governors were given no voice in the decision. **Response:** KD noted that she was unable to

comment on an individual case and said that the HTB would now prefer to find a local solution as long as that MAT has the capacity and track record of successfully supporting schools to improve.

**Question from the floor:** Jane Osborne (Bartholomew School, Eynsham) – Is it possible to withdraw from one MAT and join another? **Response:** KD said that if this happens at all, it is very rare.



KD explained the graph, which was created by Sir David Carter, National Schools Commissioner, to suggest a model for school leaders and Governors to use when thinking about their own school. She noted that schools never sit still and are always changing. The 8 different trajectories of schools over time are aimed at stimulating discussion, and not to categorise schools.

**Comment from the floor:** Carole Thomson (Fringford Primary School / Bicester Learning Academy) – It is very hard as a Governor to think about applying this for your whole school, especially for secondary or large primary schools. **Response:** KD suggested that the model could be used for a single department of a larger school or for an area of focus such as attendance or attainment.

## Strategic School Improvement – an overview

£140m this and next financial year to support those schools most in need and ensure more children are in good schools

- Prevention and intervention
- Strategic proposals supporting multiple schools
- Round 3 opened on 22<sup>nd</sup> December and will close on 20<sup>th</sup> April 2018.

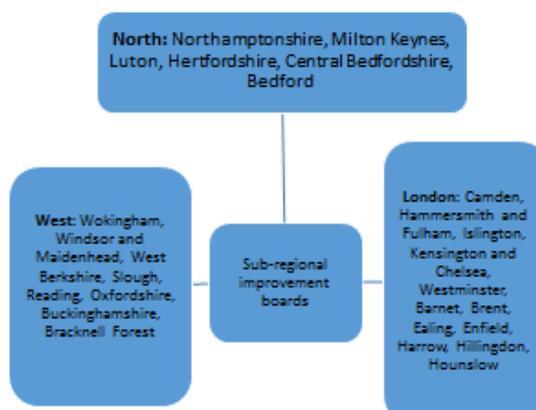
In addition to this funding, the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) is committed to spending up to £20m over 2 years to scale up and disseminate evidence-based approaches.

KD explained that there is a bidding process to the SSIF, and that bids are usually led by the Diocese, Local Authority or a Teaching School. She explained that the SSIF is for collaborative bids to support schools in difficulty. An initial meeting was held to identify the priorities for each sub-region and the eligible schools. The aim is to support bids that focus on what is known to work and not projects that are untried and untested. KD suggested using the Education Endowment Fund website to find examples of approaches that work.

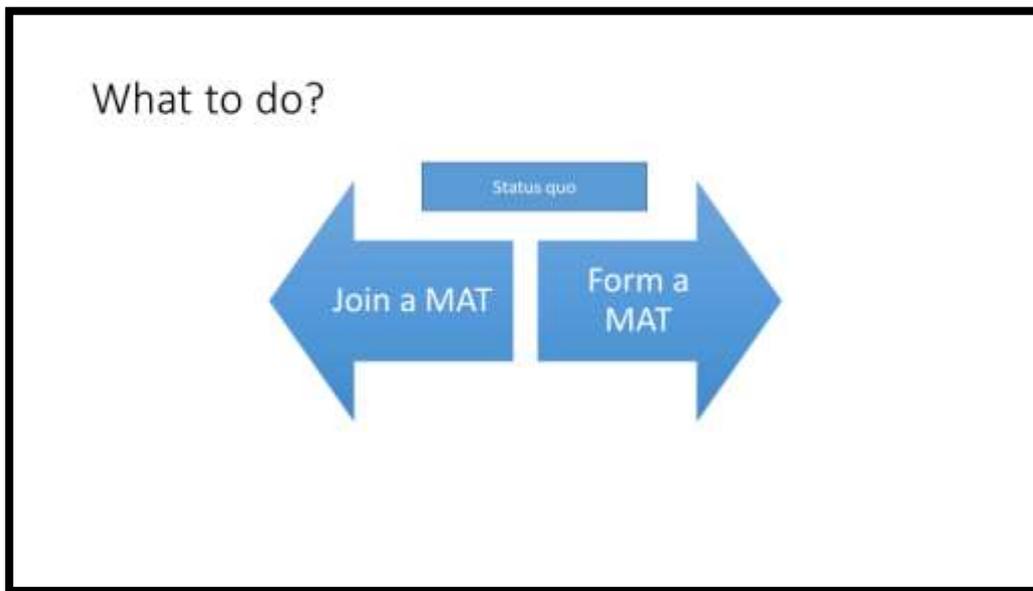
KD added that the Teaching Schools have a crucial role in identifying schools with the capacity to do the work and also those in need of support. KD encouraged Governors to discuss their own school's involvement with SSI with their Headteacher.

## Sub-regional improvement boards (SRIBs)

- Sub-regional improvement boards will work collaboratively with schools to bring together their local intelligence to identify shared improvement priorities
- The members of the SRIB comprises of representatives of the Teaching School Council, Local Authorities, Diocesan Boards of Education and the Regional Schools Commissioner
- Sub-regions in the NWLSC:



### 3. Thoughts and options on academisation



KD noted the three options currently available to schools.

### Why do it?

- Be both a giver and receiver of support
- Back office services allow leaders to concentrate on core purpose of their role;  
Teaching & Learning
- Positive benefits for pupils (wider perspective)
- Wider range of career options and development opportunities
- Broader pool of expertise and support to drive up professional standards
- Strong leadership structures at every level
- Greater financial sustainability
- Economies of scale
- Additional resources for teachers and pupils
- Want to take control of your future. Don't want to be left behind or have less choice in who you make a partnership with.

The list of reasons for becoming part of a MAT was noted.

KD highlighted the benefits for recruitment and retention of teaching staff and the value of being able to offer career development opportunities within a MAT. She noted that this applies not only to school leaders, but to subject and area leads too.

KD suggested that real economies of scale can be available as part of a MAT and gave the cost of photocopying licenses as an example.

The liberating impact of being able to concentrate on Teaching and Learning without the distraction of back office administration was also highlighted.

**Question from the floor:** Christine Hill (New Hinksey Primary School) – Does joining a MAT really offer greater financial sustainability? Governors at this school have been warned that the school will be in a worse financial position than currently if they join a MAT. **Comment**

**from the floor:** Carole Thomson (Fringford Primary School / Bicester Learning Academy) – The costs of audit are definitely higher for academies and there is no financial incentive to convert.

**Comment from the floor:** Cllr John Howson (Oxfordshire County Council) – The contribution that schools in a MAT make to the CEO's salary can outweigh any economies of scale.

**Response:** KD suggested that economies can also be made by sharing posts e.g. a bursar across a number of smaller schools.

**Comment from the floor:** Brenda Williams (North Kidlington Primary School) – A lot of time was spent by the Schools Forum in the past on finding good quality, cost effective supplies and services for schools. Gaps have now been created as a result of the dramatic reduction in LA funding. It will be hard for Schools Forum to see the benefits of suggested economies.

**Comment from the floor:** Damian Haywood (Mabel Pritchard School) – OCC services have been eroded and schools are not getting what they pay for. There are so many unknowns and the issues are not just about financial value.

## What to consider when joining a MAT:

- Do you already have a **good working relationship with the school/s?**
- Is collaboration and partnership at the heart of the organisation?
- Do you have a comparable ethos?
- Can you sign up to the MAT vision and values?
- What is their **track record of school improvement?**
- What school improvement structure is in place? Impact?
- What is the **scheme of delegation?**
- How are **successful schools used** in the MAT?
- How much autonomy is given to successful schools and leaders?
- What is the **top slice?** What do we get for our money? Is it **value for money?**
- What is the governance structure? How does the Local Governing Body work?
- What is the role of the lead school(if there is one)?
- Are **all principals involved** in leading and developing the MAT?
- Can we retain our own identity and unique characteristics?
- Are we **close enough geographically** to work together?

KD highlighted that Good and Outstanding schools needed to be sure that the offer from any MAT is good enough for them. They need to understand how they will be used. It was noted that the scheme of delegation of the MAT is critical and KD explained that these can vary greatly. She said that some are heavily weighted towards central decision-making, some are heavily weighted towards the delegation of decision-making to local governing bodies and some fall somewhere in between. She added that large MATs with the highest pupil outcomes tend to be those who use the central decision-making model, but noted that these are the MATs that take on schools that are failing.

## Concerns: Lack of autonomy

All trusts need to have a CEO, executive principal, or equivalent. There has to be an accounting officer who takes the lead .

It should not be necessary for good headteachers to lose accountability/autonomy whilst they and their school perform well.

Trust governance structures allow good headteachers and governors to have wider influence than they might have at present.

Look carefully at the scheme of delegation-it will tell you what responsibilities are retained centrally and which ones sit with local Governing Bodies

The CEO/EHT does not have to lead on *everything* that the MAT does. There should be a partnership between the leaders. Play to individual strengths.

Governing Bodies transfer their powers to the Trustees. However, schemes of delegation can allow a high degree of delegated responsibilities to local advisory groups.

KD gave InMAT in Northamptonshire as an example of good practice and noted that the Executive Board of Headteachers meets weekly. She added that any good MAT will give Headteachers a voice and use their expertise.

**Question from the floor:** Could Sir David Carter's model of trajectory lines be applied to MATs? There are serious concerns about the accountability of MATs based on the publicity around some cases of financial misconduct. **Response:** KD stated that the accountability of MATs is stringent. **Question:** If that is the case, why were the reported cases of misconduct not picked up? **Comment from the floor:** Carole Thomson (Fringford Primary School / Bicester Learning Academy) – This is worrying and there should be an escape clause for schools to withdraw from a MAT, not least because any changes made to the scheme of delegation can have a dramatic impact on the school, and because so much relies on the individuals involved, both good and bad.

**Comment from the floor:** Revd Jason St John Nicolle (Blewbury and Hagbourne CE Primary Schools) – There are options for schools which are not yet academies to negotiate and set

out their concerns before getting the legal groundwork in place. There could also be some scenario planning.

**Comment from the floor:** Judith Bennett (Chalgrove Primary School / Acer Trust) – Other Trustees have been surprised by the fact that she is both a Governor and a Trustee, but, citing an example from the NGA MAT event she had attended where a trustee was talking about visiting one school in the MAT once a year, she asked surely Trustees should know the schools they are responsible for? **Response:** KD agreed that there should be a link between the Trustees and the Local Governing Board. It was noted that both have a role and there is a need to differentiate between them.

**Question from the floor:** Damian Haywood (Mabel Pritchard School) – What is the typical structure of a MAT? **Response:** KD said there would be 4 Members at the top of a typical structure, then 11 Trustees, then the CEO and then the Headteachers.

**Comment from the floor:** The salary of some CEOs has been reported in the press as being very high. **Response:** KD referred to the CEO of the Harris Federation, who reportedly receives the highest take-home salary of any CEO and noted that Harris have taken on the most vulnerable schools and those that have been failing for a very long time. It has been suggested that parents are happy to pay for the improvements made by Harris to their children's schools.

**Comment from the floor:** Cllr John Howson (Oxfordshire County Council) – Why is the CEO worth more than all the other staff working in improving school? It was also noted that the DfE has started to address anxieties about CEO salaries.

**Question from the floor:** Who is quality assuring the standard of MATs? **Response:** KD reported that the RSC has this responsibility and meets regularly with the CEOs of MATs and with a representative of the Education Funding Agency (EFA). These meetings take place three times a year and challenge both the performance and finances of the MAT.

**Question from the floor:** Are the minutes of these meetings available to the public? **Response:** No.

## Useful documents to look at:

**A Competency Framework for Governance**  
*The knowledge, skills and behaviours needed for effective governance in maintained schools, academies and multi-academy trusts*  
January 2017

**Multi-academy trusts**  
Good practice guidance and expectations for growth  
December 2016

**Governance handbook**  
*For academies, multi-academy trusts and maintained schools*  
January 2017

## Funding for academies

- To cover the costs of conversion
  - £25,000
- Sponsorship funding
  - £70,000 to £150,000 depending on the sponsorship arrangement. Further details can be found here:  
[www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/511128/sponsored\\_academies\\_funding\\_advice\\_for\\_sponsors.pdf](http://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/511128/sponsored_academies_funding_advice_for_sponsors.pdf)

**Comment from the floor:** Stan Terry (Icknield CC / Acer Trust) – £25,000 to cover the costs of conversion is not enough. Sponsorship funding is a grey area and there is a lack of confidence that academies are on a level playing field as far as this is concerned. **Response:** KD explained that the DfE make the decisions on this funding and there are fixed criteria, which she could send out. She accepted that the process should be more transparent.

**Question from the floor:** Sue Haywood (Hailey Primary School) – What are the models of other types of collaborations between schools that work well? **Response:** KD replied that

federations can work well, which is usually where an existing partnership has been formalised. She highlighted that the key is collaboration.

**Question from the floor:** Jane Zibarras (Great Tew Primary School) – Where are the examples of federations in Oxfordshire? **Response:** Attendees gave Carterton, Thame and the Didcot Partnership as examples. CT added that there are various partnerships across the County working with different levels of success. The impact on existing partnerships of some schools joining MATs was noted as significant. Jane Zibarras advised that the Chipping Norton partnership was developing meetings between Chairs of Governors which were proving useful.

## Contact us

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*The NWLSR RSC office sends out termly newsletters – if you would like to be added to the distribution list sign up [here](#).*

KD encouraged attendees to sign up for the newsletter to receive updates and details of free events offered, such as the recent Early Years' Conference. It was confirmed that these free events are available to all, but due to high demand the tickets are quick to be allocated.

**Question from the floor:** Carole Thomson (Fringford Primary School / Bicester Learning Academy) – Last November Sir David Carter, National Schools Commissioner, suggested that there might be scope for schools to become associate members of MATs. Is there any update on this? **Response:** KD confirmed that this is still on the agenda, but there had been no further developments to date. CT noted that a two-year associate membership would help with the lack of confidence amongst Governing Boards about how to judge which would be the best option for their school. KD asked CT to email her about this point and agreed to find out more.

**Question from the floor:** Sarah Franklin (St Mary and St John Primary School): - Who is the enforcing body if a scheme of delegation is changed? **Response:** Revd Jason St John Nicolle

suggested that a third enforcing body would need to be set up. CT added that due diligence should happen both ways, on the part of the school and on the part of the MAT taking on that school. There needed to be a two-way process.

There was further discussion about the options available to schools that have not yet converted and it was noted that choice is limited by the available MATs operating in the local area. Difficulties for smaller schools with older buildings were noted as presenting more of a challenge, but KD said that some MATs will take these on.

**Question from the floor:** Fiona Craig (Diocesan Director of Education) – There is an increased sense of responsibility for Governing Boards due to the risk of isolation, especially in Oxfordshire where LA support services have diminished so dramatically and over 50% of children are now educated in academies. Where can schools go to for support? **Response:** KD confirmed that schools can go to the RSC office for advice and guidance. She reminded attendees that the RSC works across 27 LAs. KD stated that 80% of secondary schools are now academies and 23 – 25% of primary schools are academies.

**Comment from the floor:** Frances Bartlett (Diocesan Board of Education) – Headteacher recruitment can often be the catalyst for schools taking the decision to collaborate.

KD concluded by advising attendees to think carefully about the reasons for growth of a MAT.

CT thanked KD for a thought-provoking presentation and asked whether the political agenda is likely to change with the appointment of Damian Hinds as Secretary of State for Education? KD stated that there have been no indications of policy change to date.

The meeting closed at 8.35pm.