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Interim Headteacher Ms Tricia Bennett

25 January 2023

Dear Stakeholder

Consultation on proposal to join Mercia Learning Trust

The Governing Body of Talbot Specialist School is considering an application to become an academy under the Academies Act 2010 and is proposing to join Mercia Learning Trust (MLT).

MLT is a very successful local primary and secondary 2-18+ Multi Academy Trust (MAT). With a track record of improvement schools and one of its six schools, Newfield Secondary, shares the same site as Talbot.

This letter, which is being sent to staff, parents / carers, and other stakeholders, is part of a comprehensive period of consultation which will run from **9 January until 19 February 2023**. This is prior to potentially applying to the Department for Education (DFE) to seek permission for this partnership to proceed.

Background

Talbot Specialist School provides education for young people who have severe and complex learning difficulties. Our aim is that all our students make the best progress they possibly can, and for them to play a full and active part in the life of the school and in their communities. Our students are at the heart of everything we do, and this includes supporting their health, wellbeing, safety, and academic progress. To achieve this aim, we work closely with parents, carers and families and continually develop and support our staff to deliver a high-quality offer to our students. We are an oversubscribed, growing, diverse and inclusive school serving the whole of Sheffield and beyond. Talbot is a 'Good' school' (Ofsted June 2022), however we are aspiring to be Outstanding at our next inspection.

Talbot has always been outward facing through its Fusion SEND Hub, which provides expertise, staff training, and support to schools in the city and region.

Retaining our unique culture, identity, and autonomy, and all aspects of the Fusion Hub are non-negotiables for the governing body in the consideration of joining a MAT.

Current situation

During the last few years, we have become aware of the diminishing support from the Local Authority (LA) for schools in general and particularly regarding SEND issues.

This was especially evident during the COVID 19 pandemic but is apparent regarding support for school improvement and the management of central services (buildings, IT, finance etc.). As an individual school we are also more vulnerable to the current uncertain funding environment and lack resources to invest in improvements to the learning environment for children. All these additional pressures mean that the role of leading an individual school is increasingly complex, and precious time is directed to aspects of school that should be devoted to our offer for children.

A further motivating factor has been the need to secure sustainable high-quality leadership and staff at Talbot. This is essential to continue to maintain and improve the quality of education and care for our students. The school has twice in the last two academic years advertised nationally for a new Headteacher. Feedback has informed us that the burden on a headteacher in a maintained school has become too overwhelming and that high-quality leaders now require the support that is given in a suitable MAT.

Talbot and the future

Governors and leaders always have the best interests of students and staff at the centre of their thinking. They want to secure the future for Talbot so that it can provide the very best education for its students. Specifically:

1. Build on its current strength and move from being a good to an outstanding school. This is a complex process, and the school would benefit from working intensively with schools, leaders and staff who are further along this journey, particularly regarding the quality of education (curriculum) and inclusion.
2. To recruit and retain high quality staff and leaders.
3. To work in close partnership with a high-quality trust that can provide the support, capacity, and framework within which the school can thrive.
4. Increase investment in buildings and IT improvements to support children and staff.

Principles

When we considered partnership, the governors agreed several basic principles in discussion.

1. We want to retain our own Headteacher and governing body with parental and staff representation.
2. We want to retain our current autonomy, identity, ethos, and culture, and maintain the way we manage the school day to day.
3. We want to work with a Sheffield MAT with a strong reputation, culture, commitment to inclusion, capacity, and resources.
4. We want to work with a MAT that celebrates difference between its schools.
5. We want a MAT that has mainstream primary and secondary schools, and with a strong reputation for SEND and inclusion. The changing demographic of Talbot students, and the current Ofsted framework, means that knowledge and skills around the mainstream curriculum is very important.
6. If possible, we want to operate in sensible geographical proximity to the trust to aid operational partnership.
7. We want to free leaders and staff to sustain and drive school improvement.

Investigating partnerships

Over the last few years, the governors at Talbot have been exploring the benefits, advantages, or disadvantages of academisation. Several opportunities to join a MAT have previously been considered but none of the proposals aligned with the culture and ethos of our school. Many of you will be aware that negotiations with another trust several years ago began but did not progress.

During 2021-22 governors undertook a very detailed analysis of Sheffield MATs. After careful consideration we selected MLT for much more detailed scrutiny. This involved leaders, selected staff and all governors visiting all the trust schools, meeting their senior leaders, staff, and governors / trustees, talking to students, and engaging in wider due diligence.

We believe Mercia Learning Trust embraces our principles, leads very effective schools, is committed to SEND and inclusion, is well led and managed, and is best placed to help Talbot secure its future aims.

Will Talbot Specialist School become an academy?

The governing body is considering an application to convert to academy status and is working towards a conversion in September 2023. However, the governing body will not vote to proceed with academy conversion unless they are content that it would be in the best interests of the school, taking account of all the legal and practical considerations.

The governors are leading a process as follows:

1. They agreed a resolution to proceed with the consultation to academise in November 2022.
2. A management group has been formed to oversee the process.
3. The DfE has been notified of the proposed intention to academise and a DfE lead has been appointed.
4. A formal consultation period (around 6 weeks) with stakeholders (parents, staff, students, the local stakeholders) will take place.
5. Further due diligence will continue.
6. Following consultation, if governors consider that conversion would be in the best interests of the school (and MLT wish to proceed also), they will apply to join Mercia Trust to the DfE.
7. If successful, the DfE will issue an Academy Order to proceed.
8. A process of legal transfer (TUPE, land etc) will begin.
9. A period of transition will take place which would intend to launch the new partnership with MLT from September 2023.

How can I find out more?

Attached to this letter are a series of links to further information some of which can be found online. These include:

1. A 'Frequently Asked Questions' section (Appendix A) to this document.
2. A summary of MLT [Welcome to Mercia Learning Trust \(merctrust.co.uk\)](http://www.merctrust.co.uk) and information about joining MLT [Joining Mercia Learning Trust \(merctrust.co.uk\)](http://www.merctrust.co.uk). Further information about Mercia Learning Trust is available on their website www.merctrust.co.uk
3. Information about academies on the DfE website: <http://www.education.gov.uk/academies>

We will also be hosting a series of consultation meetings, including a stakeholder meeting on **Thursday 9th February, 2023 at 6pm**. At this meeting you will have an opportunity to listen to governors and senior leaders explain why they wish to pursue partnership, to listen to representatives from Mercia Learning Trust, and to ask questions.

How can I give my views?

The formal consultation period opens 9 January 2023 and will remain open until 19 February 2023. You can give your views and comments using the form attached (Appendix B) to this letter, online at the school website or in person at a meeting.

Following the consultation period, the Governing Body will consider all the feedback and views received and will then make the final decision on whether to complete the process.

We look forward to meeting you at future meetings and receiving your responses.

Yours sincerely



Tricia Bennett
Headteacher



Mark Coppel
Chair of Governors
National Leader of Governance