

FAQs Regarding Proposed Merger Between the School Trusts

What is a MAT?

A MAT stands for Multi-Academy Trust, a non-profit making charitable trust that runs state funded schools. It is a legal entity that governs a group of schools through a single set of trustees. It is set up by a group of schools, usually a local collaboration, that share a common ethos and vision. Alternatively it is the result of previous MATs coming together into a merged MAT – as a result of shared vision, value and ethos. Once a MAT has been set up, further schools can join, or the MAT can be asked to ‘sponsor’ a school, particularly one which requires support.

Why do schools form MATs both locally and nationally?

Changes in the educational landscape for several years now, mean that Head Teachers have taken advantage of greater opportunities to control their own destinies. The Charter School North Dulwich and Dulwich Hamlet Junior School converted to single academy status back in 2010/11, and later on both Trusts put in successful bids to the Department for Education to open new schools, which resulted in them becoming “multi-academy”. In addition, far less remains of borough-based authority for education in Southwark.

The long term future for schools is developing collaboratively through local groupings. Schools can use the strong collaboration and accountability afforded by the MAT to drive up standards and share best practice and services across the trust. Schools can build on each school’s strengths to the benefit of the wider local community.

What is the Department of Education’s perspective on MAT mergers?

It would appear that the Department’s focus is to develop capacity for school improvement and to empower school leadership to reach beyond traditional confines. In the words of Sir David Carter, the National Schools Commissioner: “We want to encourage support, and challenge the best leaders to take responsibility for more schools and to bring their expertise in school improvement to benefit more children.”

Smaller MATS are considered less financially viable in the longer term, and the Department is encouraging mergers of the smaller like minded MATS.

Is there a set model for how a MAT has to operate?

No. There are rules regarding how a MAT is funded, but the way in which a MAT operates, its governance structure, vision and ethos are defined by the academy or academies that set up the MAT.

How is funding organised within the MAT?

Funding for schools within a MAT is allocated on an individual academy basis. It is governed through a Master Funding agreement between the Secretary of State and the MAT, and supplemental agreements between the Secretary of State and each school within the MAT.

Why do we want to merge?

We anticipate there where will be many benefits:

- The pupils of the schools, both currently and in the future who already receive an “outstanding” education will gain as teachers grow still further in their knowledge and understanding of what makes best practice It will provide staff with wider development opportunities and build upon the existing partnerships by enabling and encouraging greater mutual support and challenge between the schools.
- There will be improved collaboration, coordination and understanding between all the schools on a range of matters from curriculum and staffing to the sourcing of services. Greater purchasing power for contracts meaning cost savings through economies of scale
- Forming a Merged Trust will give us the structure to share our ethos and vision with our local community and help to allow other schools and other pupils to benefit from the combined strength of localized collaboration. The Merged Trust offers us the strongest framework and opportunity to work with other locally minded schools and the strongest resilience to ongoing changes in the national education landscape. Joining together to develop stronger resources will help future- proof the quality education that we provide.
- Across Southwark, academy chains and trusts are being set up, have expanded and continue to do so. Such collaborations may impact on our future and we believe we must explore all options moving forward. It offers a strong degree of protection locally from other academy chains.

Why The Charter Schools, The Hamlet and The Belham

For many years ‘The Charter School North Dulwich’ and Dulwich Hamlet Junior School have worked closely together on a number of projects ranging from Charter students providing sports and classroom mentoring, to Dulwich Hamlet opening their classrooms to allow KS3 teachers and teacher trainees to learn more about primary practice. Our schools have developed an excellent transition programme which has aimed to reduce the emotional “bumps” that children can experience as they move onto secondary education.

Last year we started the conversation of how we might share our common approach to education in a more formal manner; we began to explore our similarities as well our differences and some lively dialogue took place to expose any “non-negotiables”. Emerging from this was the conviction of ‘stronger together’, that we shared a common vision and set of values, and that not only could this add value to the schools (both old and newer), we could use that enlarged strength to start conversations with other like-minded schools in the community.

Do the Trusts have a shared vision and have they outlined their key priorities for the coming years?

We have a clear shared mission to provide our community of young people with outstanding educational opportunities. The next steps will be to define our three to five year strategy. We are excited to do this and it will form the basis for our submission to the Department for Education this term. It will define our growth rate and our aspirations for the pupils. We know that the Department will be expecting us to be ambitious but are not expecting us to be empire-building.

Have we considered the risks to the schools?

All schools recognize that the school staff teams should focus on their pupils on their roll, ensuring excellent standards and achievements are built upon year on year.

In addition, we will continue the less formal partnerships that the four schools have developed with other primaries and secondaries. We believe that as we grow, we will be able to support other schools effectively by having the resources that will enable improved engagement and influence with the wider community. We hope this will lead to further schools wishing to join the new MAT.

Will there be automatic admissions from the primary schools into The Charter Schools?

No.

Although the Trust is its own Admissions Authority, each school has its own admissions criteria which tend to be based on distance and siblings. In addition this wouldn't be fair for other primary schools which might wish to join the Trust in the future. No changes to the current admissions policies of any of the schools are envisaged and secondary transfer will continue via the Common Admissions Form.

Will a poor Ofsted rating in one of the schools affect the others within the MAT?

Schools within the MAT will be supporting each other to raise standards, so this shouldn't happen. However, if it does happen, then there will be a network of support already in place to support those colleagues. School development is a reciprocal arrangement and even the schools with the greatest challenges have skills and expertise that need to be recognized and harnessed for the greater good.

So what has been happening so far?

In the summer term a working party discussed in detail the opportunities and challenges that may arise through the formation of a Merged Trust.

A Joint Steering Committee has now been set up made up of trustees from both schools, as well as Alex Crossman, Head Teacher of The Charter School East Dulwich, and Sonia Case, Executive Head Teacher of Dulwich Hamlet and The Belham Primary School. Sonia has been identified as the lead executive of the Merged Trust.

We now feel ready to open the discussion to a wider audience with the staff, parents and other stakeholders of the schools concerned.

Will The Charter Schools or Dulwich Hamlet or The Belham or any other school that shares our vision and values, lose individuality and identity?

A key principle of our Merged Trust is that member academies maintain their own character. By working in partnership, the other members of the trust can achieve higher standards and efficiencies. The Merged Trust will also aim to support its schools in tackling issues which are common across the Trust.

We have a common commitment to developing the whole pupil, (which means being as focused on the emotional and social growth of the child as their academic development), promoting creativity and innovation, as well as raising standards.

In practical terms there will be very little visible change in the way that all schools operate. Our values and ethos will also be maintained and our goal will remain to provide the outstanding education we are known for.

Why isn't there a name for the new Trust?

Unlike some large academy chains, we consider the names of the individual schools to be what parents know and love, not the name of the MAT that sits behind them. Just like brands such as Hellmans, Dove and Domestos are not necessarily known to all be part of Unilever, our vision is that schools celebrate their own hard gained identities. This doesn't mean that we won't be investing in building what the new Trust stands for, and seeking opportunities to communicate a strong Trust set of values in the future, it just means that we haven't yet decided on what the Trust will be called.

There seems to be a range of small trust names out there –from Aspire to Affinity, from Pegasus to Pinnacle, and with others named after the lead school in particular.

In the words of our greatest writer: “What's in a name?”

What does the proposed merger mean for staff

Staff will have a new employer: the Merged Trust. Under employment law there will be no change to working pay and conditions. There will be increased opportunities for staff development, staff progression and staff retention. We hope that there will be a significant impact on recruitment and retention, as new teachers recognize the greater personalized professional opportunities for remaining within a larger organization, rather than looking outside for career advancement. Teachers can observe each other across the Key Stages and across subjects; teachers can provide regular Teach-Meets and presentations on key aspects of interest- from using effective classroom questioning to how to deploy support staff more effectively to support learning, from innovative use of the latest ICT, to explorations of research into emotional well being. This empowers and upskills them.

Our commitment to staff well-being ensures that teachers can enjoy their time in the classroom – and we will ensure that staff voice is listened to and acted upon.

We will talent spot and succession plan to ensure we are always planning ahead.

How will the Merged Trust support new recruits into the profession

The current schools are firmly committed to bringing on the next generation through teacher training programmes such as Schools Direct to Initial Teacher Training. In addition we will be paying the apprenticeship levy and we hope that we can attract young people to join as the next ICT technicians, or sports coaches, or take on administrative school roles.

Our NQTS (newly qualified teachers) will benefit hugely from the expertise of the middle and senior leadership teams and of course will have many learning opportunities as they can observe in all the schools as well as meet on a regular basis for moral as well as social support!

Will the staff be expected to work in other schools or provide cover in other schools?

Nobody would be asked to work in a partner school if they did not wish to do so, although having the ability to move staff between schools could provide a great opportunity for career development if it was needed. We've already seen at both The Charter North Dulwich and at Dulwich Hamlet, that teaching and support staff have had career opportunities at the new schools.

How will the Merged Trust be governed?

The Merged Trust will have a board of Trustees whose responsibility is to ensure the overall strategic direction of all schools, and maximize the funding for the benefit of the pupils themselves.

Individual schools will maintain their own boards of governors, school names, uniforms admission policies and operational integrity.

Who are these Trustees?

The details of each of the Trustees will be published on school websites, along with their attendance at meetings and their involvement in any other public organisations. Trustees are appointed to the board by the 'members' and it is these members who can also remove them. The board will conduct a regular skills audit ensuring that it has the key skills to hold the schools' leadership teams to account. Trustees are unpaid volunteers –they do not receive remuneration for their dedicated service to schools.

How will we know money is being well spent and the Merged Trust will seek value for money?

There are many checks and balances on how the schools will spend their finances as there are currently. Most importantly, expenditure will be based on a set of core principles which place the pupils at the heart of the budget plans – i.e. the most money is used for education – for employing great teachers remunerating them properly and looking after them, knowing that staff who feel valued both in their pay and their conditions, are staff who will be most effective in teaching the pupils. Happy staff make for happy pupils which result in better outcomes. Of course the financial plans will also seek to make savings over the longer term by developing a

central services team. This will build slowly and in response to the needs of the Trust but almost certainly there will be a Chief Financial Officer who will support the Board achieve its financial aims.

Whilst we don't say that we will never spend money on tea and cakes when hosting collaborative events, you won't find this Trust hitting the headlines for inflated leadership pay or the handing out of lucrative contracts to preferred suppliers.

Will each school lose its financial independence and its ability to manage its own finances? (see above)

There would be a common financial procedures document to be shared amongst all the schools, but each school will be expected to maintain their own budgets and provide value for money, with finances spent on pupil outcomes.

In the future there is likely to be some centralisation of finances, resulting in economies of scale.

Will there be a loss of autonomy for the Local Governing Bodies?

The responsibilities of each Local Governing Body is to single-mindedly focus on their school and ensure that the Head Teacher is both supported and held to account for delivery of high standards. The Scheme of Delegation will ensure clear lines of responsibilities between the MAT Board of Trustees and the LGBs who would continue to make the decisions about their school. All schools in the Merged Trust would retain their unique culture, ethos, high standards and working practices.

How will parent voice be affected? Will they still have a say in how the schools should be run?

All the schools are committed to the same vision which is about local community engagement and providing parents and pupils with a strong voice in how the schools should operate This will continue. Becoming an academy and becoming part of a larger (but still small) Merged Trust ensures that that our ability to promote our own vision and values is strengthened not diminished.

What happens to the individual PTA's and Friends organisations?

Each school retains their own PTA and fundraising ideas. However we can imagine some great opportunities for joined up socializing in the future!

Will working with other schools mean lowering our own standards or possibly detracting resources from our own school?

The schools within the Merged Trust are high performing, local schools. Sharing expertise can only improve this further. Also, because we are all part of the same local community, we share the same families, and most would welcome closer collaboration.

What will happen to our land and buildings?

All land and buildings will be owned by the Merged Trust rather than by the two MATS.

What happens next?

A responsible merger is likely to take a reasonable period of time once the appropriate consents are in place, and will involve:

- Discussion with key stake holders outlining the long term educational benefits and benefits for staff
- A review of governance structures and an adoption of revised Articles of Association
- A review land and property arrangements
- A draft and clearance to new funding agreements
- An operational review, assessing the impact on contracts, banking and insurance arrangements
- Agree process for the transfer of assets and contracts 9. Complete transfer and sign new funding agreements