

24th November 2021

Dear Parents and Carers,

Thank you to those of you who have taken the time to write to us regarding our federation joining St Benet's Multi Academy Trust (*St Benet's*) and the implication to our federation community and in particular our children. We have compiled the answers to your questions and share them here for everyone. **The consultation event with St Benet's on 29th November has been postponed; I will notify you of the new date as soon as I can and we look forward to seeing you then.**

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)

Why St Benet's? Which other Trusts were considered and why were they not chosen?

As a church school in Norfolk, we can only choose to join a Norwich Diocese MAT. Due to our geographical location, St Benet's is the best option for us. DNEAT is the other Norwich Diocese MAT and is located further North. St Benet's is made up of 11 schools at this time, eight full members and three associate members. The governing board has been regularly reviewing the progress of the Norwich Diocese MATs and feel that St Benet's now has an offer which is a good fit for our federation. Whilst DNEAT and St Benet's are separate, they both use the Diocese of Norwich Education Services Company (DONESC) for back-office work eg finance, Human Resources, Health and Safety etc, which enables savings due to economies of scale. DONESC is connected to academy trusts and subservient to them.

How will the integrity and essential character of our schools be maintained?

Our federation schools would retain their individual characters and should not look any different, including the non-uniform policy at Forncett school. St Benet's tell us that schools keep their autonomy unless they are failing. The Trust is not immersed in the day to day running of the schools.

What are the educational benefits for our children?

St Benet's provide support, a high quality curriculum support, safeguarding, Continued Professional Development (CPD) for staff and governors, and collaborative working to ensure children are given the best offer for outcomes. All decisions are based on improving outcomes across the Trust. Collaborative working is of particular value in small schools like ours.

How will being in St Benet's affect our teachers; will there be changes in staff?

St Benet's tell us that staff enjoy working within the trust; staff are well supported, enabled, encouraged to remain and offered opportunities for development. In the last 18 months, three schools have joined SBMAT; two saw no change in staffing and more staff were recruited to support the third. It is not in the interest of St Benet's to move staff from or between good schools. Financial management being conducted by DONESC means that staff can concentrate on providing the best educational experience for our children.

Will St Benet's have a say in who becomes our new executive head teacher (EHT)? Will they also be involved in employing new teachers?

The governing board is responsible for recruiting our new EHT. Our EHT advertising was thorough, to reach as many candidates as possible, all of whom were treated in the same fair manner. The governing board makes the final decision.

There are no recent Ofsted reports available for the majority of schools currently within the Trust. How do we ensure we are aligning our school with similar performing schools to benefit our children and teachers?

As with all schools, St Benet's would not have statutory assessments since 2019 due to Covid-19 and the start date of St Benet's. However, Sam Nixon, the Director of School Improvement tells us that all internal data would be available to Trustees to show how provision is improving. Each school in the Trust has three strategic meetings a year which review the impact of school improvement and outcomes for children. These meetings involve the school leaders, St Benet's and governors. Regular visits are made to schools to monitor progress and to support each school's improvement plans.

How can you be sure that sharing of resources across St Benet's with improving schools, will not be at the detriment of good and outstanding schools like ours?

Growth has been factored in by St Benet's in terms of level of support. They provide support by experts as well as practising school staff. Examples of this include Primary Maths Mastery Specialists, Educational Psychologists, Speech and Language Therapists, Early Excellence, Teaching School Hubs, Experienced Headteachers and OFSTED inspectors. There would be at least the same level of support or greater given the economies of scale more schools bring.

Do schools in St Benet's follow the National Curriculum and state term timetables?

Yes, St Benet's follow the National Curriculum and support schools to ensure their curriculum is appropriate for their own local circumstances. Norfolk County Council publish an academic year calendar and this is followed.

How would the religious nature of the MAT change our schools? Would the way Religious Education is taught change? Would there be more emphasis on RE than there is now?

Children with different or no faith will continue to be made welcome in our church schools as they are across St Benet's. As Voluntary Aided (VA) schools we follow the Norfolk Agreed RE syllabus and St Benet's do the same. Similarly, there is a national Statement of Entitlement for RE for all church schools and academies so there will be no change here. St Benet's would have an input into RSE policy; our staff and governors already benefit from Diocesan training in RSE. There is a curriculum-based approach to RSHE and schools have autonomy to choose a programme in line with Diocesan policy.

Our small village schools respond well to the needs of the community. How would being part of St Benet's help improve individual strengths in response to the needs of the community?

All St Benet's school's still have Local Governing Bodies (LGB). As the Trust and Trustees support the schools to meet the statutory requirements (eg safeguarding audits, Health and Safety, GDPR) and monitor educational standards, the LGB has the capacity to be more involved in monitoring and developing community involvement and contributing to quality assuring the standards in the schools.

Archbishop Sancroft High School in Harleston is part of the St Benet Trust. Does this have any bearings on catchment areas for high schools and or impact on likelihood of acceptance to other local high schools?

There is no impact or change to catchment areas.

I have a child at a federation school already and another due to start school next year, and hope for him to go to the same school. What admission policy St Benet's follow; would it be the same as NCC?

At Voluntary Aided (VA) schools, governors are what is called the 'admissions authority'. We follow guidance from Norfolk County Council and the Diocese. Once within the academy trusts St Benet's becomes the 'admission authority' but they too follow guidance from the Diocese and NCC.

Is there a reason we would not continue to achieve high standards if we didn't join the MAT? If you get the sense that the majority of the families are opposed to joining the MAT, will you still go ahead?

The governing board must act strategically to maintain the standards and sustainability of our federation. We will continue to develop our federation and aim to achieve higher standards than we already do now. We are a small federation and financially vulnerable so it is unlikely that we can sustain our current school structure which would be likely to have an impact on standards. Due to our small size, the Local Authority are strongly encouraging our federation to join up with another federation.

The governing board wants to retain the distinctive nature of our wonderful two-school federation. Going forward without joining a MAT or another federation would leave our federation unsustainable which would result in changes in school structures and a potential drop in standards. A drop in standards would cause the Department of Education to force our federation to join St Benet's. Joining St Benet's now would mean that whilst our standards remain good and better, we could remain as a two-school federation.

Following discussions with staff, the governing board has amended their resolution to join St Benet's, to become instead a resolution to further consultation regarding joining St Benet's. During this consultation period, all stakeholders in our schools have an opportunity to voice their concerns and questions so that all views can be taken into consideration before a final decision is made. We will notify you as soon as possible of the date of the consultation event meeting so that you can meet Richard Cranmer, the St Benet's CEO and some of his colleagues, to find out more from them directly.

As a governing board, we have asked many questions and extensively explored the joining of our federation to St Benet's MAT. Our minutes pertaining to this are public documents and are available to you via the school offices should you wish to explore this further.

I will write again, to keep you updated as we make progress with our consultation.

Yours faithfully,

Sally Richards
Chair of Governors
Carleton Rode and Forncett St Peter CEVA Primary Federation