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22nd July, 2022

Dear Parents and Carers,

I set out below a summary of the research the governors have done to find out about St Benet's Multi Academy Trust (MAT), and the reasons why we recommend joining the trust.

Governors have to think about the long-term future of our schools and must make strategic decisions in line with government and Diocese guidance, that are in the best interests of the federation and the children.

Since 2016, thinking about joining a Multi Academy Trust (MAT) has been on our agenda but there have been no viable options for our schools. More recently, we became a Federation, to improve the future sustainability of both schools. Carleton Rode school has battled through many years with a number of changes of headteacher or being without one altogether, under constant pressure from the local authority (LA) with little support. We have coped with some long absences of our much-missed headteacher and with the difficulties of the Covid pandemic.

For all these reasons our schools remain in a less stable position despite recruiting Mr Callum Richards as our new Executive Headteacher. The Ofsted framework has changed considerably and there has been little or no leeway given because of Covid. Our teachers are having to do huge amounts of work to meet the requirements on top of all the extra work and stress caused by the pandemic. Because so many schools are now in MATs, there is little support left for head teachers and schools who are not in one. Due to government funding cuts, the local authority is now phasing out its school improvement service so schools outside MATs will soon need to pay for this support.

Another factor was the creation of St Benet's MAT. As a Norfolk church school, we can only join a church MAT and previously there was only one in our area which we didn't feel was a good fit for our schools. St Benet's MAT was created and we have been observing it's progress as it grew. St Benet's is smaller, and operates geographically closer to us. We decided that the time was right for us to find out more about St Benet's to see if it might be a good option.

As we have explained in previous communications, we were put under some pressure to make a decision about the MAT quickly, before we recruited a headteacher. As you know we have now made more space for wider consultation, but at the time, it led us to create a working group to investigate the MAT. There was a range of views within the group about MATs in general and we did a lot of research and held several meetings. We then invited the MAT to a governing board meeting to allow all the governors to ask questions and have since held similar meetings for staff and parents and carers. We conducted a survey at Easter for parents and carers and another for staff and are grateful to you for sharing your thoughts with us.

We trust our staff team and felt strongly that we wanted to keep the character of our schools and to maintain control of what happens in them and how our children are taught, treated and nurtured. We wanted to find out if we could hold on to all that is special and distinctive about our schools but to offer in addition:

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- Support to our staff in developing our curriculum and meeting the expectations of Ofsted and better opportunities for Continued Professional Development and career progression.
 - Support to our Executive Headteacher through being part of a larger organisation with regular contact with other headteachers and proper back up when facing challenges.
 - More support for the governing board and a reduced workload as some responsibilities would be taken on by the MAT.
 - More support for our secretaries and a reduced workload as some responsibilities would be taken on by the MAT.
 - Opportunities for working with a wider group of schools for our children in sports, arts and other events.

Having done some research, our working group recommended joining St Benet's because:

- We felt that our schools would pretty much stay the same and that we would retain control of how they run and the unique qualities we love about them.
- We felt that St Benet's MAT was a healthier and more supportive structure for an Executive Head who has to run more than one school to operate within. The trust collaborates closely with its Headteachers to ensure they have input into the direction and strategy of the trust.
- Our teachers would have support and people to share ideas with as they continue to develop our schools' curriculum. St Benet's work in a collaborative way unless a school is really having problems.
- Small rural schools are under huge pressure and it may not be an option for long to remain as a two-school federation but would likely be obliged to grow bigger. Support for LA schools is reducing all the time due to financial constraints.
- Because of the structure, communication and frameworks within the MAT, problems and stress points are likely to be identified earlier and there can be a more proactive response. A MAT can step in to support in a way that governors can't and shouldn't.

The main disadvantages we identified around joining a MAT include:

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- That the decision is irreversible.
- The governing board would have less responsibility for decisions being made and the majority of policies and procedures would be decided by the MAT except for example the Behaviour and Anti-Bullying Policy which the governing board would write.
- If our federation needed to recruit a new Executive Headteacher, St Benet's rather than the governing board, would make the final decision.
- If standards did not remain the same, St Benet's would step in to make improvements. Improvements could include our federation being obliged to join with more schools. St Benet's have repeatedly assured the governing board that whilst our school standards remain good, they would not need to intervene.

The Regional Schools Commissioner has the final say on which schools join MATs and when. The capacity of the MAT to support further schools is assessed before permission to go ahead is given. Joining a MAT is not a quick process and can take 12 months or more.

Our other option is to continue working together as a federation. It is possible that this could be successful however, we would be working largely alone, with diminishing support from the LA and be put under real pressure from the LA and the Regional Schools Commissioner, to join up with more schools. If our standards reduced significantly, we could be forced by the Regional Schools Commissioner to join St Benet's.

The recent Government "Opportunity for all" schools white paper sets a target for "all schools to be in strong multi-academy trusts or have plans to join or form one by 2030", so we know that joining a MAT is inevitable. We are a Church of England primary federation and the Diocese tell us that they believe that the most secure, sustainable future for all our Church of England schools, is in a strong multi academy trust.

Our Executive Headteacher, Mr Richards, has had opportunities to further research St Benet's and to talk to some of the Headteachers within the MAT. After these conversations, his informed decision is that the benefits to the federation would ensure sustainability and continued development.

We will be holding a face-to-face meeting at 6pm on 15th September at Carleton Rode school, as an opportunity for parents and carers to talk to the School Leaders and the Governors about our plans to join St Benet's. Please do come along and join us.

Yours sincerely,

Sally Richards,

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Chair of Governors, on behalf of Carleton Rode and Forncett St Peter CEVA Primary Federation
Governor Board.

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