



Ditchling (St Margaret's) CE Primary and Nursery School

Lewes Road, Ditchling, East Sussex BN6 8TU

Headteacher: Mrs. S Thompson

Learning together. Building success.

Thursday 9th December 2021

Dear Parents and Carers,

PUBLIC CONSULTATION ON THE PROPOSAL TO JOIN THE HURST EDUCATION TRUST

As part of the consultation process and following the meetings held in October and November, we wrote to you and all parents and carers on Thursday 25th November 2021 regarding the proposal that our school convert to academy status by joining the Hurst Education Trust, asking that all stakeholders use the feedback form to tell us what they thought about the proposed conversion, whether they supported it or not and why.

The results from the public consultation feedback form were as follows:

- 120 respondents (74.1%) indicated that they supported the proposal
- 26 respondents (16.0%) indicated that they did not support the proposal
- 16 respondents (9.9%) indicated they were unsure if they supported the proposal

Governors have had the opportunity to consider the strength of our stakeholders feeling and review in detail the concerns that were raised. The volume of response was extremely high, which demonstrates the importance of our school to our community, we are very grateful for the level of support and engagement throughout the whole process. Following these discussions, governors voted unanimously in support of the stakeholder feedback and therefore to continue with the proposal to convert to academy status.

It is worth noting that among the concerns fed back there were some identifiable themes that we can provide additional information on which should prove helpful (see p3 of this letter). Additionally, all the questions that have been raised throughout the process form the 'frequently asked questions' document available on the website.

Next steps:

This means that the governing body will continue the due diligence process and begin the legal process of joining the Hurst Education Trust and working towards an academy conversion date in the late spring.

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The governors remain determined to secure the best possible future for the school and will keep communicating with parents and staff throughout the process. If there are any further questions, we would encourage you to contact us via email on chair@ditchling-ce-prim.e-sussex.sch.uk.

Yours faithfully,

Vicky Harries
Co-Chair of Governors

Nigel Porter
Co-Chair of Governors

Susan Thompson
Headteacher

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Will there be a loss of power or autonomy from the local governing body to the MAT? Will the governors have the same responsibility and ability to challenge as they do now?

The governors believe that the power to make relevant and appropriate decisions at a school level (such as curriculum, budget, staffing, forest school, SEN, behaviour) is critical to retaining the schools unique character. At present the authority they do so is delegated by the Local Authority to the Local Governing Body. A potential disadvantage of joining a Trust could be the loss of this power and authority at school level, however, this differs on a trust-by-trust basis, as each trust operates differently. The governing body and Senior Leaders (in partnership with the other schools joining HET) have explored this very carefully with HET and are satisfied that HET is committed to maintaining and celebrating the uniqueness of each school within the Trust and maintaining local governing bodies with appropriately delegated powers.

The Governing Body will transfer 'as is' and will continue to have representatives from parents, staff, the Church and the community. Powers will be broadly similar in practice to the present arrangements and are detailed in the provisional Scheme of Delegation (which can be found on the Trust's website: <https://hurst.education/>).

It should be noted that as a potential founding School, the School negotiated the Scheme of Delegation with the other founding schools and the Trust. It is satisfied that it retains the ability to make delegated decisions over the operational running of the school together with the ability to support and challenge the Headteacher and senior leadership team, whilst recognising that 'ultimate' power sits with the Trust, as it does with the Local Authority now.

How can the Trust commit to keeping the management charge so low (3%)?

The College have committed to providing both the senior leadership team of the Trust at nil cost, together with a comprehensive back-office and administrative provision. These expenses are usually the most significant cost for a small/medium sized trust, and therefore the set level of the management charge at 3% is realistic once these usual costs to the Trust have been removed. One of the Trust's objectives is to keep the cost to schools as low as possible, to allow schools to direct more funding to the classroom. The Trust have no plans to increase this management charge and have modelled the Trust's finances as the Trust inevitably grows over a period of time.

Whilst hoped avoidable, the process to increase the management charge should there ever be a need or desire to do so would be for the Trust to consult with the relevant school or schools' governing bodies. The Trust would put forward an agreed case for increasing the charge. This may be, for example, to deliver increased services to the Schools within the Trust beyond those that are agreed at the outset, or where a particular school requests an additional service and the Trust would incur a charge to provide it.

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Does the trust have any experience on running a primary school?

The Trust is a newly formed. If Ditchling was to join, it is planned the School would be the second to join the Trust as one school, Albourne CE Primary School, is scheduled to join the Trust prior to Easter. The Co-Sponsors of the Trust, Hurstpierpoint College, and the Diocese of Chichester, have considerable experience in the running of schools. Hurstpierpoint College is an ISI graded 'Excellent' all-through 4-18 independent school with outstanding attainment and progress; the Diocese of Chichester has responsibility for 157 maintained schools in both East and West Sussex and Brighton and Hove.

Key individuals on both the Trust's management team and Board of Trustees have extensive experience of school management in the maintained sector, including the successful running of academy schools following a local authority conversion.

How is the Trust regulated?

Trust senior officers are responsible to the Board of Trustees who in turn are responsible to the Members, including Diocese of Chichester as majority partner. The Trust is accountable to the Department for Education through the Regional Schools' Commissioner together with Ofsted for the Trust and individual school's performance. As an exempt charity and limited Company, the Trust is also accountable to the Charities Commission, Companies House, HMRC and other relevant bodies. The Trust is required to be externally audited on an annual basis and the annual report and accounts must be published on the Trust's website and filed with Companies House. The Local Authority retain the statutory responsibility for safeguarding and SEN.

Will the relationship with the Local Authority change?

The School, and Trust, will continue to have a relationship with East Sussex County Council (ESCC).

There will be several ESCC central services that will not be available, as these will be provided by the employer which would be the Trust. These services are primarily administrative, e.g., payroll, HR, Health & Safety, and finance support. The School is free to decide to buy into other services offered by ESCC such as school improvement or professional development. Some services such as Safeguarding and SEN remain the statutory responsibility of ESCC and will continue to operate as they do now.

Will staff employment change?

Staff will transfer to the Trust on their existing terms and conditions. Key Trust staff have well established positive relationships with Union colleagues. The Trust has committed to a recognition agreement with the major education Unions (so that Unions are recognised and regularly consulted with). The membership of Unions is neither encouraged nor discouraged; this decision is for each individual member of staff to make. The Trust have committed to work to national terms and conditions for both teaching and support staff.

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Why do this now?

The school is in a strong position, it is a good school, the teaching staff are excellent, and this is evidenced through the behaviour and learning of the children. However, success is fragile, and the school is vulnerable to a challenging external environment and low predicted admission numbers in our catchment. The governors believe the way to mitigate these risks is to continue to create and develop an excellent school that parents and carers are choosing for their children, both within Ditchling and the wider area now and in the future. To continue the focus on learning, by seeking out additional development opportunities for staff, to ensure the operational or administrative elements of running a school are as efficient as possible to allow the staff and specifically senior leadership to focus on teaching and learning and to continue close scrutiny of the budgets to divert as many resources as possible back into the classroom.

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