

Barton Church of England Voluntary Aided Primary School

Minutes of the Extraordinary Full Governing Body meeting held in school on 28th September 2023 at 6.00 p.m.

Present

Mrs Julie Martin – Headteacher	JM	p	Mrs Caroline Parsons – Chair	CP	p
Mrs Louise Bowes	LB	p	Mrs Sarah Penrose	SP	aa
Mr Laurence Evans	LE	p	Mrs Anne Ugur	AU	p
Mr Andy Higgins	AHi	p	Mrs Alice Hedges – Staff Governor	AHe	aa
Mrs Catherine Martin – Vice Chair	CM	p			
Vacancies:					
Foundation Governor x 4					

p – present, aa – apologies accepted, na – apologies not received/accepted

In attendance: Ms W Guest – Clerk.	WG
Mrs K Slusar-Fletcher – applying to become Foundation Governor	KSF
Andrew Read – Diocesan Director of Education	AR

Abbreviations used.

FGB: Full Governing Body, **LA:** Local Authority, **MAT:** Multi Academy Trust, **DEMAT:** Diocese of Ely Multi Academy Trust, **CAM:** Cam Academy Trust, **ACT:** ACT Multi Academy Trust.

Documents issued for the EFGB meeting.

None.

Item	The meeting began at 6.08pm	
1	<p>APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE</p> <p>1.1. Apologies for absence Apologies were received from SP. Consent for absence was granted. WG and LB had notified the Chair that they would be late to the meeting.</p> <p>1.2. Quorum. The quorum for the meeting on 28.09.23 was 5. The meeting was quorate throughout.</p>	
2	<p>ACADEMISATION</p> <p>The extraordinary FGB had been convened to discuss the issue of academisation and to find out further information about DEMAT, ACT and the various options available to Barton.</p> <p>The Chair welcomed AR to the meeting and thanked him for coming.</p> <p>Governors had submitted a set of questions to AR in advance.</p> <p>AR introduced himself, stating that he wished to be as transparent as possible, whilst acknowledging that some of the issues under discussion are sensitive.</p> <p>AR's role as Director of Education at the Diocese is to oversee the 85 Church schools and academies (soon to be 86/87 as a new secondary school and sixth form is being built at Alconbury Weald and there are plans on hold for a new St Bede's). Cambridgeshire is currently in a dynamic period. The population is projected to increase</p>	

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by 33% over the next ten years, whilst Great Gidding Primary School has recently been forced to close due to low pupil numbers, and Cambridge City has recently seen a huge decrease in pupil numbers.

AR considers that Barton is currently in a strong position. He was impressed with our new Strategic Plan which he saw as Ofsted-minded but not Ofsted-driven, whilst following our unique vision. AR congratulated staff and governors on our KS2 SATS results. AR was glad that we were still looking to the future and considering our options, despite our position of strength. We are a successful small school, but such schools are not well-funded by the government, which is our primary vulnerability.

Cambridgeshire is in a DfE Education Investment Zone. KS2 results in East Anglia were second from bottom, nationally, so the Government is particularly focused on this area. Accordingly, if Government policy remains that academisation equals school improvement, Cambridgeshire will be a focus for that. This is combined with the current SEND funding crisis in Cambridgeshire.

AR said that the Diocese appreciates all that we do as staff and governors and wants schools to have choice over their future direction.

AR ran DEMAT for five years but is no longer in this role. AR is personally ambivalent about academies; some are poor, some are good. AR is worried about the fragmentation of the system and wants to ensure Church schools have somewhere to go if they want to or are forced to academise. Schools looking to join a MAT have different reasons for doing so, some coming from a place of strength, some from a place of weakness/financial difficulty.

WG arrived at 6.23pm

AR made the following points in relation to DEMAT's background and vision:

- DEMAT was initially created in 2013 with the primary purpose of managing schools that had been forced to convert to academies after being put into special measures. All of these schools are now rated as "good" by Ofsted.
- DEMAT currently consists of 39 schools, spread across the diocesan region (Cambridgeshire, Norfolk, Suffolk) with one more school in the process of joining the MAT.
- Turnover is £40m per year, and the aim is to ensure that DEMAT is financially sustainable so that small schools can continue to join and flourish within the structure of the MAT.
- DEMAT is owned by the Diocese of Ely Education Trust – an umbrella trust, populated by senior clergy with a strong interest in creating and maintaining excellent standards and educational experiences.
- DEMAT is committed to ensuring that schools preserve their distinctive character and ethos within the Christian framework, and that staff are recruited who share this vision.
- DEMAT provides a centralised curriculum and business management to ensure consistency and sustainability, but allows schools some flexibility in terms of delivery.
- Schools are choosing to join DEMAT now because of the benefits of being part of a MAT, rather than it being the default position for poor performing schools.

In terms of the government's position on MATs, the DfE approached the Diocese before publishing their White Paper to ask about Cambridgeshire's strategy on academisation. AR advised governors that the LA does not currently have a MAT strategy and, in his view, is ambivalent about the issue of academies. However, the Diocese feels that although the White Paper has been withdrawn, the government's direction on academies is very clear and there is no intention to disassemble the academy programme. In August 2023, the DfE published a strategy for Cambridgeshire which

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recommended that DEMAT and other existing MATs expand to fulfil the need for primary schools wishing to convert to academy status.

AR outlined the options open to Barton in the future:

1. Join DEMAT
2. Join ACT – a newer Diocesan MAT, founded by Buckden Academy
3. Join a secular MAT, such as the Cam Academy Trust
4. Join with other schools to propose a new Diocesan MAT
5. Explore other ways to ensure future financial sustainability (for example, forming a Federation).
6. Remain as a LA maintained school.

In respect of the first three options, AR strongly encouraged governors to arrange for the CEOs of DEMAT, ACT and CAM to attend future FGBs to provide in-depth information about each MAT.

In relation to point 3, joining a secular MAT, AR advised governors that this would only be possible if Barton was able to demonstrate that this option was in the pupils' best interest. As a Maintained and Voluntary Assisted School, Barton is obliged to comply with the 2016 memorandum of understanding (updated last week). This memorandum stipulates that all VA schools must join a Diocesan MAT unless there are exceptional circumstances which demonstrate that this course of action would not be in the pupils' best interest and would not best meet their needs. Nevertheless, AR suggested we do consider CAM as part of our investigations.

To assist in coming to a decision, the Diocese has created a set of due diligence papers which ensure that schools focus on the key factors that will be critical to their success in the long-term. In parallel, the DfE launched a Trust Quality Standards document last year, which sets out what the government consider to be essential criteria in measuring the success of a Trust. AR has mapped both of these documents together. When a school applies to join a MAT, the advisory board (in Barton's case the Diocesan Board of Education) will meet to consider the commissioning criteria and the best fit for the school. Schools are required to provide evidence comparing at least two Trusts in order to demonstrate their preferred option. AR advised governors that the DBE will come to a decision based on the evidence presented by the school, and will recommend the best course of action to the DfE. There would need to be a good reason to challenge a decision at each stage of the process.

Whilst Barton could choose to join a secular MAT such as CAM, there would need to be robust evidence to explain why this would be a better option than a Church of England MAT such as DEMAT or ACT.

AR is also a trustee of CAM, and reassured governors that Comberton Village College could not disadvantage primary feeder schools who were not part of the Trust. There is a statutory list of requirements that secondary schools have to fulfil to prepare primary pupils for transition. Transition is therefore not a reason on its own to join CAM, although there could be an argument for ensuring that Barton's curriculum is more integrated with CVC's to help with the transition process.

AR acknowledged that there were concerns that DEMAT has become too big, and that if the Trust takes on more schools, it will be harder for individual schools to maintain their identity. In AR's view, this should not be seen as an issue due to the fact that primary schools such as Barton are currently part of a much larger group of 186 LA maintained schools.

AR also acknowledged that many local schools are choosing to join CAM or Meridian Trust or the Elliot Foundation. All are good Trusts, predominantly run by Cambridgeshire professionals who know the community and ascribe to the Henry Morris

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<p>vision.</p> <p>AR emphasised that the decision about the best way forward should be owned by the school, and that Barton should not feel that the Diocese or government are pushing for a particular outcome. However, AR would also recommend that it would be very wise to think about a different structure in the future, as although Barton are doing well to manage a challenging budget, it is becoming clear that this is not sustainable in the long-term, and that more money and resources will be required for school to continue to flourish.</p> <p>It is possible that in the near future, a third Church of England MAT will be created, and there may even be a fourth which would give more options depending on how long governors are prepared to wait before deciding whether to convert. AR noted that St Bede's had established a MAT, but is not now creating a second school. It will therefore need other schools to join its MAT in the future and will need to decide whether to exclusively accept Catholic schools.</p> <p>Governors were encouraged to keep abreast of any developments concerning the future structure of schools. The Diocese has been running a series of Strengthening Structure seminars for this purpose, and continues to place great importance on EDRA visits to schools so that the Diocese can advocate on schools' behalf to the LA and central government. Bishop Dagmar has a keen interest in education and is very committed to ensuring the best possible outcomes for local schools.</p> <p>Governors were asked for any further questions after hearing AR's presentation. AR welcomed the questions that had been submitted, but advised that many of them related to operational issues and would therefore better be answered by Adrian Ball, CEO of DEMAT, Alison Anderson, CEO of ACT and Stephen Munday, CEO of CAM (or the CEO of any other matter Barton should choose to investigate) so that comparisons could be made between the different MATs.</p> <p>Q: Are there a significant number of schools interested in joining ACT? Yes, there are probably six that are interested with three actively pursuing their applications.</p> <p>Q: How does a MAT ensure future sustainability if it is taking on new schools that are a potential financial liability? DEMAT has secured a model that can incorporate an element of risk while not adversely affecting its existing academy schools in terms of available budget. However, it is useful to spread the risk, and it has therefore been important to establish a second Church of England MAT to deal with some of these issues.</p> <p>Q: Once a school has joined a MAT, does the local Governing Body have any say over what happens in individual schools? The Academy Handbook recommends having local governance although it is not strictly necessary. Each MAT has a scheme of delegation which sets out what is determined at a local level. Some schools only have responsibility for teaching and learning, with child protection, safeguarding, premises management and budget-setting all dealt with at Trust level. Some governors welcome this approach whereas others find it harder to let go of areas for which they were previously responsible. At the moment, DEMAT is a very centralised model and ACT is more de-centralised.</p> <p>Q: Is there any negotiation about what the Governing Body might be able to retain accountability for? Under DEMAT, some areas are non-negotiable. Budget-setting, business management and administration are all dealt with centrally. The curriculum is designed with DEMAT so that it is similar across all schools.</p> <p>Q: Ofsted recently complimented Barton on our curriculum design which is reviewed annually due to the different sizes of cohorts which determine our class</p>	
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structure each year. We would need to retain some control over our curriculum to ensure that it meets the needs of our school. The definition of a strong curriculum is one that is regularly reviewed and is driven by what the pupils need, not just by what resources are bought in. Some schools find it much more difficult to review and update their curriculum, so having a standardised version is of benefit to them.

Q: Is it broadly the same under ACT? No, ACT is a different model and it would definitely be worthwhile comparing all the MATs that Barton is interested in. CAM has an interesting model where the Chair of Governors is also a Trustee. It is important to be sure about what you want support with and what you want to achieve moving forward. The risks to the business need to be thoroughly analysed - for example, what would happen in the future if the Headteacher resigned and it was difficult to recruit a replacement. Would there be any available support?

LB arrived 7pm

Q: If we need to compare different MATs, is it worthwhile including DEMAT or is it full? No MAT is ever full. It would be sensible to compare DEMAT and ACT as Church of England MATs and also look at CAM because it is local. In this way, it should be possible to discern what is best for pupils.

Q: If during our comparison exercise we discovered elements in one MAT that we wanted to incorporate into our preferred MAT, would this be possible? It would be worthwhile exploring all options and seeing if any negotiation is possible. Bourn Academy has an associate agreement with CAM which has worked really well although it is not the DfE's preferred approach. All Trusts will need to be more flexible about how they work in the future, so it is definitely a good idea to consider more than just binary options.

Q: Does ACT have the same geographical cover as DEMAT? Yes, ACT also covers the Diocese although its current schools are all Cambridgeshire-based. It is likely that DEMAT and ACT will be the two main Church of England Trusts that operate across the region, with city-based MATs in Peterborough (due to the lower SATs results). It is important to maintain choice so that schools have a range of options to consider. Covid showed that centralised support was vital, and LA schools welcomed the support from Jon Lewis, but joining a MAT would ensure that this is available in the future.

Q: Your general advice would be to invite the CEOs from 3 different MATs (DEMAT, ACT and e.g. CAM) to explain to governors what they can offer, and at the same time, we need to work out what we want from a MAT? Yes, everything is potentially negotiable, so if there is one aspect of a MAT that Barton is not happy with, then it is important to raise this to see if there is any room for compromise. The due diligence document is lengthy, but many schools have found it helpful to focus governors' and staff's minds on what is important, and it sets the framework for where they want to be in the future. This then makes it easier to compare the MATs to determine what is the best fit. Academisation is a journey and there are no quick answers.

Q: What happens if a CE school decides that it is in pupils' best interests to join a non-CE MAT? This has not happened yet, but it is likely that it will do in the future. The school would need to demonstrate what it is about the non-CE MAT that is beneficial for pupils in the long-term.

Q: Are there any church schools in CAM? No, although Bourn has an associate agreement with CAM for financial services and curriculum support.

Q: What would happen to existing contracts which cover sports, music or language teaching for example? This is a question for the CEOs of the specific MATs

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to see if these arrangements could continue.

Q: Is it possible for other local arrangements such as the support from the CB23 Network to continue? Yes, absolutely. It is important to work out what Barton would like to keep and to raise this as part of the due diligence process.

Q: Part of our concern about joining a large MAT such as DEMAT is homogenisation - that we would lose our identity as a school and the unique elements that we have always provided as well as our distinctive curriculum. Many schools raise this as an issue, but as mentioned previously, Barton is currently part of a much bigger organisation as a LA maintained school, but yet is able to feel distinctive. DEMAT's view would be that just because it manages 39 schools does not mean that each cannot have its own identity. The best approach would be to challenge Adrian Ball (as well as Alison Anderson and Stephen Munday) to find out how schools can maintain their character within their MAT. DEMAT have taken an approach to employ Hub Directors who act like Executive Heads and have responsibility for schools within a distinct area (city, fens, villages etc).

Q: Are there any other tips that you would give Barton in addition to inviting CEOs to meet with governors? It is always useful to visit more than one school in each Trust to find out how they feel about being part of a MAT, what the benefits are and how they have managed the changes.

Q: You mention about Executive Hub Directors – if funding goes to those positions, is it likely that there will be significant restructuring as more schools join DEMAT? That is difficult to answer as organisations are always restructuring, and restructuring in itself is not always a bad thing. DEMAT does not get any additional funding so it is important to utilise resources in the most efficient way possible, which is easier when lots of schools are joined together. Some funding will go towards funding Executive Heads, but money may also fund Educational Psychologists or other forms of support which would be available to all schools. Schools are within their rights to ask for a worked example of what their finances would look like under a MAT, and what the implications might be from a staffing point of view.

Q: How closely aligned are the pay and terms and conditions? Staff's pay and terms and conditions would be protected under TUPE Regulations, although this could be negotiated in the future. For new staff joining a school, the pay with DEMAT is at least equal to, and in some cases better than in the maintained sector as DEMAT continued to award pay rises when there was a pay freeze in the maintained sector.

Q: What is the relationship like with unions? This would be better answered by the CEO.

Q: In terms of support for vulnerable groups – would DEMAT be able to provide inclusion networks? DEMAT is able to be more innovative in terms of SEN support and can protect schools from restrictions in SEN provision due to economies of scale.

Q: Does this also apply to EHCPs? Yes, but it would be better to ask each CEO for specific details. MATs have more flexibility to provide support in a way that the LA cannot.

Q: How many governors are appointed in a MAT? There are no set rules. The Trust Board is made up according to what is relevant for the Trust.

Q: What would happen if the Trust has a surplus? The LA cannot lend money to schools who are short of funds, but the CEO will explain the situation concerning a surplus in their Trust.

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	<p>Q: A member of the community has recently left a legacy to school in their Will, would this be protected if Barton was part of a MAT? Yes, the money would be earmarked for Barton in the same way that PTA funding is also protected and is not split amongst the MAT.</p> <p>Q: How much would it cost to convert to Academy status? Schools are given a grant of £25k to convert, which covers the cost of legal advice. There are however, hidden costs in terms of the hours of work needed to manage the transition. It is important to ensure that the academisation process does not consume everything else, and that governors continue to maintain a strong focus on teaching and learning.</p> <p>The Headteacher thanked AR for coming to talk to governors and for giving advice on how to best approach the possibility of joining a MAT. Governors agreed that there were many issues to consider, and that it would be useful to invite the CEOs to future meetings as well as to visit schools who have had experience of converting to academy status within different MATs. AR will send the due diligence document so that governors can start work on investigating the MAT options available,</p>	
3	<p>DATE OF THE NEXT MEETING – WEDNESDAY 6th DECEMBER 2023 at 7.00 pm</p> <p>The meeting ended at 8.08pm.</p> <p><u>Post meeting note:</u> the date of the next FGB will be changed due to a clash with the Choir performing at the Christmas Rotary Concert at West Road.</p>	