



Bents Green School

Co Headteachers:

Aileen Hosty & Laura Rzepinski

Chair of Governors:

Laura Gillespie

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Dear Simon Murch, Fiona Hawksley- Cartwright and Lisa Smith,

I am writing in response to your email on 20 June 2023 to Aileen Hosty and Laura Rzepinski, which you sent on behalf of your own union, the NEU, as well as the NASUWT and Unison.

Firstly, can I please ask that any questions about the academisation process are directed to the Chair of the Board of Governors? As you know, it is Governors – not Headteachers – who take the lead on a proposal such as this, and it is the Board of Governors at Bents Green School that is seeking to consult with our community on the proposal to join Nexus Multi Academy Trust (MAT).

Before I respond to the points you have raised, I would like to reiterate that the Board of Governors have taken a long time to consider the academies agenda – over the past 7 years - and have reached the point where we are now consulting on conversion.

I understand that the NEU has adopted a policy of opposing academisation, and whilst I respect the right of any organisation to adopt a philosophical position, I am sure you understand that it is incumbent on the Board of Governors of Bents Green School to act in the best interests of our school community, by surveying all options available to us. We do not have the option to make philosophical decisions on government policy, and we have sought to consider all possibilities to ensure the school is positioned as strongly as possible both now and for future generations. Over the past few years, the support offered from the local authority has greatly diminished and the school has become more isolated. We have also found it increasingly difficult to be maintained by the same authority that also commissions special school places from us. A future as part of a collaborative, mutually supportive, and cooperative group of schools, many of which are special schools and face the same challenges that we do, provides a strong answer to the isolation we have felt.

Bents Green School has experienced unprecedented demand for places and we have had to endure an explosion in pupil numbers in recent years, at significantly shorter notice, than we would have otherwise sought.

At the same time, the underfunding of provision, without a clear strategy for SEND sufficiency across the country and locally has left the Board of Governors clear that continuing to be maintained by the same authority that commission placements leave the school in an untenable position. Anyone who has experience of leading or governing special schools will recognise this unique issue.

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Whilst we have empathy with the resourcing pressure all local authorities have endured through the age of austerity, we must still take the path that is in the best interests of Bents Green School.

In reaching the point where we have approached Nexus MAT to seek to join them, we have considered a range of other MATs and sought information in the form of briefings and presentations arranged by Learn Sheffield, Sheffield's schools' company and by the National Governance Association. You have said in your email that "it is important to hear both sides of the academisation proposal". The consultation meetings are not about debating government policy. It is about listening to questions that our community has, providing answers, and reflecting on what we hear.

To this end, the school is now consulting with the wider community on the proposal to join Nexus. The Board of Governors has asked Nexus MAT to give staff an overview of their organisation and to give information to staff on their Trust, this will not be as you put it in your email, to provide a "one-sided pro-academisation sales pitch".

We have also invited leaders from Nexus MAT to attend meetings with our staff to allow the staff to ask any questions they would like.

This is not a TUPE meeting or any other kind of formal, legally defined employee engagement event.

The Board of Governors have approached Nexus MAT about joining them. Nexus MAT are not seeking to "sell" themselves. To characterise these question-and-answer session as such is not only misleading, but fundamentally misunderstands the purpose of these meetings. These sessions are for all staff, which includes your members, and all staff have equitable opportunity to ask any questions.

If our Trade Union partners want to discuss academisation with their members, then that is their right. Equally, if any Trade Union has questions they wish to put to the Board of Governors, we would be happy to receive these and respond. Naturally, any questions you have about Nexus MAT would be most appropriately put to them.

We therefore do not believe it is necessary, reasonable, or appropriate to cancel the planned question and answer sessions, for the reasons outlined above.

I would encourage all staff to engage in these sessions so that they can have more certainty over what is being proposed and consulted on by the Board of Governors. I trust you see the reason and sense in that.

I would also like to add as a school community we have had good constructive working relationships with our school union representatives, and we hope that this continues as we endeavour to do the best for our school community.

Finally, we as the Governing board are accountable to the community we serve, and I have therefore asked for a copy of this letter to be published on the school website so that there is absolute transparency about the process we are undertaking at this time, and why.

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Yours sincerely.

Laura Gillespie

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