

The Case for Choosing to Join King Edward VI Academy Trust Birmingham – for Staff and Governors

We have 5-10 years of Conservative government. Conservative education policy is to rapidly expand the academies programme including additional funding and increase the length and frequency of inspections.

Since our failure to build a cooperative MAT followed by our decision not to join the Guardian MAT and the 2017 election our strategy has been one of 'wait and see', focus on securing a rebuild, and see if there was a change in national policy as a result of election results.

It is now clear that to continue with this policy we would have to survive the next five years – probably ten – without a poor inspection outcome. Even this gamble is predicated on the hope that the government takes no further steps to accelerate academisation which certainly is not the expectation of most commentators (<https://antiacademies.org.uk/2019/12/7-tips-on-what-schools-can-expect-under-a-tory-majority/>). Given the battles we face with a number of indicators, it is difficult to be assured that we can be completely confident of avoiding a poor inspection outcome at some stage leading to huge instability and uncertainty for staff. If that does happen, we go into free-fall as a Local Authority / Foundation Trust School. If we are 'lucky' we get given to a MAT quickly (with no control over who that is, with the likely candidates MATs such as Ark, CAT and Matrix).

If we are less fortunate we are left in special measures, with additional scrutiny and monitoring, but not picked up quickly by a MAT (the experience of a local secondary school). As staff leave to move upwards or side-ways, we find it impossible to recruit. Growing vacancies sees budget eaten up by spiralling supply costs as norms and expectations crash. Eventually we are picked up by a MAT who impose entirely new staff and systems into what effectively becomes an entirely new school.

Governors and leadership would be unacceptably passive if we did not take steps to avoid this. Obviously, the work we do to continue our improvements is central, but we should also consider making a strategic decision to join a MAT of our choosing. When looking at joining a MAT the following must be considered:

- 1) Experiences of staff in schools already within a MAT.
- 2) The levels of autonomy enjoyed by a school within the MAT.
- 3) Advantages to recruitment (staff and pupils) or governance from a particular MAT.
- 4) Alignment of ethos.
- 5) Level of top-slice
- 6) Geographical basis of MAT
- 7) Sustainability of MAT – security from re-brokering
- 8) Respect for national and local pay and conditions agreements
- 9) MAT Finances

Despite the Headteacher's own political beliefs, the best MAT 'fit' he has been able to identify is King Edward VI Academy Trust.

1) Experiences of staff in schools already within a MAT

Damian McGarvey, Headteacher at Balaam Wood, feels that King Edward VI Academy Trust

is genuinely supportive organisation. Centralised restructures have not taken place and Damian has been able to continue to develop the capacity of his school as his team sees fit. Balaam Wood's Chair of the Local Governing Board, Valerie Allen, echoes the view that the school's independence has been maintained whilst support for the school has grown.

2) The levels of autonomy enjoyed by a school within the MAT

The schools have kept their autonomy in broad terms, school improvement has been useful and Employee Relations, Human Resources, Estates etc are well run and expert. Schools in the MAT get their budget devolved and can spend it as they choose. There is no staffing 'model' imposed. There is not a curriculum model imposed.

According to King Edward VI Academy Trust 'All of our schools will continue to deliver the curriculum and to develop an ethos that demonstrates a commitment to supporting children from all backgrounds to reach their potential. All of the schools will continue to provide a caring environment which will be overseen by the current Governors, Head and staff.'

3) Advantages to recruitment (staff and pupils) or governance from a particular MAT

KEVI has clear advantages in terms of recruiting pupils which may help secure the school against future population changes in the locality. It is reasonable to assume that the benefit exists in the recruitment of staff to an extent. We are aware that in a period of pupil number growth some local schools are inclined to increase Pupil Admission Numbers rapidly. This inevitably sets up a period of intense competition for pupils before the losers of that competition are forced to contract their schools and make redundancies. We are also aware that as we operate at a small Pupil Admission Number, we cannot afford to lose too many pupils before the school's viability becomes a question. After safeguarding, continuing to develop the school's appeal and reputation is our foremost priority, and in this membership of KEVI offers a significant advance.

As a school we have worked hard to make sure we recruit and retain staff effectively. Belonging to the King Edward VI Academy Trust would allow us to maintain our work around workload without systems edicts (curriculum, centralised schemes of work, marking and assessment policies etc) from a highly centralised MAT.

A strength of our school is the governance. But the reality is that this excellent work is conducted by a relatively small number of individuals. This does mean that our strong governance is not secure in the longer-term. Membership of KEVI will allow us to access a greater range of candidates for local governing board membership, thus providing greater security for this area of strength.

4) Alignment of ethos

The Chair of the King Edward VI Academy Trust, Hywel Thomas, is extremely clear in the purpose of the MAT – to improve the education of children in Birmingham. Our aim – to provide the best possible education for the girls in our community aligns well with this. KEVI has taken on the challenge of improving the outcomes for children in Frankley by taking on Balaam Wood despite the huge challenges involved, and this seems to be evidence that their

vision is genuine and not just words. We are aware that KEVI took on this challenge when others within education were ready to write the school off.

King Edward VI Academy Trust also shares our appreciation of the benefits of single sex education and we believe this MAT above others safeguards this characteristic of our school.

5) Level of top-slice

Many MATS take a top-slice of between 6% and 15%, dependent partly on how centralised they are but also on the size and remuneration of their executive structures. We do not know exactly how much of central government funding the Local Authority holds back to fund their operations, but we estimate that it is between 6% and 8%. The KEVI top slice would be just over 2.5% in 2021. In real terms, this means that we will at the very least be no worse off as a school.

6) Geographical basis of MAT

Our view has always been that national MAT chains make a lot less sense than a group of schools in geographical proximity. KEVI is entirely Birmingham-based. Furthermore, within KEVI, if we join, there will be a smaller group of schools based in the South West of the city. These facts make joint-working and school-to-school support practical.

7) Sustainability of MAT – security from re-brokering

The best single argument raised against the prospect of forming a local cooperative MAT when that was still a possibility was that the small size of that MAT meant that re-brokering of the schools within it was a very real possibility, particularly given the fluctuation in results that small schools serving mostly white working-class communities are statistically likely to endure. The King Edward VI Academy Trust, with a preponderance of good and outstanding schools, is unlikely in the foreseeable future to face having its schools rebrokered.

Therefore, we can have a high level of confidence that our chosen MAT will be our home for the longer term. An appeal of this particular MAT is their vision to grow to 16 schools and no more, meaning that the MAT is able to focus support where it is needed without being overwhelmed by large numbers of member schools requiring support at the same time as MATs like E-ACT and AET have experienced.

It is also reasonable to conclude, if we compare the experiences of local schools – academy compared to maintained, that academy under-performance when it arises, is dealt with in a very different manner. It is noteworthy, for example, that Shenley Academy has not been rebrokered.

8) Respect for national and local pay and conditions agreements

As the academies programme is extended to schools still outside of MATs in the next five or more years, we can expect to see more and more MATs seeking to drive down staffing costs by leaving the local authority pay scales and local government pension for support staff. We are also witnessing a growing number of MATs not implementing national teacher pay awards. As KEVI does not have the same financial imperatives due to the support of the Foundation, the King Edward VI Academy Trust is a better option for our staff than waiting

until we are forced into a more predatory organisation. Their current practices are identical to our own.

9) Financial Stability of MAT

Our initial due diligence shows that King Edward VI Academy Trust finances are remarkably sound, benefitting from their unique relationship with the foundation and strong financial leadership and governance.