



Newsletter

Welcome to our newsletter which sets out the background as to why we are considering converting to an academy and joining the Learning Trust.

The Governing Board

The Governing Board is made up of the following:

Juliette Benton	Headteacher
Lynne Taylor	Deputy Head
Tim Clifton	Teacher
Rhonwen Barraclough	Chair
Churni Jennings	Vice Chair
Mark Bland	Co-opted
Neil Stacey	Co-opted
Carena Graham-Benson	Parent Governor
Franck Schmidlin	LA Governor
Chris Martin	Parent Governor
David Connolly	Parent Governor
Karen Chaplin	Co-opted

Parents are well represented on the board with 8 governors having children at the school. 3 governors are existing members of staff. We have experienced former Chairs in addition; and two of our co-opted governors have children who attended Belgrave.

Consultation

The Governing Board accept that aspects of the consultation process, so far, could have been better implemented. There is no prescribed format for this. We took guidance from various sources and attempted to expand the consultation to engage parents and the local community. We also published supporting information on the school website for transparency. The Governing Board have acted in good faith throughout. However, in retrospect, there are things we could have improved upon.

- Could have made more information available. We are committed to doing this. There is no reason not to do so. As minutes are formally resolved at future Governing Board meetings we will upload them. We have provided links to various sources and relevant materials at the end of this newsletter. This is an ongoing process and as we become aware, we will continue to update the website page with that information.
- Should have been more conscious of the initial consultation period to allow for the review of information. The consultation was extended by 2 weeks to Friday 7th June 2019 and then a further

2 weeks (due to amendments made after Cheshire West and Chester advice) to Friday 21st June 2019..

- Should have been clearer in assuring that any decision will not be made at the end of the consultation period. The Governing Board has ongoing due diligence to complete and this will require external advice. If at any stage, it becomes clear that this proposal is not in the best interests of the school, it will not proceed.

Strategic Responsibility

There are 2 motivating factors which have led the Governing Board to consider the proposal: -

- the new school on the new development; and
- the drive to improve children's education.

The new school

The new school has been on the Governing Board's radar for at least 2 years. The new school represents the most significant development for Belgrave for some time:

- The new development will be a part of our community in the same way that Curzon Park is
- The new school will be less than a mile away
- It will be a new build school designed to reflect today's teaching methods/practices
- It will be cheaper to run as it will be a modern and efficient building
- It will have better facilities than Belgrave (i.e. all-weather sports pitch)
- Better facilities for SEN (i.e. designed with those needs in mind)
- It will have a nursery
- It will be able to accommodate before and after school clubs more easily due to its size
- It will offer an 'outstanding' standard of education -i.e. LA will not award to a MAT offering less
- It is unlikely to fill up from catchment immediately meaning there will be room for out of catchment

Furthermore, the school is currently designated as a 1.5 form intake. If we were to bid we would plan for a 2 form entry and other bidders will have the same considerations. This means the school will have to attract families from outside of their catchment – i.e. our families in order to be viable.

A brand new school offering outstanding standards of education with purpose built and designed facilities with a nursery is a credible alternative for families when selecting a school for their children.

Improving opportunities, outcomes and education

We are always looking to improve opportunities, outcomes and education for children. This is our responsibility as a Governing Board. It would be unacceptable if we took that view that as the school is outstanding and oversubscribed we do not have to aim higher. If we do not, then we risk falling behind.

But now, more than ever, Belgrave has to offer more for its children as part of its continuing drive to offer the highest standards in order to remain the first school of choice in the area

Consideration of all options

Until recently, there was no clear pathway for the school to continue to offer the highest standards of education and mitigate the risk of the new school over and above what the school is doing already.

Those options are as follows: -

- Do nothing and continue to work in the existing cluster of primary schools, exchanging ideas on best practice and hope this is enough.
- Join or set up a federation of schools.
- Convert to an academy and set up our own MAT.
- Join an existing successful primary MAT in the city with other similar primaries.

It is important to note that we are not looking to convert and join a MAT because we think it, on its own, is a good idea. Any such plan must satisfy our strategic goals and also be consistent with our ethos which is fundamental to our considerations. The options above do not meet our criteria because Belgrave already works within a cluster of 11 primary schools sharing best practice. Also, none of the options above are without risk or carry less risk than the proposal we are considering.

For instance, a local federated school was outstanding and is now in 'requires improvement' which evidences the fact that the 'mechanism' is neither a guarantee of success nor the sole cause of a downfall.

In addition, we are an outstanding school and a strong school and we have high expectations of any MAT partner. We would be looking for the following qualifications: -

- A shared child focused and inclusive ethos;
- Located within a lunchtime drive in order to facilitate the working relationship;
- Strong links to our local community so that we are affected by the same issues;
- Common but not competing interests
- Lead or at least equal partner
- Partners must have better facilities and resources that we can access and benefit from; and
- Experience of and success with bidding for grants for existing as well as new schools.

Evolving Conversation

As part of our existing links with TLT, they started a conversation about what our strategy was and whether there was merit in working together. That conversation with TLT has continued and as part of that the Governing Board have asked the following questions throughout: -

- Does this answer our strategic goals? (i.e. continuing to improve our offering to children and mitigate the risk presented by the new school).
- Are there clearly defined benefits?
- Are TLT the right partner?
- What are the risks and due diligence?

In our view, it does meet the strategic goals and it does meet our wish list requirements for joining a MAT.

Risk and Due Diligence

Of course, there are risks associated with joining a MAT. Whilst there are many examples of unsuccessful MATs locally and nationally, there are also examples of very successful MATs. Where risks are acknowledged and mitigated, MATs can work very well. Our proposal is based on a convertor academy approach (more control over the academy process) and not a sponsored academy approach (less control of the academy process). Evidence suggests that outstanding schools who become convertor academies continue to be successful.

Key discussions have focused on: -

1. Is TLT the right MAT/partner? Do they have the same values and approach as Belgrave i.e. is the children's education at the heart of their decisions?
2. Do they apply these values to the financial aspects of governing their organisation? and
3. Due diligence

Due diligence has been ongoing for the Governing Board from the outset. It is not yet complete as this is still relatively early in the process. It has been and will continue to cover all aspects including the following: -

- Management, accountability and succession planning;
- Local governance and whether sufficient powers are devolved to local governance; and
- Financial risk and compliance (sound financial planning).

Management, Accountability, Succession Planning and Local Governance

Currently each school within TLT has its own Local Governing Board (LGB) which is responsible for managing the school. Conversations with TLT to date have indicated that it will be the same for Belgrave.

Local governing powers are delegated through a document called the 'Terms of Engagement (ToE)'. Copies of the Terms of Engagement for Queen's Park High School (QPHS) and Christleton High School (CHS) can currently be found on TLT's website (links provided below). Each ToE is tailored to the individual school and conversations with TLT to date have indicated that Belgrave will also have a bespoke ToE.

The current ToE for QPHS, for example, does allow for parents of children at the school to elect parent governors to the LGB.

The current understanding is that LGB will be responsible for pastoral care, the school curriculum, and local staffing and financing requirements. Staffing and finance requirements relating to the Trust will be dealt with at Trust level.

The ToE is reviewed annually and / or when any issue arises which requires it being reviewed. Changes are made to the ToE where necessary and changes are made by mutual agreement between the school and the Trust.

The LGB is accountable to the Trust for pupil performance and for managing their budget and members of the LGB can be replaced by the trust if they are not demonstrating the appropriate level of performance as a member of the LGB.

Financial Risk and Compliance

TLT has indicated that they have a Finance Manual which is based on the Academies Financial Handbook (link below) and that this has been approved by their auditors. They have indicated that this manual is regularly updated in accordance with the Academies Financial Handbook and is checked regularly.

TLT has told us that they are audited by external auditors. TLT's financial reports can be found on their website.

As part of the due diligence process, various factors such as the process for the external auditing of accounts, any non-compliances, systems and procedures, and compliance with the Academies Financial Handbook will be looked at.

Independent expert external advice will be sought to ensure thorough due diligence work is undertaken and so that the Governing Board are made fully aware of all the risks, the level of risk and to what extent the risk is mitigated. If an insurmountable issue is discovered, the Governing Board will not proceed with this proposal.

The Governing Board would like to reiterate and reassure parents that we will not gamble with our children's education.

Useful Links for this Section

Academies Financial Handbook:

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/714474/Academies_Financial_Handbook_2018.pdf

Governance Handbook:

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/788234/governance_handbook_2019.pdf

TLT:

<https://www.tltrust.co.uk/>

TLT's Terms of Engagement with QPHS:

<https://www.tltrust.co.uk/pdf/the-learning-trust-terms-of-engagement-with-qphs.pdf>

TLT's Articles of Association:

<https://www.tltrust.co.uk/pdf/the-learning-trust-academy-articles-of-association.pdf>

Why does this school think this is a good idea?

- One of the key reasons that Belgrave is the success it is today is because it embraces change. 10 years ago, parents and staff had real concerns about the change to become a primary school from an infant school, but embracing that change led to more success and is why Belgrave is now a thriving oversubscribed **primary** school. There are risks with change, however, the risks could be greater if we are observers and not participants in this development. Belgrave was graded outstanding by Ofsted 10 years ago. It continues to be a strong, highly oversubscribed school. Currently, we work in a cluster with 11 other schools in Chester to develop and maintain best practice. But how can we do more and offer our current and future children more exciting opportunities and in doing so, maintain the security of the school by continuing to be the first choice in the area in the face of strong competition?
- We have a desire to keep improving the education and experience for children at Belgrave which is getting more difficult because of gradually diminishing resources and funding in the LA and the difficulty a small school has commissioning their own resources.
- We are constrained by the National Curriculum. Academies are not required to follow the National Curriculum and have greater freedom to determine the content of the school's curriculum but are still required to teach *English, Maths, Science, Religious Education and Sex and Relationships Education*. What if there was the opportunity to give **great** teachers who work at Belgrave the freedom to focus on what is best for pupils, as well as more autonomy? Evidence from around the world clearly demonstrates that educational performance is improved by giving autonomy to front-line teaching professionals and holding those professionals to account for the outcomes they achieve for young people.
- It is not the case that every academy performs better than every local authority school; but the academy system makes it **easier** to put in place these factors - better teaching, better leadership, better curriculums and more accountability - that unquestionably drive up standards.
- Becoming an academy would offer children huge opportunities and access to (from an exhaustive list):

6 different languages taught across the schools at the QPHS site

STEM with access to proper science labs and equipment

Playing an instrument from reception instead of starting at Year 4

Shared Enterprise projects

Drama and arts facilities/performance space

Coding / ICT facilities

Shared Library resources

Sports facilities, including a mini bus to access more competitions and additional trips and events. For example, a coach currently costs us a significant amount for a local visit

Mentoring across key stages – for example play leaders

Wider use of resources for morning and after school clubs

SEN resources such as access to Educational Psychologist, Speech And Language Therapy and play therapists etc.

- This would also lead to refreshing of staff in terms of ideas: training and development. Professional development can be organised across multiple schools upskilling individuals and groups. Teachers could take control of their own teaching and learning. Opportunities would lead to cross phase teaching shared through a common child-centered ethos and philosophy. In terms of strong leadership, combined knowledge and planning abilities to work on challenges and solutions together. Governors and trustees draw on each other's experience to formulate strategic approaches.
- A desire to work with the trust to access responsive and cost-effective support from a very local trust in all the support functions. These include Educational Welfare Officer, site and facilities, staff and subject development, access to capital improvement money (TLT has invested over £7M in their 3 schools in the last 2 years through successful capital bids). You may or may not be aware that a trust is able to purchase as a whole thereby achieving economies of scale not achievable by schools as individuals, resulting in money saved being allocated back to the pupils. Currently our colour photocopying bill is extortionate, we would have access to 3D printers etc, things that as a single form entry school we pay very high prices for.
- Close links to school will also better prepare pupils for high school **whichever one they choose** but particularly those who choose QPHS which currently is the majority of our year 6 children. This will smooth their transition, offering a full journey from 4 to 19 year olds which will offer tremendous pedagogical opportunities and mean there is much less wasted learning in year 7. A desire to team up with feeder and secondary schools to raise standards in both by sharing pedagogy and expertise. This is more likely to be effective and sustainable.
- Currently, so many hours at Belgrave for SLT, staff and admin are devoted to policy, finance and process. Whereas, being part of the trust centralised admin will mean significantly less time spent on this, and more time to focus on the importance of educating pupils in teaching and learning. We see the schools as a sum of complementary parts, that work together to create a stronger and more supportive environment.
- There will **not** be a loss of control in how Belgrave is run, the Trust delegate back to the local Governing Board so that school will continue to be run in the same way as present with the strong *local* governance and oversight. LA provision will still be used where and when required and it becomes more efficient and cost effective. There is no intention to change the hours, term dates and admissions. And we would want to commit to smaller class sizes which is not an option under the local authority.
- Being part of a successful MAT could facilitate the recruitment and retention of staff by giving leaders the ability to point to realistic career development paths and opportunities to specialise within the MAT.
- A desire to enable more children to learn the outstanding Belgrave way by working with TLT to open the new school as the lead Primary is our aim. We continue to be unable to meet the demand for places from the local community due to the size of our school, we continue to turn

away families showing approximately 50 new families around our school each year and this year have had to turn away 105 pupils from the total number of applications, 34 of them being first preferences. Our main aim is to educate more children who are not being offered places, the opportunity to be educated the Belgrave way. The new school is being built, 1400 houses are going to be on the new development and **we** want to provide those children with quality education from the start of their school journey with a seamless transition to secondary school. Belgrave lies at the centre of this community. We all want this to continue. There is a guarantee that there is no intention to close, move or extend Belgrave on its existing site. Instead, we want to replicate the high quality education of Belgrave on a separate site.

- Working through the consultation process and with the Wrexham Road development having been on the agenda for over 2 years, the Governing Board feel that this is the best way forward for pupils at Belgrave to benefit now and in the future. We will ensure any potential change protects and enhances our school strengths.

Once the consultation closes, in accordance with professional advice, we will collate the questions and respond accordingly. We hope the culture and ethos of Belgrave school will be respected by parents for the remainder of the process.

The final date for submitting either via the website or the paper questionnaires is Friday 21st June.

