

## Answers to questions raised, to date, by stakeholders during the consultation period.

We would like to thank everyone for their responses that we have received so far.

Please note, this is a consultation with stakeholders. No decision has yet been made and your opinions will, of course, be taken into account.

### 1. Why is this consultation happening? What is NEATs motivation?

As previously stated, Governors at ARFS approached the Newcastle East Mixed Academy Trust (NEAT), with the support of the Diocesan Board of Education, to ask them to consider if it would be possible to join their Multi Academy Trust (MAT). The Governors believed that it would be advantageous to pupils, governors and staff to be part of a bigger organisation. This was not at NEAT's request.

### 2. Will the schools reputation be damaged by this consultation?

It is not the intention of the Governors to cause reputational damage or discourage prospective pupils from applying to our school. On the contrary, Governors are exploring an option in order to strengthen our school to regain a strong reputation within our community and to ensure this continues in the long term.

### 3. Questions Regarding Staff

#### ❖ Will joining NEAT increase the turnover of staff?

As a school, we have recently experienced a significant period of change, during which staff turnover has been significantly higher than usual. Governors recognise this and are now keen to stabilise staffing for the benefit of our children. This will remain the view of Governors, regardless of whether the school joins NEAT or remains as it is. Staffing within in the NEAT schools is stable and turnover is low. NEAT feels it would stabilise the staffing due to support offered.

#### ❖ Is this more upheaval for staff?

You will see from the Frequently Asked Questions that there would be no "upheaval" for staff. Very little will change as staff would retain their current terms and conditions and they will not be required to move between different schools in the MAT. Unions have reassured staff and Governors that this process is "straightforward". Staff opinions are being gathered as part of the consultation process and will be considered by Governors.

### 4. Questions about Partnerships

#### ❖ Will ARFS still be a member of the Gosforth Schools' Trust? Why are you leaving Gosforth School Trust?

ARFS will continue to work with Gosforth Schools' Trust and, as it is a Church school with a foundation of its own, it cannot become a full member of another foundation trust. The Diocesan Board of Education will only allow a Church school to become part of a Church of England MAT or "mixed" MAT like NEAT (see A1 of FAQs). We are not aware at this stage of any reason why ARFS could not remain an Associate Member of the Gosforth Schools' Trust even if the school joins NEAT. In addition, Gosforth Schools Trust have made assurances that they will continue to work with ARFS. NEAT have stated that they would always actively encourage ARFS to work closely with the other Gosforth schools. Please see statement from GST 29.1.19

We are currently exploring whether ARFS would remain an Associate Member of the GST. We are firmly rooted to Gosforth and this will not change. We will continue to work with the schools in GST, in a similar way as we have done since GST was created. ARFS values the strong links with the other

Gosforth Schools and we remain committed to those links. GST have confirmed that they will continue to work with us in a similar way. See GST statement Jan 2019

❖ **Did ARFS look to GST for support? If NEAT had not stepped in who else was offering help?**

When ARFS required “school to school support”, following the Requires Improvement (RI) judgement in July 2017, Governors approached the Local Authority (LA) to broker support for us and they directed us to Throckley Teaching School, then to NEAT. The Governors felt that the LA were best placed to know what was required and also where there was the capacity to provide it. Support has also been provided by GST and the strong working relationship with GST has continued.

❖ **Geographically and demographically, joining NEAT doesn't fit – why can't ARFS be more of a member of GST and why is ARFS only an Associate Member of GST?**

As we are a Church School, our foundation is the Diocese. For legal reasons we can only be an Associate Member of GST, as schools cannot have more than one foundation trust.

Geographically, ARFS is not located too far from the other schools in NEAT and there are several successful geographically dispersed trusts across the UK. You might think that the schools are very different but, in reality, all of the schools in Gosforth face similar challenges to NEAT schools in terms of meeting the diverse needs of all pupils. For example, all schools have pupils with a wide range of needs including highly-able children, pupils with special educational needs and disabilities or other contextual needs.

❖ **The other NEAT schools are close together, would we be excluded?**

It usually only takes 20 minutes to get to Walker, therefore there is no geographical barrier to the schools working together. This has been evident over the last year with regular journeys between the schools.

❖ **What is the role of the PCCs in the decision making process**

The PCCs have an important role to play at each stage. Firstly the PCC needed to be consulted as a key stakeholder along with parents, staff, Unions, other local schools and the Diocesan Board of Education and local authority so that their views can be taken into account along with all stakeholders. At the application stage the Head Teacher Board of the Regional School Commissioner's office will need evidence that the Diocesan Education Board has formally conditionally consented to the proposal and also that both PCCs have formally conditionally consented. If the Head Teacher Board grant approval and legal work commences then at this stage the Vicar and Church Wardens of All Saints (who own the school site as custodian trustees) would be asked to consider and sign a nationally agreed model licence agreement covering the school's occupation of the site.

## **5. School to School Support**

❖ **Why can't ARFS continue to work with NEAT but not as part of the MAT? Why not continue the informal relationship?**

We *can* continue to work with NEAT informally (and this is one option we are looking at), however, Governors also want to consider the option of joining NEAT formally and the benefits that this would bring to the school. One of these benefits is increased accountability which is something not *currently* offered by GST. The GST is a group of schools working collaboratively together but they don't *currently* hold each other to account in terms of school performance however, they are looking to do this increasingly in the future. The multi-academy trust structure is an accountable structure available to schools.

A MAT ensures that roles and responsibilities don't just rest with the individual schools and that there is a level of responsibility above the Governors. A MAT's Board of Directors is responsible for strategic decisions about the trust and each of its academies however, in NEAT each individual school retains its own Local Governing Committee (LGC) and the Trust Board delegates specific functions to that Local Governing Committee (see NEAT Scheme of Delegation).

- ❖ **It is good that school is more outward-looking and positive changes made are noted. It's fine to say the school could work with whomever it wants to but how do GST view this?**

All schools in the city, and within GST, have signed up to be part of the "Newcastle Promise" which is a commitment to all Newcastle schools working together for the benefit of children in Newcastle.

- ❖ **Wouldn't it be better to forge an improved relationship with GST? What is their view and how would this affect working going forward?**

We already have a strong working relationship with GST and we have met with them to discuss what support they could provide. Governors are awaiting a proposal of changes to be made to the way in which GST currently operates. The Governors will consider this proposal and the dialogue with GST will continue in order to establish whether this will provide an alternative to joining NEAT.

There is a strong confirmation of the GST's commitment to including ARFS in its activities where possible and practical, regardless of the outcome of the Governors decision.

- ❖ **What is the school's view of the statement that the Gosforth Schools' Trust published on the day of the consultation meeting?**

GST have released a subsequent statement which outlines;

"There are no plans to distance or exclude Archbishop Runcie from the work and benefits of the GST, although joining the NEAT would result in changes to some of the joint working as it may not be possible for the staff at the school to be fully involved in the work of both organisations.

The school will continue to be part of the Gosforth Pyramid and we will seek to involve the school in the work of the Pyramid and the GST whenever practical and possible.

Following discussions with Archbishop Runcie, we are currently working on a robust, collaborative and mutually supportive plan to strengthen and formalise our school to school support for all of our schools, including Archbishop Runcie, in the event of it continuing with its current status. This plan will be shared and agreed by all schools in the GST and will provide a mechanism through which we can all identify vulnerabilities in our schools. This plan will be available to Archbishop Runcie in time for staff and governors to consider before a final decision is made regarding joining NEAT.

We accept that as a Foundation Trust, we might not be able to provide all of the assurances which the Governors at Archbishop Runcie are looking for and we will respect the decision of the Governing Body to join NEAT, if that is the chosen direction for the school."

We are delighted that they have confirmed their intention to work with us, regardless of our decision.

## **6. Single Form Entry – Expansion**

- ❖ **Does a single form entry school stack up? The problem for ARFS is its budget – expanding would solve this. What are the reasons ARFS hasn't been able to expand? We feel that ARFS is racing into something here when expansion may be a better option.**

A single form entry school has financial challenges but there also benefits to being a small school. Governors have been pressing the LA for ARFS to expand for a number of years. During this time, other local schools have been expanded. We have had no commitment from the LA that ARFS will be expanded, either now or in the future (but no reasons have been given as to why). It is worth bearing in mind that the recent expansions of some other schools in Gosforth has now met the demand for first school places in the area, but there is now a pressing need to increase capacity within in the middle schools in Gosforth.

We will continue to work with the LA and the Diocesan Board of Education in seeking an expansion of our school, which we believe would be beneficial to our children and staff in the long term (see also Qs relating to budget).

## 7. GCMS Admissions

- ❖ **Will joining NEAT cause Gosforth Central Middle School (GCMS) to change its admissions policy? Can they change it?**

*“Gosforth Central Middle School will always admit Children from Archbishop Runcie First School under Category A.” GCMS Dec 2018*

*“Gosforth Central Middle School has reassured parents that there are no plans to reconsider or change any current admissions arrangements. In this regard, Archbishop Runcie pupils will not be disadvantaged as a result of the school joining NEAT.” GST Statement Jan 2019*

Any school admissions authority is entitled to change their admission arrangements however; they would also have to comply with the School Admissions Code, which means any changes are subject to consultation and must be reasonable and transparent.

## 8. Conflict of Interests

- ❖ **Does the Diocese being involved at the start of NEAT skew the Diocesan viewpoint in supporting the proposal?**

NEAT was set up by a group of schools in the East end of Newcastle and was driven by their governing bodies and Head Teachers looking to set up a MAT to ensure better accountability structures and collaborative working amongst a group of schools. This formalised an already existing relationship. Paul Rickeard from the Diocesan Board of Education was involved only after this decision to form a Trust had been taken and this was to ensure that the governing documents were suitable for a Church of England school joining the MAT; the Diocese always has to consent to a Church of England school becoming an academy so has to be involved. He then worked with the Church of England school and the wider group of schools to assist and support in liaising with the Department for Education and ensuring the appropriate protections of ethos were in place. This was absolutely not in any way driven by the Diocesan Board of Education, but by the group of schools involved.

It may help to clarify the role of Diocesan Director of Education. In this role Paul Rickeard has statutory responsibility for supporting and advising 103 Church of England schools across the Dioceses of both Newcastle and Durham. As part of this role he has strategic oversight for education and ensuring all schools are the very best that they can be which does involve looking at all of the possible options available to schools and supporting governors to consider options with the background of his experience and that of his team. There are 14 academies in the Durham Diocese including one which is part of a mixed MAT; 6 in the Newcastle Diocese all of whom are part of three separate mixed MATs and in addition there are two other mixed MATs proposed by school groups in development.

Paul has supported and worked with all of these ventures and the Diocesan Education Boards are represented at Member level on all of these Trusts as required by the national Church of England. The Membership of these Trusts is publicly available on “Get Information about Schools” and the membership of NEAT and the role of the Diocesan Education Board (which Paul represents) was also explained in the consultation documentation. Hopefully this context helps alleviate any concerns.

- ❖ **The letter from the Chair of Governors and Head says that the Diocesan Board of Education will only support joining a Church of England MAT or a mixed MAT. Does this mean that the lease for the school will only be granted if we go down this route?**

The Diocesan Board of Education is only able to support any proposal for a school becoming an academy and joining a MAT if the governance structures enable its ethos to remain fully protected as a Church of England school. The national Church of England Education Office has agreed model documents and structures at national level with the department for Education to ensure these structures are legally correct and the Diocese must ensure these protections and structures are properly in place before granting consent for any school to join an academy trust. The school site is owned by the vicar and church wardens of All Saints parish on Trust for the school as a Church of England school so it

would not be the Diocese who would be granting any right to occupy the land but those trustees. In any event this would be by way of a nationally agreed model licence agreement called a church supplemental agreement. The school would not be awarded an academy order if the Diocese were unable to consent to its proposals to join a MAT which did not have the necessary protections for its ethos in place.

## **9. Decision Making Process**

### **❖ Please confirm the exact process this consultation will take and the decision-making process plus the timeline.**

Once the consultation period has concluded the governors will consider all responses from staff, parents, PCCs and others including the Diocesan Board of Education, Gosforth Schools Trust and the Local Authority. We will seek to identify the key themes, areas of concern and areas of support. Governors will then use this collated information to inform their decision, also taking into account their own experience of the school and may seek the advice and support of the Diocesan Board of Education and the Local Authority when doing so. It is important that this isn't seen as simply a "referendum" by all those who respond to the consultation as in reality the duty is on governors as those ultimately responsible for the future sustainability, educational performance and strategic oversight of the school. This is a huge responsibility, particularly in light of the previous difficulties the school has experienced, and governors need to very carefully consider the implications of any decision, ensuring that they are confident their decision is being made for the right reasons and in the very best interests of the school and the children.

Parents will be updated following any governing body decision following the end of the extended consultation period. If governors do decide to proceed then an application will be submitted to the Regional Schools Commissioner requesting permission to convert to academy status. This application will be considered by a Head Teacher Board who will decide whether to issue an academy order (which is permission to proceed to full conversion). This is likely to take at least 6 weeks after the end of the extended period. If an academy order is issued then lawyers will need to be instructed to carry out the legal steps towards conversion and there will be a process of formal due diligence to again look at financial and educational implications and for staff to go through a full TUPE consultation process. This stage will take at least a further 4-6 months so it is unlikely that any conversion would take effect until at least Autumn of 2019.

### **❖ Is the view of the parents of children in lower years being given more weight? For example this will impact reception children far more than year 4.**

All parents' views are valid and important and governors will carefully consider views of all parents equally. We acknowledge that those parents of children in the lower years have more years remaining at the school and their views are extremely important. However those with children in the higher years have valuable experience of the school, its governors and staff from being part of the school community for a longer period of time so it would not be appropriate that their opinions are given less weight.

## **10. Questions about education provision**

### **❖ Can NEAT change the number of pupil contact days/school holidays?**

Local authority maintained schools, like ARFS, are required to have 190 pupil contact days. Academy trusts are not required to follow this, however NEAT chooses to follow the term dates set by Newcastle City Council and therefore ARFS would have the same number of pupil contact days/school holidays as it does currently. Holiday dates do not have to be the same across a MAT. It is more important that they meet local circumstances.

### **❖ Can the NEAT increase class sizes above 30 pupils?**

No, academy trusts are subject to the same statutory requirements as maintained schools in relation to infant class sizes legislation (Reception and KS1). There is no current statutory restriction on class size in KS2 therefore either the current Governing Body or NEAT could hypothetically increase class sizes

and some other schools in the area have done this. However, they would have to consult on increasing Pupil Admission Numbers.

❖ **Have any of the NEAT schools been inspected by Ofsted since the trust was formed? If not, how can you demonstrate that the schools within the trust have improved?**

Schools that convert to academy status will usually be inspected within three years of opening and as all of the NEAT schools are currently in their second year of operation none have been inspected yet. Part of the evidence trail of any inspection is pupil outcomes and all of the NEAT primaries have either improved their academic outcomes or remained above national outcomes. Furthermore, NEAT have spent a significant amount of time developing principles of an effective curriculum and a CPD offer that will enable continuous school improvement.

❖ **Will the difference in the 2 tier and 3 tier system cause difficulties between ARFS and the schools within NEAT? Will ARFS become a Primary School?**

The Governors do not see that this would cause difficulty although we would expect to benefit from their experience of Years 5 and 6. ARFS will only become a Primary School if all the other schools in the Gosforth Pyramid convert to a 2 tier system (as has happened in Ponteland). We will maintain strong links with GST.

❖ **The other NEAT schools have a much higher proportion of disadvantaged pupils. How will NEAT have a positive impact on outcomes at ARFS?**

NEAT believe that all children should achieve the highest possible outcomes whatever their backgrounds and starting points in education and to that end, teaching and learning is the key priority for NEAT. Quality first teaching is the most effective strategy in securing good outcomes. NEAT have worked in partnership with ARFS for the last year supporting the professional development of the school's staff alongside developing strategies to track and monitor teaching and learning. Through this collaboration and the focus on quality first teaching, we have seen improved outcomes and NEAT are very confident that if ARFS joins NEAT, they will help the school to secure further improvements in educational outcomes. Furthermore, teaching and learning is ever evolving: being part of a larger organisation will help ensure that ARFS is at the cutting edge of teaching and learning developments.

## **11. Questions About Governance**

❖ **What types of decisions would still be made at local level by ARFS governors? Would Governors lose control?**

The ARFS Local Governing Committee would establish the school's ethos and character, agree the timing of the school day, the school's training dates, school uniform etc, make decisions about whether pupils should be admitted or excluded and decide school-level policies as set out in C4 in original FAQs. In addition, the Local Governing Committee (LGC) would have a key role in monitoring and scrutinising the school performance acting as the 'eyes and ears' of the trust board. This would enable the LGC to focus on the children's needs at ARFS.

❖ **Will the wider priorities and challenges that NEAT faces take priority over those faced by ARFS?**

We face the same challenges; however they may not be apparent to everyone. As all NEAT schools are Newcastle based, they work collaboratively with the Local Authority and Newcastle schools to address shared challenges and priorities together. Within a MAT, it is the role of the Trust Board to act strategically and ensure the priorities and challenges of all of its academies are addressed. Furthermore, the LGC of NEAT schools has a key role in highlighting and addressing the individual challenges and priorities faced by their school.

All schools currently face shared challenges and priorities and an example of this would be the current pressures on school funding.

## **12. Questions About Finance**

❖ **Is this a purely financial based decision?**

No. After many years of hard work, by the Senior Leadership Team and Governors, and a variety of cost cutting exercises across the school, our budget, for the first time, balances and will continue to do so for the next three years. However, costs continue to rise year on year so we must not be complacent and look at ways to secure further cost savings. It would however make our school more financially stable in the longer term because NEAT could legally procure contracts and services to be shared amongst their schools.

❖ **Would it be helpful if parents raised money to help the school's budget?**

As you are aware, the PTFA already supports our school through various fundraising activities held throughout the year. These activities provide much needed additional funding as well as enhancing our children's experiences. We would, of course, welcome additional volunteers to further support this work.

❖ **How does NEAT allocate funding to the academies within the trust? Are funds targeted at Year 6 which would be to the detriment of ARFS?**

The General Annual Grant (GAG) funding for each school is calculated using the local authority's funding formula and this is the allocation that each school receives. Each school is then responsible for allocating its available funding to address their own specific priorities when setting each year's budget. There are no trust wide funds that are targeted to support Year 6 only.

Much of the funding is ring fenced and must be spent on our children in our school e.g. pupil premium funding, sports premium, music grant etc.

❖ **NEAT provide central services to all their schools this includes an attendance officer, a welfare officer and admin staff. Surely ARFS will have less use of some of these services?**

No. ARFS would use these services however, we would be paying in less than the other larger schools currently pay in as each school's percentage contribution is based upon their own budget, not a fixed amount per school. This ensures any costs are relative to school size - we would pay in considerably less than the other schools. This would give us access to services which we currently cannot afford but our children would benefit from.

❖ **Will ARFS be at a disadvantage as it won't receive funding from the local authority if it needs to make redundancies?**

All maintained schools in Newcastle are directly responsible for the redundancy costs that they become liable for and so there is no disadvantage to ARFS if they leave the local authority. A potential benefit of being part of the NEAT MAT would be that there is the potential for redeployment of staff across the MAT, which may reduce the risk of redundancy costs being incurred.

❖ **Has NEAT previously made staff redundant and how much did this cost?**

Since NEAT was established in April 2017, two positions within the MAT and its trading subsidiary have been made redundant at a total cost of £24k.

❖ **Do the salaries over £60,000 declared in the MAT's annual accounts all relate to members of the NEAT central team? Won't this be a financial burden for a small first school like ARFS?**

No. All salaries across the trust are included in the declaration of the number of salaries above £60k in the annual accounts and so this includes leaders working in each of the schools as well as those working in the central team.

Each school's contribution to the shared central services is based on a percentage of its core per pupil funding and so all schools have the same relative cost for these services.

❖ **Are the other schools in NEAT full? How does this affect the trust's finances?**

Two of the MAT's schools are full and two more have rising pupil numbers, which reflects the demographics of the local areas covered by those schools. Schools are primarily funded on their pupil numbers and so an increasing number of children in our schools is positive for the long-term sustainability of NEAT. The one issue that needs to be considered is the impact of lagged funding, whereby pupils are funded in the year after they join the school, which can lead to a funding gap for any

school whose numbers are growing rapidly. However the MAT is in a strong financial position, with good cash reserves and where necessary is able to support its schools as their pupil numbers grow.

❖ **Is it too early to assess the effectiveness of NEAT?**

We acknowledge that NEAT is in its infancy, in its current form, but the schools worked together as the Riverside Learning Trust, prior to conversion. In a short space of time they have built on these foundations and achieved significant gains. As the LA told us, they are one of the highest achieving group of Primary Schools within the city, at KS2.

❖ **We feel we have received too little information.**

We take on board that some stakeholders do not feel they have been provided with sufficient information but we have tried to share as much information as we could and hope that this additional information helps answer questions. We have never undertaken a consultation of this nature before and therefore we are responding as quickly as we can. We would like to have responded sooner but we are sure you appreciate the time that it has taken to pull together all of this information and deal with queries from all stakeholders.

❖ **This decision should not be rushed. Can we revisit this in a couple of years?**

Yes, subject to NEATs agreement and future growth of NEAT and its future capacity.

Answers compiled by the Governors of ARFS, in consultation with the Diocesan Education Board of Education, NEAT and GST. 31.1.19