

Address – EPHA Small Schools Headteacher Conference 2022

Wednesday 19th October 2022

0905-1000 (45 minutes plus 10 minutes Q&A)

Planning the Journey to 2030

SLIDE 1: Welcome



Good morning colleagues, I am delighted to be with you this morning for your conference, I trust that it will be an interesting and engaging day.

Thank you Jinnie for your kind introduction. As my biography states on the agenda I am the Principal and CEO for the Consortium Trust, currently a 12 setting Trust with 11 primary schools in Norfolk and Suffolk, the smallest school with 21 pupils and the largest around 300, we also operate a large independent nursery provision in Lowestoft. In addition to our core business Consortium Trust also operates a swimming pool, a 34 bed residential field study centre on the beautiful north Norfolk coast (commercial break, bookings for summer 2023 are being taken now) and our own unregulated

Alternate Provision. Providing a 6 place AP provision for children within our own Trust that are risk of exclusion, staffed with qualified colleagues showing commitment to inclusion in our Trust

SLIDE 2: The map



The Consortium Trust has been in existence since August 2016 and was borne from the desire to ensure the longevity and indeed existence of the two small primary schools that I was the Executive Headteacher for, and at a time when Suffolk County Council were actively closing neighbouring schools.

(Refer to the map) Our schools are rural, coastal, small and unique what's not to love!

Over the past six years we have grown significantly while keeping to our core mission of supporting small rural primary schools to flourish. I strongly believe that schools and school buildings are community assets and that we need to protect, promote and open them up to the local community.

We have also kept three primary schools open simply by offering them a home in our Trust, where the local authority had advanced

plans to close them as maintained schools. One of which is Winterton, where we have developed the FSC provision (reference sales again), we started with 12 pupils and now have 60 statutory aged pupils, plus a nursery and a parent and toddler group. These decisions are never easy, often giving us more headaches than we would like, but are socially and morally right!

As a Trust we are about to embark on the next stage of our journey, taking on two large special school academies in Suffolk, further diversifying our Trust and strengthening the skill set within our team. This is part of a wider recalibration of the academy system that will ultimately see fewer, larger and all-through multi-academy trusts. This is a key aim of the Government education white paper, although, it is due to the natural evolution of the system rather than the direct result of government policy.

As a recent departing member of the East of England Department for Education Advisory Board, I am now free from political restriction, therefore I am able to be more open with my views during my address this morning. Although I should emphasise, that views expressed are mine and not necessarily the views of my Trust or my Trust Board.

I have been in the fortunate position of effectively having four careers, coming late to education. I started a 15 year career in medical research, as a staff cytogeneticist, before retraining as a teacher. I also held a commission in the Army Reserve as a Lieutenant. And had a reasonably successful political career, serving 10 years as an elected member of Norwich City Council and fighting 5 general elections (so far)!

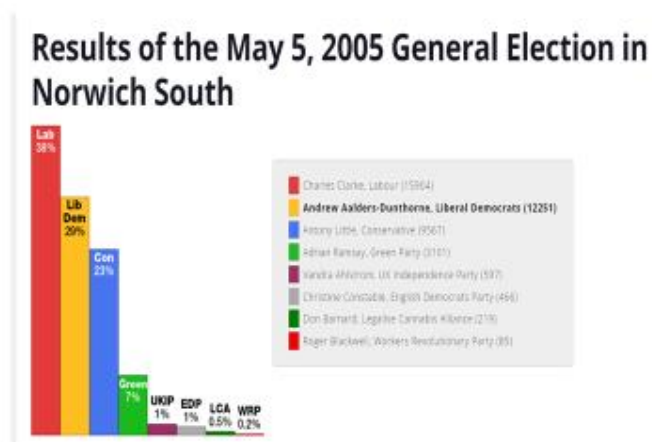
This has all contributed to shape my personal belief and character providing me with a bedrock on which I now draw on in my best job yet as CEO of Consortium Trust.

In the spirit of transparency my political ideology is grounded in liberalism and social democracy. With one of my greatest achievements, back in 2005, when as a nearly new teacher in Norwich I came within 3500 votes of taking the seat off the then Education Secretary Charles Clarke in the general election.

SLIDE 3: Political bar chart



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Anyway enough about me! Colleagues, my contribution this morning is titled 'Planning the Journey to 2030' and the very concept does seem slightly ludicrous not because it is eight years away. But due to the fact that in the past year we have seen a carousel of education secretaries, with the existing (and *I believe* this is still the case, since by drive from the Norfolk border this morning) Kit Malthouse being the fifth.

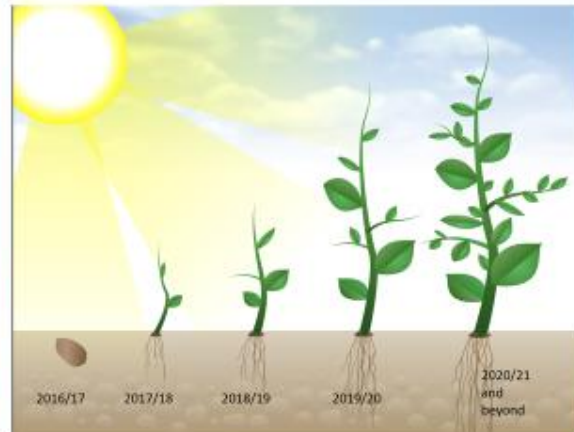
SLIDE 4: Kit Malthouse



Five secretary of states in a year would appear crazy, but what is even more unsettling is that since I started planning my talk with Pam back in June, there has been three occupants of this high office. With such a merry-go-round at the heart of government and the very government itself in doubt, how can we as educational leaders plan for a point almost a decade way and most certainly in a new political landscape.

I hope that he is listening although I am not going to hold my breath.

SLIDE 5: Planning



But plan we must, as our pupils, staff and communities look to us for leadership and stability while the world around us can feel anything but stable. The key things for me is to put the best interests of the child at the heart of our decision making, not to panic or be bounced into a decision, but plan strategically the direction for your school now. Investment and research now will pay dividends when the time in right.

I would like to share with you, the Consortium journey, discuss some of the options and consider the benefits and pitfalls of the journey to academisation. I am not here to bang the drum for the academy sector, Consortium does not and have no plans to operate in Essex, I have no vested interest – but I can provide my honest appraisal. Becoming an academy and then developing a multi-academy trust was the right decision for me and the schools and settings I have the honour of serving, but academisation is a solution and in certainly not the solution.

In fact academisation was twice rejected by my then governing body and indeed myself... before taking the plunge in 2016, what is important to note is that it was a different time. What hasn't changed is that; I didn't want my schools to lose their identity; I didn't want them to end up in a national chain; but I recognised that the status quo was not an option.

What is clear in the Government's Educational White Paper is the aspiration that all schools will be within a strong family of schools and that looks firmly towards a MAT-structure.

While the aspiration is there, there is no clear methodology to 'make' maintained schools transfer, no mechanism beyond a trigger from an adverse Ofsted inspection. In legalisation currently there are two routes that the DfE through the Regional Director can intervene in the governance of an LA maintained or indeed a struggling academy school.

Firstly, a category four inspection result that would trigger a DAO – Directive Academy Order and secondly the 'coasting' definition where a school does not show that it is making and maintaining a good standard of education – by incurring two consecutive Require Improvement judgements. The two RI judgement measure is very much the focus for the DfE at the moment and obviously expands the pool of schools that could become subject to a Directive Academy Order in respect to an LA maintained school or a brokerage of an academy.

SLIDE 6: Forcing your hand



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While I am not advocating that you plan for an adverse Ofsted inspection, part of the strategic critical incident plan should in my view contain the pre-planned elements of 'what if'. Not out of fear, but of a clear, predetermined and well researched position of strength. There is nothing worse than being bumped into a decision during a period of turmoil!

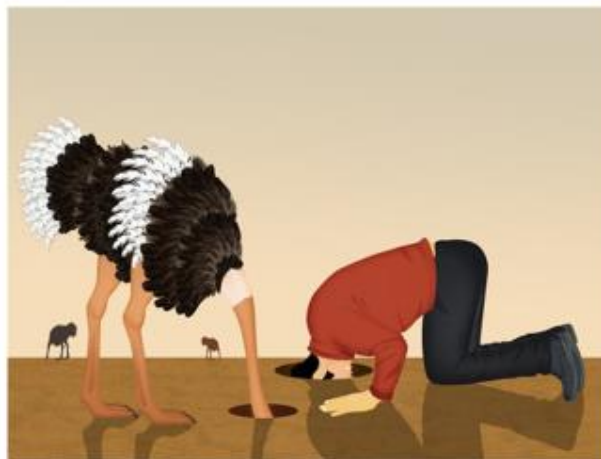
Whether you consider academisation for the freedoms and benefits that being in the right Trust provides or making those contingency plans in the event of a potential critical incident. Those discussions while not in crisis will support any potential transition, whether that is in free will, strongly encouraged or forced!

I do not see the political appetite to unpick the academy sector, and I do believe that it would be a retrospective step. So a Governing Body position now of waiting for a Labour Government, that is technically two years away is not a sound strategy!

SLIDE 7: Head in the sand



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So if you or your governing body are playing the ostrich, this is a deeply insecure space to occupy in today's fast changing and volatile educational landscape.

During my time on the DfE Advisory Board, a recurring theme that guided the Regional Director and the Advisory Board were where existing supportive and effective relationships existed, these were seriously considered and often supported as the best solution.

So professional connections and friendships made now will serve you and your school community well in the future.

The Government education white paper does talk about the relationship of the local authority as quasi-delivery system of county wide strategic activities. It also dangles the prospect of local authority lead MATs, the paper fails to specify the detail and this proposal is not welcomed by much of the existing academy sector. It smacks a little of gamekeeper turned poacher, effectively an LA-MAT would be marking its own homework and could create a further inequality in the system.

I can see that where there are a number of small, vulnerable maintained schools that may be unattractive to 'standard-MATs' that an LA version that scoops them up would be seen as a benefit. My issue is that it was my own schools and others within my MAT that were at risk from the LA. The LA was not an advocate, wasn't supportive and lacked the creativity (in my experience) to see a future for the schools. Opting instead for the destructive option of school closure.

In 2017 I recall colleagues from Essex County Council putting to the then Headteachers' Board the proposal to create an LA- MAT, I was part of those discussions and remember that it wasn't particularly warmly received by the Board. It was ultimately rejected.

With the new proposals there are two significant barriers to the formation of an LA-MAT.

1. That the proposed LA MAT must demonstrate that there is effectively a gap in the market, where there are already a number of MATs operating in a County the Department is unlikely to further dilute the sector and create another MAT. That is certainly the case in Norfolk and Suffolk where there is a plethora of MATs and SATS, while Essex the sector appears less developed there are still tens of Trusts in the County.

2. The Department's policy has hitherto been able to limit LA involvement in academy trusts to a maximum of 19.9 per cent of academy trust members being Local Authority Associated Persons (LAAP), i.e. being either elected members of an LA or persons who have been in the past four years; or currently employed by an LA or as an officer of a company which is under the control of the LA. While this is currently the position the DfE guidance document goes on to state that if LA-MATs are successful this limit could be removed.

Although nothing is insurmountable and legislation is obviously subject to review and change, it would require a level of scrutiny and in most cases parliamentary approval.

So my point is, revisiting our ostrich friend is that waiting for legislative change in the form of an Educational Bill or waiting for a new government after a General Election – is unlikely to deliver the short to medium term strategy that you will need.

So what could be the options moving forward...

SLIDE 8: OPTIONS



Explore the options

- Family of Schools
- Federations
- Association membership
- Joining a Trust
- Creating a Trust

Local collaborations through creating a loose, non-binding, retaining individual governance structures through **Family of Schools**. Effectively finding geographic neighbours that wish to work together on specific activities and projects. This is system leadership model worked effectively before academies in the form of LA clusters or pyramids, usually focused or lead by a Secondary. In more recent times Family of Schools morphed into ‘mates MATS’, not particularly aligned other than on the friendship of a group of heads. [Expand if time].

Federations are the next step on the alignment journey, where two or more schools come together with a single governance structure and often an Executive Head. A model that is well known in the small school sector. [Expand if time].

Associate membership of an existing Trust or the try before you buy model. Where the maintained school links with a Trust, maintaining its own governance structure but with a commitment to work towards a more formal arrangement that ultimately sees the school join the Trust.

The education white paper, promotes this as a vehicle to secure a single academy system. Recommending the methodology, incentivising through TCAF (Trust Capacity Academy Funding) and suggesting the partnership should last for a maximum of 18 months.

This method does in fact have significant advantages for the maintained school, with the opportunity to work with colleagues in the Trust sector, benefiting from some of the collaborative work while having the opportunity for maintained school leaders – to carry out deep and meaningful due diligence while keeping absolute control of the process. [Expand if time].

Joining a Trust – choose wisely and remember, if it's too good to be true – it probably is – I will explore this in more detail in a moment.


Creating a Trust – An application needs to be made to the Regional Director, this is not the preferred option currently but it is not unknown should the rationale for creating another Trust meets regional and local needs analysis.

But, the line of least resistance as far as organisation is concerned would be to join an established MAT. I have four top tips when considering this:

SLIDE 9: Top Tips



The slide features a large blue graphic on the left with the text 'TOP TIPS'. To the right, there are four circular icons with corresponding text. A small green box with the number '9' is in the top right corner.

-  Do your Homework
-  Primaries do not need to be run by a secondary
-  Forget about Finance – it is ultimately irrelevant
-  It's about identity not autonomy

- Do your homework
- Primaries DO NOT need to be run by a secondary
- Forget about finance – it is ultimately irrelevant
- It's about identity not autonomy

Do your homework, interview Trust leaders, google, read the published accounts and the auditor's report, it gives you far more information than the pounds and pennies. Visit school settings and talk to the MSA or the caretaker. Can they articulate the vision and ethos of the Trust? If they can the Trust has nailed it – probably nothing else matters!

I have often had robust professional conversations with other Trust leaders and DfE Officials around the leadership and management of Trusts. As a Fellow of the Institute of Leadership and Management and a seasoned school leader, I do not see why and no one has been able to prove why a primary school leader can't lead a Trust with secondary schools. But Department thinking appears to reinforce the view that a secondary school leader can lead a Trust with primary schools. This is not only an inaccurate view but is slightly insulting to

the strengths and abilities of a primary school leader. My view is that there is no better school leadership training programme than heading up a small primary school of less than 100 pupils and 15 staff. I am sure we agree a truly intense and holistic course.

It is easy to focus on finance, this obviously is a consideration and the academy sector in the early days did not wrap themselves in glory after several high profile cases of financial mismanagement. But the reality is that the academy sector now operates in a highly regulated and accountable system.

As school leaders will be very aware that actual amount of disposal revenue that you can control is a very small proportion of the total school budget. Fixed costs including staffing, utilities and contracts swallowing the vast majority of available resources.

An advantage of being in a Trust is the ability to pool finances, secure economies of scale and benefit from services that the Trust may have at its disposal.

A governing body starting point is often what is the 'top slice' or 'Academy Charge'? Focusing on a % rather than asking the real question on what is the Trust's budgetary decision making ethos, priorities and engagement with stakeholders? No, matter what the Trust states the % top slice is, it cannot promise that that budget will remain at the individual school. The Trust is the legal eternity and the CEO is also referred to as the 'Accounting Officer'. Having a discussion about how resource allocation is arrived at is a far more mature position than comparing a 6% top slice in Trust A and a 15% top slice in Trust B.

For me it has always been about identify not autonomy – my Trust operates on aligned systems, collective responsibility and the sharing of intellectual, financial and actual property. We truly collaborate, share, discuss and debate – we often agree and occasionally there are differences of opinion. What is always secured is that we place

the child at the centre of our decision making and that once we have had our internal professional discussions and come to a collective view that we as a Trust support those decisions, with our hearts and minds.

While this can be seen as a loss of autonomy, I would argue that in a system that is inclusive and collaborative, better discussions can be had and ultimately stronger decisions can be made. Headship can be a very lonely furrow and I personally welcome as do my colleagues the opportunity to regularly work with likeminded colleagues to positively contribute to the wider educational landscape and support the better outcomes for all children. It is unwise and ultimately unhealthy for the sole school leader in a school to engage in conversations with themselves!

This collective responsibility does not have to come with a loss of identity or school individuality. I created the Consortium Trust because I passionately believed in the future viability of my village schools, our Trust system has been developed to ensure that front facing aspects of school remain as individual, quirky, often grounded in local history and tradition. My schools are proud to be members of the Consortium Trust, but they are not faceless clones. That would be counterproductive and certainly not aligned with my values and ethos. Difference and diversity creates strength and innovation.

So again I would advise that when considering the future as 2030 looms, the question is not necessarily what you will lose, but what opportunities you gain!

SLIDE 10: Thick MAT



This is a genuine photo I took in a school hall, where I was pitching against two other Trust Leaders to encourage a maintained school to join our Trust in Ipswich. I didn't convince the governing body on that occasion – but as the invitation appears to be clear – so I am still taking it as a win!

Whether a thick MAT is welcome or not at your school, I suspect that we are all still reliant on some support in the future, no matter how ineffective or unwelcome it may be. Planning your journey to 2030 will need time and effort – who knows what tomorrow will bring – but change is coming. Whatever your thoughts and actions may or may not be, it is probably worse somewhere else, so I leave you with this thought!

SLIDE 11: Truss

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Final thought ...



Truss
/tr[^]s/
noun
a framework made
in simplest form
from two short planks

Thanks for your engagement and I hope that you found it useful, I am happy to take questions.