

**The Questions schools should
ask a trust before they join**

Sir David Carter

1. What does the trust care about and how do our values match up?

- If you review the values of trusts and their schools as they are articulated on their websites, there is enormous uniformity.
 - Children First, Staff matter, Community Cohesion are just a few or the obvious statements that of course make sense. But does this aspiration match up to the message?
- How as a possible trust joiner can you find out?
- The answer comes from talking to existing members of the trust. How do headteachers feel? What is it like to be a middle leader in the trust? How do support staff feel they are being developed?
- Prepare a short questionnaire that you might ask the trust to distribute on your behalf, to get a sense of how different stakeholders feel about being in the trust. This will not provide all the answers you need but it will address a few.

2. How much **Autonomy** will we retain?

- The reality is that you will lose the independence of being a stand alone school. But are there compensations that outweigh this factor?
- My question would be to work out what it is that you want to retain because it works better as opposed to holding a philosophical debate about whether independence is the overarching objective.
 - If a school has no desire to change or embrace better practice, then joining a trust won't change this.
- However, where there is demonstrable evidence that a common approach to assessment, data collection, testing, curriculum development, training and induction means better quality and, equally important, less duplication and therefore a lighter workload, it becomes a powerful benefit of trust membership.
- Find out how they operate and whether these potential outcomes are a real.

3. Who is responsible for standards?

- In a trust, the CEO is the accounting officer.
- The board is held to account by the DfE for standards, financial oversight and the quality of governance. This has to be part of a seamless relationship between the schools and the trust.
- The trust cannot fulfil the expectations of the funding agreement without good practice at the school level.
- Therefore, the leaders and local governors have to be accountable to the CEO and the board for standards in their schools.
- This collaborative approach should be one of mutual benefit for both parties.
- The key question to address here is how will the accountability be managed? How will the leadership team be challenged and supported? How will the local governors work with the board?

4. How will you support us to improve our school more quickly than we can on our own?

- We sometimes make the mistake of assuming only schools in difficulty need school improvement.
- My view is that every school has pockets of weakness that become more challenging if left exposed
- The key questions to ask here are to do with the way that the trust will add capacity to improve more quickly those pockets of weakness than has been possible before.
 - What does the term school improvement mean to the trust?
 - Is there a trust improvement plan that enables each school to see what capacity it can draw upon as well as offering capacity to the trust?
 - Is school improvement more about “weighing the pig” than “fattening it”? Knowing through data collection that boys in year 8 attend less frequently is great, but how does knowing this produce a plan to make it better?

5. What opportunities will there be for us to support other schools in the trust?

- For good schools this should be one of the most important questions.
- Trusts should “commission” great schools to join them to become incubators of stronger practice
- Trusts should talk to good schools who can offer capacity in areas where they need more
- A key question for a school thinking about joining a trust should focus on how a school can become a lead school in a particular area of improvement. A specialism that the trust needs but does not have
- A new school joining a trust can offer more practical and immediate solutions than a one-off DfE improvement grant that still needs someone to deliver the end goal.
- Leaders and teachers working with their colleagues as peers is always a better solution than simply bringing in another consultant who might have a preferred solution that is not the right one.

6. What is the role of members and trustees?

- This is a more technical question and arguably should already be known but I am sometimes reminded when I talk to trust and school leaders how little is known about this.
- A trust is a charity and the members appoint the trustees. The members are the “guardian angels” of the charity
- The trustees own the strategy and challenge and support the CEO and the trust leaders to implement the improvement plan. Their role is oversight and scrutiny
- The schools work with the trust and the other schools to deliver the improvement in their schools.
- If you see it in this way, then the obvious questions are more to do with
 - the people and their experience,
 - the strategy of the trust, and
 - the relationship between the trustees and how they operate their oversight.

7. What is the role of the local academy boards

- The local boards are NOT governing bodies—we should call them boards, sub committees or councils
- The scheme of delegation is vital and you should ask to see it as it outlines exactly what responsibilities this group have
- I think these boards should at the very least be tasked with these four responsibilities. To oversee....
 - The experience of a child in a trust school. Are they happy, safe and well educated?
 - The experience of an adult employed by the trust to work in a trust school? How are they supported and developed?
 - The experience of a parent or carer who chooses to send their child to a trust school. How are they communicated with? What are their views? How do they articulate concerns?
 - The role of the school as an ambassador for the trust. How does a model that will be very different for the community (the MAT) become something that is seen as a positive force for good?

8. How will the trust communicate with our school? How can we share our challenges and successes?

- Communication has to flow in both directions from the trust to the school and back again.
- How does the trust ensure that what is taking place at board level is communicated with local boards.
- Is there a standard agenda for example at each local board where feedback from the trust is presented and where feedback for trustees is gathered?
- How do the chairs of school boards meet and feed ideas and concerns to the board? How does the trust expect schools to communicate with their families ?
- The key question is one of operational clarity. If things change at school level it is not difficult to respond within hours. If they change at trust level, it can be weeks before the implication is understood.
- Working out how and who is tasked with this communication is key.

9. How do we influence key strategic decisions that may impact upon our school?

- This flows from the Communication question (No 8) but has a specific focus on the trust strategy and what it means for the school.
- There should be synergy between the trust plan and that of the school.
- I would suggest at the school level the questions are these.
 - How does my school help the trust to deliver its organisational strategy and priorities?
 - How does the trust help my school to improve more quickly than we might have if we remained as a stand alone school?
 - How would you consult with us about a major change in the way that the trust operates?
 - This makes explicit that the trust is its schools and the schools are the trust which has to be the basis of a strong culture.
 - Can a trust be good if one of its schools has an RI judgement? Can a school in a trust be comfortable if another school is failing?

10. If we join, what will the trust be like in three years time?

- Is your school the first of a large group of schools that are likely to join the trust in the next few years?
- Are you going to be the “new kid on the block”, getting all the support you need until there is a new joiner at which point the support stops?
- Is the trust you might join today going to feel very different in the future if another 20 schools join after you?
- What succession plans are in place for key trust leaders? CEO, Finance Director, Chair of Trustees etc
- Getting a sense of the medium-term priorities is going to be vital to your understanding of how you can play a part in the development of the trust but also how the trust will continue to support you in five years time.