



# Highfields School

Headteacher: Mr A Marsh



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Dear Highfields Staff Member

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Governors want Highfields School to be the best it can be, both now and for the foreseeable future. Its students and staff deserve the very best. Over the last few years our observation, however, of both the physical state of school buildings and the reducing support given to school staff has led us to question the extent to which the local authority can support us as we move forward.

Governors were originally due to send you this letter in March but chose to 'freeze' these discussions while the school was coming to terms with the current pandemic. **We are moving forward with this more quickly than we intended to and know that the timing is not ideal. However, the Covid-19 crisis itself has highlighted to governors the crucial and urgent importance of belonging to a medium size team of strong, like-minded schools.**

The technical, financial, administrative and moral support which we have seen offered to schools since March in strong multi-academy trusts (MATs) has been far greater, we believe, than has been experienced by standalone schools like Highfields. We have watched many school leaders at Highfields pushed to the limits as they try to match with a small team the workload which in decent MATs is undertaken by a much bigger collective. One small example of this can be seen in the pooled online teaching resources offered by a number of strong MATs. This has reduced the pressure on individual MAT teachers to produce resources. A second example is the production of letters, lockdown arrangements, legal advice, health & safety support, resources, PPE and signs which have been produced centrally for schools from the pooled resources of the MAT.

Therefore, the governing board has decided, with the agreement of the headteacher, that given the challenges we face and after significant initial investigations and discussions spanning several months (see appendix 1), to enter a formal consultation process with a MAT. This consultation will offer staff and families the opportunity to evaluate the decision to join the selected MAT and to have their views taken into account.

The MAT selected by the governors for this formal consultation is the East Midlands Education Trust (EMET) because this trust most closely meets the criteria set out in our selection process (see appendix 1). EMET have agreed to invite Highfields to join their MAT.

The school intends to join EMET multi-academy trust only as long as expectations already informally established between the school and EMET **are confirmed to governors' satisfaction through the formal consultation process which will now follow.** These expectations are that:

1. Highfields students and staff will benefit as a result of our membership of EMET, a 'partnership of willing, proud and autonomous schools'. Our membership will lead to enhanced resources, improved support for school leaders at every level, training, support and progression opportunities for staff and, most importantly, a strong base from which to secure further improvement for students and staff moving forward.

*This is a good school. Ofsted, May 2017*  
*A good school with an outstanding Sixth Form. Ofsted, October 2012*





2. The unique character, name, uniform, practices, traditions, curriculum and ethos of Highfields School will be respected and the school will continue to be led by its school leaders and governing board. This will apply as long as Highfields remains Ofsted 'good' or 'outstanding' and financially solvent. Should the school fall short of these standards it is expected that the school would receive additional direction and support from EMET in order to secure its improvement.
3. Highfields School will benefit from significant investment in the learning environment including such refurbishments, rebuilds or upgrades as are needed to ensure that both sites become much better places to learn and work for students and staff.
4. EMET will have a positive impact on student achievement and on the effectiveness and workload of middle and senior leaders and the wider staff, through its support for curriculum development and school improvement.
5. Highfields staff will be invited to apply for developmental opportunities within the 'family of schools', either through roles in EMET's curriculum development/school improvement team or through secondments or other similar activities. This would be agreed through discussion with Highfields leadership and would not be allowed to compromise the ongoing quality of education offered to Highfields students.
6. Highfields staff will not be adversely affected through joining a MAT, and any changes which do affect a small number of staff through centralisation of, for example, finance and HR will be phased in to minimise negative impact.
7. Highfields' net financial position over time will be enhanced through membership of EMET.
8. Any changes to staff terms and conditions will be minimal and will be made clear through the consultation process.
9. Highfields staff will not be coerced into working elsewhere in the MAT's 'family of schools'.
10. Current guidelines will mean that membership of the trust will provide two to three years exemption from Ofsted inspections to allow the school a period of transition.
11. Current government policy which appears implicitly to disadvantage local authority schools will not significantly change.

It goes without saying that we will be expecting immediate and significant support as we negotiate our way through the next stages of our recovery from Covid-19.

Other expectations may arise through the consultation process. Governors must be satisfied that the track history of EMET suggests that the expectations are 'more likely than not' to be realised. Should emerging evidence convince governors that these expectations will not be met, the governing board will exercise its right to withdraw from the process.

We include a range of information below including answers to some of the initial questions you may have. As a priority we would like you to meet with leaders and teachers from EMET. These are informal discussions which will precede more formal meetings which will take place as part of the consultation. Attendance is voluntary and is for staff members of Highfields School only (unions and professional associations will be fully involved in the formal consultation process). **You can sign up through the link on the email issued with this letter (closes 5pm Sunday) for an opportunity**



**to be involved in either a socially distanced meeting or a Zoom session.** All sessions will feature a presentation by Rob McDonough from EMET and a Q&A session.

This matter is time sensitive because we believe that EMET is a sought after MAT and has finite capacity. If we do not explore this option now soon it may be too late as they will have taken on all the secondary schools that they feel they can reasonably support. Our options will then be limited significantly because, as you may be aware, not all MATs are equal in their approach, their principles or the ethos they promote.

Governors feel strongly that now more than ever, Highfields School needs to be part of a strong, secure collective and that delaying this matter is not in the interests of students or staff at Highfields School.

EMET have a clear line on staff consultation: if Highfields staff offer significant and sustained resistance to joining then EMET will withdraw their invitation. This reflects their stated identity as '**a partnership of willing, proud and autonomous schools**'.

We hope, therefore, that you will take some time to reflect on the benefits of joining this trust, not only in order to meet the significant challenges currently facing us, **but also to face those which may lie ahead in an uncertain future.**

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'A Ellson'.

Angeline Ellson  
Chair of Governors  
On behalf of the Full Governing Board



## Explanation of process thus far

### Rationale

Highfields students and staff deserve to attend a school which is a brilliant place to learn and work. Since September 2019 governors and various members of staff have been exploring who would be most likely to bring this about: the local authority (LA) or a multi-academy trust (MAT). This is an extension of a discussion which began in 2017 which resulted in no formal consultation being undertaken.

### Action

The school has acted in line in with guidance provided by Derbyshire Local Authority (*Alternative Models of School Leadership: Revised Guidance to Schools September 2019*) and has the LA's support in seeking the best solution for Highfields School.

### Method

To provide a comparison between the LA and MATs we shortlisted MATs who:

- a) Are high performing (especially based on progress 8), so that Highfields can learn from schools who are even more effective than us
- b) Have similar schools/ethos to Highfields
- c) Have schools local to Highfields so that a) meaningful links could be retained with MAT HQ and partner schools and b) MAT was experienced at dealing with DCC and Derbyshire based challenges
- d) Have at least 5 secondary schools in order to ensure significant support capacity/economy of scale/security
- e) Have significant funds to invest in Highfields students and staff
- f) Allow very high level of autonomy so that Highfields staff could work creatively and independently and so that any changes to staffing/processes/school traditions and practices would be minimal
- g) Were currently recruiting school to their MAT

We longlisted thirteen local MATS (see fig.1) and reduced them to four by applying the criteria above (appendix 1). Andrew Marsh and Peter Cole held talks with four MATS who had showed an interest in Highfields (EMET, LEAP, Redhill, Mercia) and rejected a further two (LEAP, Mercia) because they did not meet the criteria above convincingly enough.

We invited the two remaining MATS to present their offer to governors. After this we invited them both back to answer more detailed questions from governors. At this point governors agreed to reject one of the MATs which left EMET as the MAT who would be compared in detail to the LA.

Members of staff and headteachers from EMET then met with senior leaders, teachers, support staff and senior leaders. A number of visits to EMET schools including West Bridgford, Ripley Academy, Joseph Whitaker and Kimberley were undertaken to explore the benefits/costs of joining EMET.

### **Fig. 1: shortlisting process to find MATs to compare with LA**

Note: We have included only trusts which meet 3 or more criteria and which are geographically appropriate.



Criteria	A	B	C	D	E	F	G
	High performing?	Similar schools/ ethos?	Local/ Derbyshire schools?	At least 5 secondaries?	Significant funds to invest in students/ staff?	High level autonomy?	Currently recruiting?
LEAP	No -0.34	Yes	No	No	No	Yes	Yes
EMET	Yes 0.34	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Redhill	No 0.07	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
Outwood	Yes 0.16	No	Yes	Yes	Unsure	No	Unsure
Spencer	Yes 0.25	Yes	Yes	Yes	Maybe	No	Not sure
Ormiston	No -0.03	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No	Not sure
Two Counties	NO	No	Yes	Yes	Unsure	Yes	Unsure
Chorus	No	Yes	Yes (HVC only)	No	Unlikely	Yes	No
Mercia	Yes 0.47	Yes	No	No	Unlikely	Yes	Yes
Tapton	Yes 0.11	Yes	No	No	Unlikely	Yes	Unsure
Nova Trust	No 0.06	Yes	Yes (Kirk Hallam only)	Yes	Possibly	Unsure	Unsure
Minerva	Yes	No	No	Yes	Unsure	Yes	Unlikely
Delta	Yes 0.29	No	No	Yes	Yes	No	Unlikely

Finally, over a number of detailed meetings, EMET's support was compared with the LA's. We based these discussions on the relative track record of EMET versus LA since September 2017.



## Frequently asked questions

**Q. Why now? Surely the focus should be on recovering from this pandemic?**

A. The forming or joining of a multi academy trust was first raised in 2017 by the co-heads and governors at the time. We came back to this discussion in September 2019 and paused it in March 2020. We feel that delaying this discussion until Covid-19 is resolved is not an option and that Covid-19 itself is a challenge which calls for us to seek support. Governors have noted that successive headteachers over the last four years have reached the same conclusion: that Highfields needs to consider belonging to a medium sized collective of academies. Governors feel that this debate cannot be delayed further until the Covid-19 crisis is over, as there is no indication as to when this might be. We are keen to explore involvement only with trusts, like EMET, whose ethos ('a willing partnership of proud, autonomous schools') reflects our preferences. Governors have recently learnt that the Peak 11 (a longstanding consortium) is slowly disbanding and this is partly due to Peak 11 schools joining MATs. We believe that EMET will not expand beyond a certain number of schools and we do not want to delay to the point where this option is no longer open to us. The consultation and possible conversion will NOT require significant amounts of staff time and will NOT be allowed to undermine staff wellbeing or work/life balance.

**Q. But surely Highfields is good and improving further - why does it need to consider this type of change?**

Yes, Highfields is good and improving further, mainly as a result of the exhaustive and (possibly) unsustainable efforts of its staff team. However, the headteacher and governing board believe that there is a ceiling to this improvement if we remain with our local authority. The school and its staff need significant investment of money and support. This is why we are entering formal consultation with a MAT.

Schools in MATs can access resources that local authority schools cannot. This has been made so by the government because they wish all schools to become academies. Whilst some educationalists have political reservations about this, the fact remains that our staff and students are being potentially disadvantaged as long as we do not belong to a MAT.

**Q. Which evidence suggests that EMET, in particular, might be considered as a positive alternative to the LA?**

A. The evidence can be summarised thus:

1. EMET has a track record of respecting schools' individual identities and offering a high level of autonomy; we would not lose the autonomy we have under the LA. The MAT also has a good reputation amongst teaching unions.
2. In recent times (2017-2020) EMET has invested an average of £1.3million per school into EMET schools which are most similar to Highfields. DCC is not offering anything like this level of investment.
3. EMET has a track record of moving forward building projects quickly. This is not the case for LA where much needed projects (e.g. renovation of unhygienic Y11 toilets) can take many months or years to complete.
4. EMET has a track record in its schools of offering bespoke school to school CPD / development / support which far outweighs anything offered by the LA. Because EMET has similar schools, Highfields is also well placed to provide our own expertise to other schools which is usually beneficial for both parties.
5. EMET schools are high performing as a group (lead school P8= +0.79) and so we can assume that some EMET leaders have experience in solving some problems that Highfields may still be facing.



6. EMET offers some excellent career development possibilities for staff looking for progression (Highfields staff turnover is low and so promotion opportunities can be limited).
7. Membership of EMET will exonerate us from inspections for three years. This will give us the space and time to focus on being the school we want to be without distraction.
8. All available evidence suggests that EMET consultancy, marketing and recruitment is more effective than that which we are currently offered. Highfields needs to attract and retain the best staff and be the first choice for families of Y7 children in our area and Y12 students more widely.

**Fig.2: Comparison of track record of funding for capital projects (surplus to DFC) since 2017**

EMET: Examples of capital spending projects include sixth form centre at Kimberley and Sports/Performance Block at Ripley. The average total spend on capital projects since 2017 for EMET schools of similar size to Highfields: £1.3m

School Information					School Condition Allocation				
School	Phase	GAG (19/20)	Pupil Nos	SCA as % of GAG	17/18	18/19	19/20	20/21 (Proposed)	Total
JFC	Secondary	3,410,608	741	27%	292,478	229,784	134,547	249,547	<b>906,356</b>
TKS	Secondary	6,267,509	1301	24%	629,139	641,573	146,849	117,349	<b>1,534,910</b>
TRA	Secondary	3,467,953	690	15%	166,804	185,435	145,751	35,751	<b>533,741</b>
SWA	Secondary	3,844,944	834	28%	231,534	176,019	407,833	278,833	<b>1,094,219</b>
WBS	Secondary	7,741,431	1700	15%	388,172	220,704	172,553	412,553	<b>1,193,982</b>
JWS	Secondary	6,162,605	1308	20%	318,282	305,037	456,427	176,427	<b>1,256,172</b>

### DCC: Examples of capital spending projects

Although there have been no projects on the scale of a sixth form block or sports centre it would be true to say that DCC funding has allowed a number of projects. These include:

- 2017/18 Student Access Initiative (this money ensures DDA compliance for individual disabled students): projects worth £65,000 for toilets and £22,500 for lifts.
- 2019 Catering upgrade (£129,512) as part of DCC catering renewing contract (all fixtures and equipment belong to DCC catering).
- 2020 Insurance maintenance premium: Door upgrade to meet fire regulations £45,000, start date unknown. Agreed expenditure.
- 2020 Fire alarm c.£120K start date pending. Agreed expenditure.
- 2020? Insurance maintenance premium: Sports corridor roof repair £42,000: bid pending.
- 2020? Joint match funded (Highfields pays half of cost): security fencing/gates £35,000. Start date unknown.

Estimated total spent by DCC on capital projects or similar at Highfields School 2017-2020= **£382,012**



**Q. What's in it for students?**

A. Students in EMET schools have better facilities. Their working environment is smart and well maintained. Renovation take place frequently and worn or damaged surfaces are replaced. At least two schools have had major new builds in the last three years. Teaching is supported by a wider team of professionals within EMET who collaborate professionally over resources and practice. Achievement at EMET's lead school West Bridgford is truly outstanding (P8= +0.79) and other schools in the trust are approaching this level. Students in these schools have wider/ better options for post 16 and 18 study.

**Q. I have a year 6 child. How will potentially joining EMET affect admissions?**

A. It won't.

**Q. What are staff likely to gain?**

A. EMETs resources are pooled so that all leaders can choose to work as a collaborative unit. The senior teams regularly meet and combine their resources to solve common problems. Subject teams support and develop each other. Where individuals or departments find themselves with difficult to solve problems (perhaps there is a ceiling in GCSE subject) there is a pool of support to draw on - someone somewhere within EMET is likely to have solved that problem before. Excellent staff may look to develop their careers through progression routes offered by EMET (this would only be done where there was a net benefit to Highfields). Unlike Highfields under the local authority, EMET schools are regularly upgraded and repairs and renovations kept up to date creating a reasonable professional environment for its staff and students.

**Q. But surely the budget is looking more healthy at Highfields - we don't need extra resources any more do we...?**

A. All school budgets are looking more encouraging in 2020-21. The fact remains that local authority schools cannot bid into funds (including the condition improvement fund) in the same way as academies and therefore cannot expect the improvements to student and staff facilities that could be expected as part of EMET.

**Q. What will EMET expect from us?**

A. The MAT has a track record of autonomy. They are light touch if their schools are within budget and graded Ofsted good. Where schools meet these broad criteria the school the MAT expects that schools will oversee their own governance, uniform, ethos, teaching approach etc. Where schools struggle our investigations have revealed they have a strong record of offering bespoke support to support the school staff in improving things for students (for example at Ripley). Over time EMET schools are expected to offer to help other schools in the MAT. This is agreed between schools.

**Q. What will change as a result of being part of EMET?**

Staff at schools joining EMET have told us that many stakeholders notice no change as signage/uniform/name of school etc is unaffected. Changes will be made to roles involving finance and HR but this may be technical rather than substantial (finance and HR are centralised in most MATs). EMET schools are not expected to adopt new data systems, uniform, QA arrangements etc. EMET invited Highfields to join the MAT because they like what the school is doing and feel it is reflective of best practice.

**Q. Surely terms and conditions will change?**

A. Derbyshire Schools who have joined EMET have noted only small changes. One of these changes is time scales on some HR policies. This will be explored in the consultation.





**Q. Will EMET take our teachers?**

A. No. If teachers want to explore leadership or developmental roles across the MAT they would only be allowed to apply if it were clear that the net impact on Highfields students and staff was positive. Staff can, of course, choose to apply for jobs in other schools within EMET and Highfields will benefit from this 'pool' approach.

**Q. Why would we be exempt from Ofsted and is this a benefit?**

A. Any school who joins a trust is allowed this time for transition of a minimum of two years and a maximum of three years. Staff may feel that this is beneficial because it allows us to focus 100% on children rather than being unduly distracted by Ofsted schedules.

**Q. How would safeguarding/ early help of children be affected?**

A. Safeguarding arrangements will not be affected and neither would the early help offer to primary schools.

**Q. What are potential downsides of joining EMET?**

A. It's a one way process. If governors commit after formal consultation it is a binding arrangement. Staff morale may, in the short term, be affected by change. The 'top slice' is more than we give to LA (see below), however our expectation is that we would be a net beneficiary financially. Another downside is that it is often the case that headteachers within MATs can often be more quickly removed following dips in performance than their peers in local authority schools. A small number of roles around HR and finance will change over time in line with MAT policy. The people in these roles will be briefed throughout the process (and have been thus far) in order that they are able to make informed professional decisions. If the school dips below the performance criteria outlined above then EMET will intervene more. We have looked at a case study of how this was handled within EMET and feel satisfied that the response was supportive and positive.

**Q. The 'up front' top slice is about 2% (£100,000) per year. How can it be expected that 'Highfields' net financial position over time will be enhanced through membership of EMET'?**

A. Discussions with schools, including former Derbyshire local authority schools, have revealed that joining EMET has been financially positive despite the top slice. This is partly because the capital monies that EMET has put into, for example, a sports block at Ripley or a sixth form block at Kimberley have far outweighed the top slice. But it is also because EMET, like most MATs, reduce costs by centralising (over time) services like HR and finance, by applying for funds only available to academies, by buying products and services in bulk thus reducing the overall cost and by sharing resources (for example TES advertising) across the trust.

**Q. Will this affect our membership of Peak 11?**

A. No...but as stated above, Peak 11 and other soft federations are being disbanded as schools become part of multi academy trusts.

**Q. Will staff be shunted between EMET schools?**

A. Absolutely NOT under any circumstances.

**Q. Is this a move to pre-empt forced academisation?**

A. In short, not really. We do not know how the Johnson government will move forward on this but it is widely accepted that academisation is here to stay and that the government would like to phase out local authority schools. However, this has not been our primary motivation for seeking to join a MAT. We are primarily interested in educational improvement and investment in our school buildings.



- Q. Other secondary schools in Derbyshire are staying with DCC and they are doing fine...why can't we?**
- A. In fact Derbyshire, like most local authorities, has more and more schools joining MATs (Brookfield, Newbold, Tupton Hall) or planning to join (Hasland and others) for exactly the same reasons as Highfields is looking to join EMET: increased levels of support for students and staff.
- Q. Why bother consulting? Isn't this a done deal?**
- A. It's true that we are seriously committed to exploring this option because we think it is likely to benefit students and staff. As we have explained in our letter, if formal consultation reveals that EMET cannot meet to our satisfactions the expectations we have outlined, we will pull out. EMET have made it clear for their part that they have only ever welcomed schools into the trust who are willing members. Should it become clear that there is significant and sustained union opposition to the joining of EMET then EMET itself will withdraw their invitation to join.
- Q. Does the headteacher or senior team have anything to gain if this conversion goes ahead?**
- A. No; not beyond the advantages with regards to enhanced CPD, progression options and working environment on offer to other staff members. The status of the headteacher will remain the same and will not assume any 'executive' role as part of this conversion.
- Q. Some educationalists feel academy programme is flawed and educationally divisive: why are we supporting this strategy by considering the joining of EMET?**
- A. Governors have a range of political views and these have been aired in discussions. Ultimately governors agree that Highfields students deserve the increased resource and support enjoyed by schools in EMET and this underpins our formal consultation regarding this matter.
- Q. What happens now?**
- A. Families, students and staff will be consulted in various ways on their views. Staff will be given the opportunity through a range of socially distanced and online meetings to ask questions of Rob McDonough (chief executive officer) and other key members of the trust. These surveys and meetings will take place in September and early October. Depending on when this application reaches the regional headteacher board, the formal consultation with unions etc should last around two months. At its earliest, if the outcome of consultation were positive, the school would join the MAT in January 2021, latest September 2021.