

FAO: House of Commons Public Bill Committee

Written representations to the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill: call for evidence

19 January 2025

Submission by Sarah Stevens (individual person)

1. Introduction

1.1 My local MP, Peter Kyle, brought this call for evidence to my attention and I request that this submission is considered as part of the Government's current consultation period.

1.2 I am a parent that is part of the community that successfully fought hard against Hove Learning Federation (HLF) voluntarily seeking to academise my daughter's school, West Hove Infants and Juniors. My daughter only joined her Reception class in September 2024 so this personal experience is recent and I believe relevant, and hopefully useful, to the Committee's current consideration of Government policy re. academy schools.

1.3 I welcome the opportunity to inform the Government's future policies on academies and do not propose to rehearse our robust reasons for not wanting our school to be part of an Aurora academy school - however, in our case it was an unfair battle and this could have easily been avoided if there had been a more transparent and genuine engagement process.

1.4 I do not believe that our maintained schools should be privatised. If this Labour Government continues to believe academies are an appropriate form of schooling in the UK then there need to be far more parameters in place that govern the whole process and ensure the academy trusts meet the same requirements of maintained schools particularly in terms of curriculum and teaching staff.

2. No decision regarding children's education should be irreversible

2.1 I fundamentally disagree with academisation being an irreversible decision. I strongly believe this needs to be changed and a series of criteria provided in policy that enables schools in certain special circumstances to come back to local authority maintenance. These criteria clearly need to avoid abuse and leaving local authorities with schools that have been left to deteriorate or become financially unstable as a result of an academy trust's negligence/poor administration/self-interest.

3. Consultation and engagement requirements

3.1 The policy on the current requirements for consultation (not engagement) are very limited and open to significant interpretation or abuse. In order to rectify this I suggest:

1. Genuine transparent **engagement** is made a requirement. This is not the case at the moment. Only consultation is required - the length of the consultation period is left to the school/academy trust. I believe parent/carer engagement should be a compulsory requirement, and especially in the case of voluntary academisation. A minimum length of time should be formally required and ideally the period should run during term time. If it is necessary for the engagement process to run over bank/school holidays then the timescale should be extended. In the case of HLF, the school started the process in mid-November and it ran until mid-December. Many teachers, parents/carers, stakeholders were understandably heavily pre-occupied in the run up to Christmas.
2. The length of time for the engagement period is reliant on sufficient information being made publicly available from the outset. Government policy should provide parameters and a list of information that needs to form part of any engagement strategy. Important information should not be drip fed – and if it is, then the duration of the engagement period needs to be extended proportionately.

3. A balanced presentation of information needs to be provided. HLF and Aurora provided a sales pitch presentation at its first public meetings and this set in train a very biased, defensive and adversarial position by the school. This isn't just my understanding, local councillors and politicians agree this was not the correct way for HLF/Aurora to present the proposal and conduct the whole process.

From the outset, the position of the affected school, proposed academy trust, and local authority should be made available and this position needs to present both sides from each party. No proposal is 100% positive/beneficial and an appropriate risk assessment needs to be presented to ensure a transparent and unbiased process commences, and this will importantly enable meaningful engagement. Being regularly drip fed reactive responses (as was the case in Hove) is not appropriate and it also facilitates confusion, apathy and/or consultation fatigue. A robust process would also facilitate informed and well-considered feedback from all members of the local community, and not just those that are able to understand the process, have time to undertake research etc.

4. Public meetings should be a formal requirement. Due to the sales pitch approach adopted by HLF/Aurora in the first two meetings, some parents got upset as it was clear HLF had made its decision to pursue academisation and the consultation process was simply lip service. In light of this feedback the school cancelled all future public meetings and organised smaller group meetings which I believe had between 1-5 public attendees at each. There were less of HLF/Aurora representatives at these meetings compared to the public meetings but I know several parents found the meetings intimidating but had to attend them as there was no other opportunity to discuss the proposal with the school and Aurora. For some parents/carers it was not an environment they felt comfortable with, and so did not attend any of the smaller group sessions. Another problem with smaller meetings, is that everyone is hearing different information and not hearing questions raised by other parents/carers/stakeholders that might be of interest.

Public meetings should also be held at times that optimise attendance. HLF held the two public meetings in the evening - which clashed with the bath/bedtime of most families. Meetings should be held after school alongside a minimum requirement for at least one weekend session. Government policy should provide a list of information requirements that should be publicly disseminated by the school/MAT and local authority - this would help provide transparency and clarity over the process. I also think the recording of meetings is beneficial – providing all those that attend the meetings are advised in advance.

5. From my experience the Council has little influence over whether a school leaves their control/maintenance, and the public review of the proposal is left to the Department for Education (DfE). This seems at complete odds with the Government's general intention to decentralise decision making. It also makes those on the receiving end feel like they have no influence.

6. Our school has clearly been let down by previous administrations at Brighton and Hove Council (and this has been confirmed by the Leader of the Council). Despite this our school has just been awarded Ofsted Outstanding in all respects which reflects the wonderful family of strategic staff, teachers and support staff. I cannot imagine any local authority wanting to lose such a school from its portfolio but can clearly see the attraction to a multi-academy trust (MAT). In our case, HLF joining a MAT felt like their last resort. Can there be a process in which the DfE acts as a mediator to seek to resolve any significant issues between a school and its local authority before they believe that the only option available to them is academisation?

7. The role of teachers/support staff needs to be better respected. Teachers and support staff found out about HLF's academisation proposal at the same time as parents. I understand the need to contain information and release at an appropriate time, but I believe there needs to be a staged process where they are advised a minimum timescale before parents, carers, and local community. Maybe a meeting with unions and teachers 1 or 2 days before it is formerly made more public. The unions would be able to better advise on this matter.

8. Our school's Governing Board knew that they were pursuing academisation when we went on our initial school tour at the end of 2023. Although the academisation application had not been submitted, HLF clearly knew it is the option they wanted to pursue. I believe the Government needs to provide clear guidance on when and what information is publicly disseminated. Parents specifically asked whether HLF was considering academisation and they were advised there were no plans. This clearly was not the case. Many parents would not have put West Hove as its first choice if they had known.

I also believe a review needs to be undertaken regarding the membership and role of governing boards at maintained schools. Is there a requirement for board membership to represent all those involved in a school – for example, I'm aware of parent representatives but is there also a role for a teacher representative? It would also be beneficial to have members that have young children at the school alongside those with older children. Our governing board only has parents whose children will be leaving the school soon.

9. In our experience, the way in which the process was undertaken exacerbated the school/MAT vs us position. A position that most parents did not want to be in and felt was inappropriate – it should not be the responsibility of parents/carers to get more meaningful engagement. We were fortunate that we have a well-orchestrated and highly interested community – many school communities do not have this advantage. The 'them vs us' approach has also affected many people's ongoing trust of the school - including future parents that were considering putting West Hove Infants/Juniors as their first choice. Engagement needs to be more informative and collaborative and less adversarial. A more systematic, structured and transparent process would help and facilitate this.

9. Choice of MAT and sponsor: our community group researched Aurora and its sponsor, Pansophic, during the four week consultation period and established some damning information (including that they are a non-UK tax payer) which in my opinion should mean that Pansophic is never a credible sponsor that the DfE should support and offer to schools in their choice selection – especially when the decision to academise is irreversible.

Far greater due diligence needs to be undertaken about these organisations and made readily publicly available – and early on in the academisation consultation/engagement process so that it can inform opinion in a timely manner, and not near or after the consultation deadline.

I have sought to provide my comments succinctly and trust they will be considered by the Committee. If possible, I would like to be kept up to date with the Government's emerging policy on academies.