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Lord Nash
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Henry Smith MP
By email: darren.rutland@parliament.uk

26 January 2017

Dear Henry,

Thank you for your email of 1 December, enclosing correspondence from Mr Kevin Hollinrake MP, about Easingwold School. I am replying as the minister responsible for this policy area.

I note Mr Hollinrake's concerns about the academisation selection process and capital funding. We paid close regard to the directive academy order process, as set out in the department's internal guidance. This is underpinned both by legislation and the department's Schools Causing Concern guidance, which is available at: tinyurl.com/nq34vrx. Having recognised the need to find strong support for the school as soon as possible we followed the process for selecting a sponsor correctly and decisively and took all possible alternative solutions into account.

Outwood Grange Academy Trust (OGAT) was selected on the basis of its proven track-record of acting quickly to improve schools facing significant difficulties. The Regional Schools Commissioner and her Head Teacher Board considered other multi-academy trusts as potential sponsors but none were deemed suitable to intervene in view of the nature of the issues identified by Ofsted. The scale of the projected financial issues that have come to light has made it even more important that remedial action be taken quickly and decisively.

I recognise that there are concerns among parents that OGAT had already begun its due diligence and had spoken to parents at a meeting at the school, at the governing body's request, but it has now paused on further engagement until clarity on responsibility for the capital building works has been resolved. North Yorkshire County Council (NYCC) had sent OGAT the school's condition report on the same evening as the meeting. If OGAT had been aware of the school's condition report prior to the planned meetings with parents, it would have postponed those meetings until it had obtained clarity about the building costs and who would be responsible for meeting them.

I note Mr Hollinrake's concerns that the department should fund any shortfall that is not picked up by either OGAT or NYCC. As with a local authority maintained school, responsibility for the condition of the school buildings and their upkeep rests with NYCC. It would not therefore be appropriate for the department to meet these costs. We are working collaboratively with the local authority and OGAT to achieve a quick resolution. We have met both parties to clarify the priority needs for the school and have commissioned an independent structural survey. These are taking place this term and will provide a further independent assessment of the condition of the school and clarity on the priorities for action. NYCC's full cooperation will be crucial in moving us forward.

Capital funding is available to an academy trust through the Education Funding Agency's (EFA) Condition Improvement Fund (CIF) normally through an annual bidding process. As a large sponsor OGAT instead receives an annual School Condition Allocation to cover all of the schools in the Trust. Individual schools are not, therefore, able to apply for the CIF. The department is continuing to explore potential capital funding routes.

In addition, OGAT was approved for £80,000 funding to help meet the costs of sponsorship.

Thank you for writing on this important matter.

JOHN NASH