

# ONE (Owl North East) Trust

c/o Throckley Primary School | Hexham Road | Throckley |  
Newcastle upon Tyne | NE15 9DY  
info@onetrustacademies.org.uk  
www.onetrustacademies.org.uk



17<sup>th</sup> September 2025

Dear Parents, Carers and Community Stakeholders

We are writing to you to inform you that the ONE Trust Board of Trustees is currently in early discussions with Smart Multi-Academy Trust to explore the opportunities that might come from a merger of our two organisations.

As you may know, one of the conditions of multi-academy trust status is to have a growth strategy that would ensure we have the organisational strength to achieve our ambitious visions for pupils, staff and our whole school communities. Our primary goal is to ensure that our Trust remains both strong and sustainable so that we can continue to advance the education of all our children.

Although we recognise that we are in our infancy as a new MAT, we have been active in seeking opportunities for growth to benefit the children and families we serve, to secure our longer-term future. Our central team has been working closely with Smart Trust over the past year regarding our central services capabilities. Their Chief Executive Officer, Colin Lofthouse, has also been working closely with our Chief Executive Officer, Julie Stuart, as part of a CEO network of leaders in this region. Both our organisations share closely aligned visions and values, with pupils and their families at the heart of the organisation. As neighbouring trusts, we serve similar communities within the city and have comparable challenges.

We want to make it clear that this is the very beginning of an exploration process. We see the consultation and work required to pursue this proposal, as well as the due diligence required, taking us up to early January 2027. This timescale means we can ensure that any decision our Board of Trustees makes is well-informed; takes into account all stakeholder views; is in the best interests of every pupil; and benefits all schools, their leaders, staff and governors - now and in the future.

Please rest assured that, as we explore, we will stay true to our ONE Trust vision and values, putting pupils at the heart of everything we do and ensuring that our school leaders are an integral part of this process.

We hope that the following serves to give you some immediate information as to why the ONE Trust Board is exploring this merger at this time. We appreciate that there will be many more questions that you will have which we hope to be able to answer over the course of this exploration.

## **What happens next?**

Until any formal decision is reached and implemented, both trusts will continue to operate as separate organisations, as currently.

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As you would expect, executive leaders and the Trustees from both trusts are working closely together during this exploration phase. A similar letter has been sent to stakeholders in the Smart Trust.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Helen Richardson".

Helen Richardson      **Chair of ONE Trust Board of Trustees**

CC  
Julie Stuart              **CEO of ONE Trust**  
Sandy Christie         **Chair of Smart Trust Board of Trustees**  
Colin Lofthouse        **CEO of Smart Trust**

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## **APPENDIX**

### **How would this merger benefit the pupils?**

- A merger would provide much greater institutional strength to help us achieve our ambitious aims for staff and pupils
- Both organisations share closely aligned vision and values, with pupils and their families at the heart of each organisation – we could be better and stronger together
- Bringing together a group of 19 good and better schools - with the expert leaders and staff involved - creates greater capacity for school improvement support and many more opportunities for sharing and developing our talent.
- Both trusts serve similar communities in the same part of Newcastle and face comparable challenges around sharing enhanced mechanisms and systems for supporting pupils and their families
- Both trusts recognise evidence-based practice as a shared approach to school improvement. System leaders working together for the benefit of improving outcomes for all pupils is a strong model for a sustainable and effective school improvement strategy
- A combined trust with over 5000 pupils could potentially be more sustainable financially, thus helping to protect jobs and retain expert staff, as it would unlock central government funding to improve our schools
- Together we would attract a significant School Condition Allocation (SCA) from the DfE, protecting financial reserves and allowing greater resources for the education of all pupils in our schools
- An enhanced services support team will ensure that school leaders and staff can focus on their core purpose of advancing the education of all their pupils.

### **Further benefits of a potential merger**

- This merger would be by mutual choice rather than a forced takeover; a genuine "merger of minds" with closely aligned visions and values
- Both trusts share similar principles: each is a highly collaborative organisation with an ethos of school-based decision making
- We would be a primary-only MAT with a clear focus and a larger pool of expertise
- The trusts are geographical neighbours
- Both organisations are at complementary development stages, with minimal role conflicts

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- Our Chief Executive Officers and Chief Financial Officers have an established professional relationship which gives a strong foundation for collaborative working.

## Why explore this now?

- **Advancing the education of our pupils** – we could move forward ‘at real pace’ in areas of need with an enhanced school improvement offer
- **Growth strategy** - the ability to grow easily has been removed with the new Government and the removal of funds for conversion; opportunities like this are likely to reduce
- **Masters of our own destiny** - if we don’t do something whilst the choice is ours, we could be vulnerable in future to something being done ‘to us’ involving a trust with whom we are not as closely aligned
- **Avoids the fragility of a smaller organisation** – this safeguards the future of both our trusts. We would be an optimum-sized trust for both sustainability and to manage risk
- **Thrive not survive** – this merger would give a firm level of stability for the future of the organisation with strong support systems and greater financial sustainability
- **Preserving our values** - our trusts are complementary. We already share good practices and have a closely aligned ethos and set of values
- **A strong services team** - there is minimum cross-over of central roles. The relative newness of the ONE Trust means there is currently very limited duplication of services roles, and we would gain further executive and services staff capacity and expertise
- **Succession planning** - we have the opportunity to co-create a strong and sustainable trust, with an enhanced central services team enabling us to further minimise risk and increase our operational capabilities
- **Why don’t we wait?** - waiting longer means we would further embed our current processes and systems. This could restrict and complicate any merging of infrastructure and procedures in the future.

If a merger is pursued, consistent with current practice and with both trusts’ values, individual schools will continue to reflect their communities by retaining their unique identities, expressed through their own uniform, school name and badges.

Staff would continue to work in individual schools creating strong links with parents, local governors and the wider community they serve. Parents would continue to benefit from having a relationship with the staff and leaders of their child’s school. Local governance would continue to provide support, challenge and community connections for each school.



**Below are some questions and answers regarding the exploration of the merger of ONE (Owl North East) Trust and Smart Multi-Academy Trust which we hope will be helpful:**

**1. What are the principal purposes of the proposed merger?**

The principal purpose of merger is to improve educational outcomes through collaboration with other schools by bringing schools together in learning networks (an approach which has been developed by the Confederation of School Trusts, a sector body for multi-academy trusts). In a merged trust there would be wider opportunities for staff to work in learning networks, focusing on strong practice and impactful teaching, sharing and learning from each other, and ensuring that staff are supported to get the very best outcomes for pupils.

**2. Would the identity of each school in the Trust be retained?**

Yes. In the same way as we have retained the identity of each individual school in the current trusts, we would intend that to continue. Each school would have its own uniform and a local governing body with representatives from parents, staff and the local community.

**3. When is the decision on merger likely to be taken?**

A decision to merge would be taken after formal consultation and feedback from all stakeholders is considered, which would happen in due course as part of the exploration process. Both Trust Boards are required to make a final decision on any merger. We anticipate that the due diligence and work required would take up to early January 2027.

**4. Would the plan be to follow the model of the large academy trusts who all follow the same structures and rules across the whole trust?**

Much like we do now, we would aim for a new trust to align best practice for the maximum benefit for pupils. This does not mean that everything will be the same across all schools but where aligning practices, structures or systems can be seen to benefit pupils and staff, then this would be considered. Examples of this have already been successful across the schools in both of the individual trusts.

**5. Would we be able to continue working collaboratively as we do now as this has hugely benefited the pupils in our schools as well as staff and we are keen to keep this going?**

Collaboration is key to the school improvement structure being developed. We have seen how key collaborations in both trusts have developed and strengthened classroom practice and how aligning aspects of the curriculum has supported strong professional networking and positively impacted on outcomes for pupils.

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## **6. Would there be more costs to schools?**

We believe that being larger would be more cost effective and more financially sustainable, with access to more capital to improve school buildings and facilities. This will be explored during the due diligence process. Having a stronger financial position would mean that we are able to be more strategic and less reactive. A new, merged organisation would potentially benefit from more opportunities to free up time for educational staff to focus on school improvement.

## **7. Is there an impact on job security?**

Any new trust will face the same energy, funding and cost of living challenges as the two trusts face currently. Whilst merger would not solve these issues, the aim would be to create a more resilient and financially strong organisation that is better able to weather financial challenges.

## **8. How will this affect Local Governing Bodies (LGBs), Members and Trust Boards?**

Current Local Governing Bodies would stay in place. They work effectively to challenge and support schools, and this would be just as important in a merged organisation. It is essential that in any new governance structure the voices of parents, pupils and staff are systematically heard, and this would be a crucial piece of work for LGBs.

In other mergers, the Members and Board are often formed by Members and Trustees from both trusts. Appointments would ensure the right balance of skills, knowledge and experience to run a merged trust.

## **9. When will we know more about developments and progress with this proposed merger?**

We will be providing regular updates to all stakeholders throughout the exploratory process. As this point, we don't know exact timings for communications, but we will ensure all communications are timely and relevant so that we are keeping everyone appropriately informed and involved.