

## **Academy Conversion: Frequently Asked Questions for Parents/Carers and other Stakeholders**

### **Q: Why are we looking to become an academy within a Multi-Academy Trust?**

As you may be aware, it is Government policy to encourage and support all schools to become academies by 2022, and in particular for schools to organise themselves within groups. At the same time, local authorities are reducing the services that they have available to schools as their budgets are reduced. From April 2018 a number of key services such as school improvement will no longer be provided by Surrey County Council.

The school Governing Body has been carefully considering the future strategy for Pirbright Village Primary School for some time and believes that academy status within a Multi-Academy Trust is the best way to support the school in continuing to develop and improve, and that working together within the Trust will bring benefits to teaching and learning which will positively impact on children's achievement.

### **Q. What is an academy?**

An Academy is a state school that is run by an Academy Trust. The Academy Trust enters into an agreement with the Secretary of State for Education that sets out its responsibilities and accountabilities for the effective running of the Academy. The Academy is funded directly by the Government not through the Local Authority (in our case Surrey). The Trust is given charitable exemption, which means it must operate much like a charity.

### **Q. How many academies are there in England?**

Currently there are almost 7,000 academies (65% secondary and 27% primary). As at January 2017, 68.8 per cent of secondary pupils and 24.3 per cent of primary pupils in England were attending academies.

### **Q. Is it true that all schools must be academies by a certain date?**

In its White Paper, Educational Excellence Everywhere, the Government stated that every school should be an academy or part of a Multi Academy Trust (MAT) by 2022 and planned to introduce the legislation it needed to make this happen. However, following opposition, this proposal was dropped by the Government on 6 May 2016 and there are now no plans to take forward legislation on this matter although there is strong encouragement for schools to become academies.

### **Q. What is the difference between academies and maintained schools, between academies and free schools and between stand-alone academies and Multi Academy Trusts (MATs)?**

Academies are publicly funded independent schools that are able to set their own pay and conditions for staff and have freedom to determine their own curriculum. Academies exist in a number of forms including free schools, studio schools, university technical colleges and sixth form colleges.

An academy can either be a stand-alone school or part of a MAT.

**Q. What is a Multi Academy Trust (MAT)?**

A Multi-Academy Trust (MAT) is like a mini Local Authority providing support services and driving forward school improvement in the academies within it. The MAT has a board of directors which is accountable for all the academies in the trust. Each academy in the trust has its own Local Governing Body. Schools can convert to academies together as part of a Multi-Academy Trust (MAT), as Pirbright Village Primary School is proposing to do as part of the Athena Schools Trust.

**Q. Who runs an academy?**

The academy is run by an "Academy Trust" which oversees a governing body. The Academy Trust is a legal body which operates a charitable organisation and a company limited by guarantee. The Trust has a formal agreement with the Department for Education (DfE) to provide educational services to its pupils.

**Q. How is an academy funded?**

Academies are funded directly by the Education Funding Agency (part of the Department of Education). This means that academies receive 100% of their grant (rather than a proportion of these funds being diverted to the Local Authority) and are free to choose how to spend it, as long as it is spent on improving the education of its pupils.

**Q. Which types of school can become an academy?**

All schools are eligible to become academies.

**Q. What work has been done by Governors to explore all options?**

Governors have conducted a number of activities to ensure we reach the best decision for our school. These include:

- discussions with other local schools to understand their strategy and journey
- attendance at specific training and information sessions for Governors
- research on other MATs within Surrey
- research on academisation based on information from a variety of sources
- presentations and Q&A from the Athena Schools Trust on a number of different subjects
- detailed discussions with the other potential founder members of the Athena Schools Trust
- presentation and discussion covering the pros and cons of all the options for the future of the school
- due diligence activities

**Q. Is there a requirement for staff or parents at a school to be consulted prior to academy conversion?**

There is no statutory requirement at all for consultation with either parents or staff. However, it is good practice (and it is recommended by the DfE) for parents and staff to be consulted before an application is made for academy conversion. If a school is converting to become an academy, although staff do not have a right to be consulted on the principle of becoming an academy, staff do have a separate right to be consulted on the impact of any change in the status of school under the Transfer of Undertakings Protection of Employment (TUPE) Regulations relating to their conditions of service.

**Q. How can parents make their views known about the school becoming an academy?**

Parents who wish to make their views known should attend the parent/carer consultation meeting. Views/questions can also be sent to the school via this email address [consultation@pirbright.surrey.sch.uk](mailto:consultation@pirbright.surrey.sch.uk).

**Q. Can a Headteacher make the decision to convert a school to academy status?**

No. A Headteacher has no individual power to determine whether a school becomes an academy and so cannot make the final decision. The decision rests with the governing body and if the school is a voluntary aided or controlled school, with the relevant religious authorities.

**Q. Do schools need to have a sponsor to become an academy?**

If a school or academy is underperforming and needs an intervention strategy, then to become an academy it will require a sponsor. Sponsors require approval from the Department for Education to support an academy or group of academies. If on conversion the school intends to start a MAT to support other schools, then it will have to have a sponsor.

Pirbright Village Primary School has voluntarily decided to consider conversion to an academy as part of the Athena Schools Trust and therefore does not need a sponsor.

**Q. What is the benefit of joining a MAT?**

As mentioned earlier, it is government policy to encourage and support all schools to become academies by 2022, and for schools to organise themselves within groups. At the same time, local authorities are reducing the services that they have available to schools as their budgets are reduced. For instance, from April 2018 a number of key services such as school improvement will no longer be provided by Surrey County Council.

Against this background the Governors have been considering our options for some time. Converting as a stand-alone academy would mean some very difficult decisions over financial priorities and could risk the quality of our provision to our pupils. Governors believe that academy status within a MAT is the best way to support the school in continuing to develop and improve, and that working together within the Athena Schools Trust will bring benefits to teaching and learning which will contribute to children's achievement.

**Q. Why have Governors chosen to join the Athena Schools Trust?**

The Athena Schools Trust (AST) is a collaborative equal partnership of 5 local schools: Guildford County School, Northmead Junior School, Shalford Infants School, Pirbright Village Primary School and Stoughton Infant and Nursery School. The schools share a common ethos, common aims, a common vision and a commitment to ensuring that we offer the best schools to our communities and deliver an outstanding education to every child.

Athena Schools Trust aims to:

- develop a MAT that sets high aspirations and goals for every school in the partnership
- drive up educational standards and raise targets through collaborative school-to-school support
- give teachers more time to teach and to focus on delivering an excellent education by centralising services to achieve operational efficiencies
- deliver the best education – academic, physical and emotional – for every child, whatever their individual needs, across all ages.

As a founder school, Pirbright Village Primary School has the opportunity to shape the development of Athena Schools Trust in the various committees that have been set up to agree MAT policies, services, processes, etc. In addition, founder schools can nominate a Trustee to sit on the Athena Schools Trust Board. Although this role is not designed to promote the school's needs in isolation, it will allow policy etc. to be viewed from the school's perspective.

The Governors believe that participating in Athena Schools Trust will enable the school to build on its strengths and to develop and improve in a challenging financial climate.

**Q. Who decides which schools are allowed to join the Athena Schools Trust?**

The founding schools have come together to establish the Athena Schools Trust because they have a common ethos, common aims, a common vision and a commitment to ensuring that we offer the best schools to our communities and deliver an outstanding education to every child. It is hoped that other schools will join the Athena Schools Trust in due course to increase the benefit to each school from collaboration. The Trust Board will approve schools wishing to join the Athena Schools Trust, in consultation with the Governing Bodies of each school already in the Athena Schools Trust. Further schools joining the Athena Schools Trust will not be founder members and so will not have the same level of influence in the establishment of the Athena Schools Trust as we have had, and continue to have, at Pirbright Village Primary School.

**Q. What happens to the role of the Local Authority?**

If a school becomes an academy, the Local Authority will retain certain statutory roles in the school. Some academy schools choose to maintain a relationship with the local authority and, for example, continue to buy certain services. Pirbright Village Primary School has an excellent long-standing working relationship with Surrey County Council. The Governors expect this relationship to continue and it is likely the school will carry on purchasing some services from them in the future.

However, the role of local authorities has changed considerably since 2010 and the introduction of the Academies Act and the process of academisation across England. This has impacted on the services and support that are available from local authorities, particularly as academisation has also coincided with cuts to local authority funding.

Under proposals currently under consultation by the Government, changes to the national funding formula for all schools, including academies and non-academies, would mean that from 2019/20 all schools will be funded directly from the Government. Local authorities would no longer passport funding to schools in the authority.

**Q. How quickly can a school become an academy?**

There are certain steps that must be taken when a school converts into an academy. These include TUPE consultation on the transfer of staff terms and conditions and agreements with the local authority. Consultation has to take place on the land arrangements and there may be consultation with stakeholders.

All of this takes time and the length of time can vary, depending on the complexity of the issues in individual cases. The time required for a conversion to occur therefore varies from school to school. When an application is made, it is a minimum of two weeks before the Department for Education grants an academy order. It can take longer. Once the order is granted, timescales vary from two months to much longer for the conversion to take effect.

If the decision to convert is made then Pirbright Village Primary School would hope to complete the process by September 2018.

**Q. Does the Local Authority have to be consulted on an application by a school for conversion to become an academy?**

Governing bodies do not have to consult with the local authority on applying for conversion to academy status. However, Pirbright Village Primary School will work very closely with the Local Authority to ensure that transition is as smooth as possible.

**Q. As an academy, will schools have more freedom?**

Schools, regardless of their status, already enjoy considerable autonomy over their affairs, whilst remaining accountable for their use of public money. All schools are subject to the same inspection regime. All schools are subject to the same test and examination performance measures. All schools are subject to primary legislation, including employment law, health and safety, and equalities legislation.

**Q. How are academies funded?**

Academies are funded in almost the same way as maintained schools; maintained schools have part of their budgets kept back by their local authorities and academies pay part of their budget to their trust to make provision to replicate the range of services (finance, personnel, legal, insurances, etc) previously provided by the local authority.

**Q. Will Pirbright Village Primary School be better or worse off financially as an academy?**

As described above, academies are funded in almost the same way as maintained schools with part of the budget being paid to the MAT to provide centralised services, much as is done with the local authority currently. We expect to be able to share a number of services within the MAT (e.g. finance, personnel, legal, insurances, etc.) and therefore save money compared to if we were a standalone academy.

**Q. Will schools that convert to academy status get a new building?**

There is no automatic additional money to support new buildings or refurbishment to existing buildings for schools that become an academy, but as an academy we would be able to apply for capital funding that isn't currently available to us.

**Q. Who owns the land when an academy converts?**

This will depend on the type of school and the current ownership of the land.

- Community schools – generally the land is owned by the local authority. The academy trust will occupy the school site by way of a 125-year lease and the local authority will become the landlord of the academy trust.
- Voluntary aided schools – land ownership is often split between the local authority and the diocese. For any land owned by the local authority, the academy will occupy that part of the school site through a 125-year lease.
- Trust schools – the freehold of the land will be transferred from the current foundation to the academy trust, so that the academy trust will be the outright owner of the land.

Pirbright Village Primary School is a community school and therefore the conditions described above will apply.

**Q. Can the MAT shut down an individual academy and sell its land?**

No. The MAT will always seek to help any individual academies that are underperforming either in terms of children's achievement or financially. The MAT cannot sell the land owned by any academy without permission from the Department for Education.

**Q. Do academies have greater curriculum freedoms?**

Academies are not required to adhere to the National Curriculum, but all schools have freedom to decide how they implement curriculum provision. There are no plans to change the curriculum at our school.

**Q. Who has oversight of academies?**

In part, this depends upon the nature of the academies themselves. For example, academies that are part of a MAT will have a layer of oversight from the academy trust. At Pirbright Village Primary School the Local Governing Body would continue to monitor the performance of the school and would, in turn, be monitored by Athena Schools Trust (a role currently undertaken by the Local Authority).

All academies are overseen by the Secretary of State for Education, through a National Schools Commissioner and a network of Regional Schools Commissioners. Ofsted is responsible for inspection of individual academies, as is the case for all other state-funded schools.

**Q. What is the role of Regional Schools Commissioners?**

Regional Schools Commissioners (RSCs) play a key role in securing an academised school system, under new powers resulting from the Education and Adoption Act 2016.

RSCs are responsible for securing new academies and intervening in underperforming academies in their areas.

**Q. How will academy conversion affect the educational provision pupils receive?**

Structural change does not of itself raise standards. There are outstanding academies and outstanding Community and Foundation schools.

Academies have freedom to vary the curriculum and there are concerns that this has led to the narrowing of the curriculum in some schools and the loss of subjects, particularly creative subjects and the arts.

Some academies have made decisions about costs of school uniform and equipment and educational opportunities offered by the school which have become cost-prohibitive for some families. Pirbright Village Primary School does not intend to make any such changes.

**Q. Do pupils achieve better in academies?**

There is no evidence that structural change such as academy conversion will result in better educational standards or outcomes for children.

There are high-performing academies and there are academies that have been judged 'inadequate' by Ofsted. It is not what a school is called but how it supports high-quality teaching and learning that is critical to success. Pirbright Village Primary School believes that partnership with Athena Schools Trust will support the raising of standards for the children in our care.

**Q. Will there be any changes to admissions?**

Academies are their own admissions authority and, therefore, set their own admission policies. They are required to abide by the fair admissions code. The Local Authority retains oversight of the admissions process.

**Q. Will pupils in an academy within the MAT have priority at another school in the MAT?**

There are currently no plans to change the Admissions arrangements of the schools in the MAT. Academies set their own admissions policies and are required to abide by the fair admissions code.

**Q. Will parents have more influence with academy schools?**

The influence that parents will have with academy schools will entirely depend on the school. Some academy schools have sought to involve parents further in the school following conversion, others have cut them out of processes altogether, including removing them from governing bodies. Pirbright Village Primary School intends to continue to work as closely as possible with parents and carers, for the benefit of our children.

**Q. Once a school becomes an academy, what can parents do if they are not happy with any decisions made?**

In the first instance, as now, parents can speak to the school. The academy will continue to have a clear complaints procedure. Future processes for making a complaint will be very similar to the present policy, but there will be an additional escalation process managed by the MAT.

**Q. What happens if an academy experiences difficulties?**

This will largely depend on the nature of the difficulties.

Matters concerning perceived underperformance would fall within the remit of AST initially. Where there is a concern that issues are not being dealt with appropriately by the Trust Board, parents, carers and other stakeholders may refer their concern to the Members of the Trust to whom the Trust Board is accountable. Ultimately concerns may be taken up by Ofsted or the RSC who has wide-ranging powers to intervene and may choose to move an academy into a MAT or move the academy into another trust if it is already a member of one.

Financial problems/irregularities will be dealt with by Athena Schools Trust and then the Education Funding Agency or the Department for Education, depending on the nature and severity of the difficulty faced.

**Q. Will the ethos of the school change?**

No. The Governors would not wish to do anything to jeopardise or change the values or standards of the school as it is now.

**Q. Will there be a change of teachers?**

No, the teaching and non-teaching staff will remain the same, except for normal changes in regards to natural staff turnover.

Teachers will have the opportunity to share their expertise with other academies in the Athena Schools Trust and equally Pirbright Village Primary School will benefit from the expertise of staff and facilities in other academies. Teachers will not be required to change the school they are based at unless they choose to do so.

**Q. Will staff have to apply for their jobs? Will there be redundancies?**

No. Staff who are currently employed by the Local Authority and who work for Pirbright Village Primary School transfer automatically to the MAT's employment the moment the school becomes an academy. These are known as TUPE arrangement (Transfer of Undertakings Protection of Employment).

**Q. How will pay and conditions of current staff be affected?**

If the school becomes an academy, our staff will cease to be employed by the Local Authority and will instead be employed directly by the MAT. They will transfer to the MAT under the same terms and conditions as currently.

**Q. How will becoming an academy affect term dates and the working day?**

There are no plans to deviate from currently agreed term dates or the hours of the working day. Any changes to term dates or the working day would be subject to a separate consultation process.

**Q. Will the uniform change?**

The Governing Body is responsible for determining the School Uniform policy. There are no plans to change the uniform.

**Q. Will the name of the school change?**

No.

**Q. Can we withdraw from the conversion process?**

Schools are able to withdraw right up until the point that they sign the funding agreement. Once this is signed there is a legally binding agreement between the Secretary of State and the academy, and the termination would require a long notice period (7 years).

**Q. Will anything else change? What will children and staff notice?**

Very little will change. Our Headteacher will continue to run the school and be accountable to the Governing Body, although under a MAT the Headteacher will also be accountable to the Board of Directors of Athena Schools Trust.

Our Governing Body will retain a critical role in guiding the school's performance, ethos, values and future strategy. We will still have the freedom and independence to decide what is right for our pupils, staff, parents and community. We will continue to determine our curriculum, staff structures, school day and school terms.