

11th May 2022

Dear parents, carers and other stakeholders,

We are writing to you with details of a proposal to convert Cansfield High School and Willow Grove Primary School to Academy status and to jointly form a Multi-Academy Trust alongside First Steps Nursery.

Willow Grove and Cansfield already have a close working relationship at a leadership level and we share very similar values. For over a year, the Governing Bodies of both schools have been exploring all options to ensure that our students are given the best opportunities for their future. Forming a Multi-Academy Trust with a trusted partner would allow us to secure our vision and ethos, as well as further develop provision for our communities.

We believe that students and staff as well as the wider community would benefit from the greater opportunities a formal partnership through the establishment of a Multi-Academy Trust would bring, which include:

- Significantly enhanced development opportunities for staff as we share expertise
- Improved recruitment and retention with colleagues attracted by opportunities that a wider Trust organisation brings
- Expansion of opportunities for pupils and parents across a Trust, in terms of access to physical spaces, curriculum design support and the enrichment of social, emotional and mental health provision
- Greater resilience to future risks by forming a Trust that contains other schools
- Enhanced procurement opportunities as we share resources and services

This is in addition to the fact that we are putting ourselves in the driving seat as we approach a period of inevitable change. The two schools, along with First Steps Nursery, will be the founding members of the Trust and will therefore drive the development of the Trust's ethos and values.

After considerable exploration, Governors at both schools have voted to move forward with the application to form a Multi-Academy Trust, the next step of which is to consult with yourselves as stakeholders about the school's conversion to Academy status.

The consultation period will last for four weeks, ending at midday on Friday 10th June. There will be an opportunity for parents and members of the community to meet with the Headteachers of both schools, listen to a presentation outlining the rationale for this decision and ask any questions that may arise. The sessions will be held on:

- Monday 23rd May, 6pm at Cansfield High School
- Tuesday 24th May, 6pm at Willow Grove Primary School
- Friday 27th May, 6pm at First Steps Nursery

We have also prepared some Frequently Asked Questions, which follow this letter.

When you feel you have enough information to comment, we would appreciate any thoughts or queries being noted on our consultation document. This can be accessed electronically at: <https://forms.gle/xyHBTeZGpMbz7iaN6>. Responses must be received no later than midday on Friday 10th June, when the document will be closed. If needed, paper copies of all documentation can be made available and collected from the respective schools.

Yours sincerely,



Geoff Baker
Executive Headteacher, Cansfield High School

Joanna Murphy

Joanna Murphy
Headteacher, Willow Grove Primary School

Multi- Academy Trusts Frequently Asked Questions

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 and is no longer run by the Local Authority (LA). The Trust is charitable, which means it will operate as a charity and not for the profit of individuals or businesses.

What is a Multi-Academy Trust?

A Multi- Academy Trust (MAT) is when 2 or more Academies come together in partnership overseen by an educational charity. Our MAT would be formed by a partnership between Cansfield High School and Willow Grove Primary School, along with First Steps Nursery. Our Board of Trustees would be made up from Governors from the schools and, as appropriate, other Trustees specifically recruited for their skills. Rather than being funded by and accountable to the LA, a MAT is directly funded by and accountable to the Department for Education (DfE). Academies are still part of the community and serve children and families in a particular area and retain the same responsibilities as any maintained school. Outstanding MATs also help to support other schools. The Trust is accountable for all of the schools that are a part of it, and through Schemes of Delegation decide which powers are retained by the Trust and which are delegated to individual schools.

Why are we considering forming a Multi-Academy Trust?

The direction of travel from the DfE is for all schools to become Academies and become part of a MAT by 2030. Rather than join an existing Trust and potentially losing some of the unique character of each school, we want to be the leaders in this and create our own MAT. By creating our own MAT now we would get to:

- lead the way for the Trust
- keep our school characteristics
- maintain and continue with our own path of school development
- maintain the huge success that we have had

This is the opportunity to shape, control and future-proof our schools. As we have learned through collaboration with other schools, we can provide an improved educational experience for our own pupils through various areas including teaching and learning, an enhanced and engaging curriculum, staff development and progression opportunities, finance and human resources, legal services, school improvement structures and governance arrangements. In addition, as an Academy we would have greater control of our school budgets and greater autonomy over our curriculum. Over the next few years there is going to be a tightening of budgets and we need to prepare for this.

Would the admissions arrangements change?

The current admission arrangements would remain in place for both schools and we see no reason to change them. If, for some reason, the Academy wanted to change its admissions arrangements in the future, consultation would be required and would still comply with the Admissions Code.

Will our schools change?

We want to continue to be great schools where every child is valued. We therefore do not intend to change except in ways we think will improve the schools even more. For children, it is unlikely that they would see much, if any, change in their day-to-day school lives. We do not intend to make any major changes and would engage with parents/carers, staff and students if we did ever intend to make such changes in the future.

Will the schools change their uniforms?

No.

Will the term dates change?

All schools have the ability to set their own term dates. We currently work with the LA to try and provide term dates that suit both the needs of our children and parents. There is no intention to alter the current arrangements.

Do Academies have to follow the National Curriculum?

Academies do not have to follow the National Curriculum, however over the past few years our schools have adapted the National Curriculum to follow our values and approach. Our schools already have an excellent curriculum framework recognised by Ofsted.

Would Academy status affect the SEND provision?

No. SEND services would stay exactly the same and we would continue to provide SEND services as we do now.

What would the changes mean for staff?

Staff would not notice significant changes in their everyday working lives. We already experience and champion the benefits of partnership work and that would not only continue but grow. Terms and conditions for existing staff would remain the same and pensions would transfer (including pension contributions). Their contracts would TUPE across to the Trust. Professional development would further expand and there would be a greater range of opportunities for advancement.

Who makes the final decision on whether each school converts to an Academy?

The Governing Body.

Would other schools join us and who would make the decision on this?

Any decision on additional schools joining our group would be made by the Board of Trustees. We would expect other schools to join as time goes on and any school that joins us would be expected to subscribe to our vision and ethos and governance structure and to fully contribute to and learn from the other schools.

Would the schools have to change their names?

No, schools would retain their names and uniform policies.

What would the group of schools (the Trust) be called?

The Trust will have a separate name but we would still retain our own school names. The Trust vision would build on our core ethos and values – we would maintain and strengthen our focus on each child enjoying their learning and achieving their academic best in a stimulating, nurturing environment, maintaining our high expectations and approach to inclusion, attachment and trauma practices. As part of the consultation we will agree a name for the Trust.

Are academies free from Ofsted inspection?

Academies are still subject to Ofsted inspections. Any school which is not making satisfactory progress or does not meet expected standards is at risk of intervention.

Who are the Trust accountable to?

The Trust would be accountable directly to the DfE and our accounts would be audited by the DfE's Education Funding Agency and external auditors, and we would be overseen by our Regional Schools Commissioner, as well as continue to be subject to Ofsted inspections.

Will you be the only Multi-Academy Trust in Wigan?

No. There are already existing MATs within Wigan. In addition, a number of schools are currently undergoing the same consideration process we are. Schools recognise the value in working closely together for the benefit of the students by developing self-improving school systems. They also recognise that this is where the future lies.

Will Governors still play a role?

Each school would continue to have its own Local Governing Body (LGB). Above the LGB would be an Executive Team and the Board of Trustees. The Board of Trustees would consist of a number of Trustees, specifically selected for their skills, tasked with ensuring the excellence of all schools and delegating powers to the LGBs. As with Governors, Trustees receive no remuneration for their function and serve as volunteers for our charitable endeavour. We expect that Trustees would come from the existing Governing Bodies, as well as through a recruitment process to secure key skills for the Trust.

I have seen on the news that there have been Academies that have had troubles with financial management.

The Trust will monitor the finances closely and the Board of Trustees will have financial expertise on it.

As a partnership of schools will we have increased purchasing power?

Yes, it is probably the case that a group of schools will be able to obtain better value when negotiating contracts for services essential for running a school, such as insurance, accountancy, HR, payroll, broadband and other internet and IT services.

Will you be introducing any new charges?

No. There is no intention to charge in the future for anything that is currently free.

A lot of news reports are about failing schools being forced to be taken over as Academies. What does this have to do with us?

A school that is failing, can be taken over by a sponsor and turned into an Academy with the aim of the sponsor driving improvement in the school. But what does not make for dramatic news is that strong schools are able to start their own MATs and lead on school improvement in their group. We want to make this move because we are strong schools with strong leadership and we want to continue to build on this. By running our own Trust, we would be able to keep everything great about our schools and continue to make improvements that work for our schools without another Trust taking over in the future.

What process have the Governors gone through in deciding to begin this consultation and will we definitely become a Multi-Academy Trust?

Each school's current Governing Body voted individually to confirm that they would like to proceed with the proposal of the formation of our MAT. This is not a decision we have come to quickly, but the result of the evolution of everything we have been through on our drive to become outstanding, and a vast amount of research and training undertaken by Governors. At the end of the consultation period, which includes a rigorous process of due diligence, each school's current Governing Body will further consider their decision and then have a final vote on whether to convert to MAT status, at which point we would submit our application to form a MAT.

Can schools withdraw from the conversion process?

Schools are able to withdraw right up to 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 process would require a long notice period.

What is the timescale for conversion?

The entire process from start to finish generally takes 6-9 months, with conversions being official on the 1st of the month. It would be a smooth transition in which children, staff and parents are unlikely to perceive any change, and no disruption to the normal running of the school. If we convert, the date would be determined with the DfE and we would let you know when it is confirmed.