



## Proposal to become an Academy within a Multi-Academy Trust (MAT)

### Mercian Trust

#### Frequently Asked Questions

#### **GENERAL**

Lower Farm is considering converting to an academy and joining the Mercian Trust.

#### **What is an academy?**

Academies are publicly funded schools which are independent of the local authority. They have a lot more freedom to govern themselves: for example, Academies don't have to follow the national curriculum and can set their own term times. They still have to follow the same rules on admissions, special educational needs and exclusions as other state schools. Academies get money direct from the government, not the local council. They're run by an academy trust which employs the staff. We are proposing to convert and join a Multi Academy Trust called the Mercian Trust. Converter academies are successful schools that have chosen to convert to academies in order to benefit from the increased autonomy academy status brings, having decided that becoming an academy is the best route for the school. Schools within the Mercian are all converter academies, as Lower Farm is proposing to be.

Some academies have sponsors such as businesses, universities, other schools, faith groups or voluntary groups. Sponsors are responsible for improving the performance of their schools. These sponsored academies are those normally falling into the Ofsted 'inadequate' category and have no choice about changing into an academy.

#### **What is a Multi Academy Trust (MAT)?**

A Multi-Academy Trust is where a number of academies join together and form a single Trust with a Board of Directors (called Trustees) answerable to the Trust's Members. The Members will be responsible for the strategic oversight of the MAT. They are the conscience of the Trust, ensuring that the objectives are upheld.

The Board of Trustees is the body that takes the important decisions on how the Trust and all its schools work. It determines the policies of the Trust, monitors the effectiveness of individual academies, manages central services and reports to the Secretary of State. The Trustees work with their academies to ensure they are performing to their best ability and that they get the support they require. As is the case now, each of the academies in the Trust will have its own local governing body which will report to the Board of Trustees.

The Trust is accountable for all its academies. Our model ensures a high degree of autonomy for each school and each school in the trust will maintain its own identity, with the same head teacher and staff as they have now.

### **Why should our school join the Mercian Trust?**

The Mercian Trust is a group of 5 Walsall secondary schools that have established a MAT and have invited Lower Farm to join them as the first primary school. The schools are:

- The Queen Mary's Grammar School
- The Queen Mary's High School
- Shire Oak Academy
- Aldridge School
- Walsall Studio School

Already the Mercian Trust is attracting positive attention from central government which is regarding it as an example of how schools with different backgrounds can work together to achieve success.

The Mercian Trust is unique because:

- First and foremost the Trust will build on existing strengths and has the potential to strengthen schools' individual values. The welfare and success of children will be at the heart of all our work. There will be a focus on achievement and not just attainment. There will be a focus on ensuring schools get the best out of the children and families they work with rather than simply being results driven.
- It will develop, with its member schools, a culture of high academic achievement but also have the development of each child's mental, physical, spiritual, moral, emotional and social well-being at the core of its work.
- The Trust will take the view that everyone is on a shared journey, being there for each other and not feeling isolated; everyone has something to offer.
- The Trust will operate with transparency and openness.
- The Trust will be part of the wider local arrangements for school-to-school support and not a competitor. Its academies will continue to work in other local collaborative networks and seek support through existing networks.

### **Who will be the Members and Trustees?**

Mercian Trust is a charitable company. The role of a Member is a 'hands-off, eyes on' role, similar to the governance role of the local authority in a maintained school. Mercian Trust will have 5 Members. The Mercian Trust has agreed that these will be from the Queen Mary's Schools Foundation (that monitors the Grammar and High Schools) and the Vine Trust (which monitors the Walsall Studio School).

The whole Trust is governed by the Articles of Association approved by the Secretary of State.

The articles of association will stipulate the number and types of trustees that the academy trust should have. The Mercian Trust has presently 8 Trustees, drawn from the 5 schools which joined together to form the Trust. There will be a further 3 Trustees appointed in due course. In the Mercian Trust, each academy school will retain

its own local governing body. The responsibilities and procedures are set out in what is called the Scheme of Delegation.

### **Has the Department for Education or the Local Authority put pressure on the school to convert?**

No. This is a decision taken by the Governing Body after careful consideration of all available information. They believe it represents the best way to preserve the future of the school, whilst continuing to strive to provide an outstanding education for all the young people in our area.

### **What does the conversion process involve and how long does it take?**

The basic start up grant of £25,000 is paid to all converters when they are approved in principle to become an academy and can be used to support the process.

The length of time to convert varies but is not usually sooner than four months from the start of consultation. Lower Farm would expect to become an academy and join the Mercian Trust by September 2018. A school can change its mind right up to the point where documents are sent to the Secretary of State for signature, which is usually two or three weeks before the planned conversion date.

### **If our school becomes an academy within a MAT, how will this affect the governing body structure?**

The principles and expectations of governance are the same in academies as in maintained schools.

Each school will have a local governing body with parent and staff representation. The local governing body manages the academy on behalf of the Trust in line with the Scheme of Delegation referred to. The flexibility of the Mercian Trust will allow Lower Farm to replicate our existing governing body if we wish to do so. As before, Governors will still be expected to ensure that delegated spending is used prudently for the purposes intended.

The concept under which the Mercian Trust operates (and on which basis the Trust has invited us to join) is what is called “supported autonomy”; this means we can get the benefit of getting support without losing our identity.

### **How will we know what responsibilities we will have as a Local Governing Body?**

The directors of the Trust hold accountability for the performance of the academies to the Secretary of State. Local governing bodies are effectively committees of the Trust with delegated powers given to them by the directors through a Scheme of Delegation.

The Trust promotes the principle of ‘supported autonomy’ and the Scheme of Delegation reflects the level of support each academy will receive from the directors and the Trust. It also outlines the delegated powers given to them by the directors of the Trust.

Broadly speaking a school that is good or outstanding will see little change.

### **What are the risks?**

There are two main areas of risk that Governors have considered and will continue to consider.

First, the risks of the current situation. The biggest challenge that schools face is sustaining performance and standards when dealing singlehandedly with a combination of:

- The increasing financial pressure, squeezing staffing and resources
- The difficulties in retaining, developing and recruiting high quality staff and leadership

- The cost and availability of relevant, impactful professional development
- The continuing decline of Local Authorities' (LAs) capacity to support schools
- The need to respond to a continually changing educational landscape

Ultimately, any school that gets into difficulty faces the risk of being taken over by another MAT. Joining a MAT now, with like-minded schools, whilst all of those schools are performing, helps mitigate against this risk.

**How will school improvement be managed and standards monitored?**

Most academies will be expected to operate as now, looking to ensure there is school-to-school support and using local networks, as well as services from the Local Authority where they are available. Likewise, academies requiring support will access it in this way.

The Trust will co-ordinate some monitoring of academy performance/achievement and ensure support is provided and matched to need, from within the Trust.

Local governing bodies will be responsible for standards in their academies in line with scheme of delegation and will report to the directors of the Trust.

**If a school has resourced SEN provision, will it be expected to continue to provide that service if it becomes an academy?**

It is the DfE's expectation that existing educational provision in the school will transfer to the academy and it is unlikely you will see any change to the existing provision although, as an accountable body, the Trust will have more power to advocate on behalf of its academies. We could for example enhance our level of support by employing our own speech therapist or other SEN support staff; this is something the Trust could facilitate on behalf of its academies.

**What inspection regimes and assessment data information do academies have to provide?**

All academies are inspected by Ofsted using the same framework and timescale as for maintained schools. Academies will still have to take part in national tests and in teacher assessments of pupils' performance in exactly the same way as they do currently.

**Will the school have to follow the National Curriculum?**

Academies are not required to teach the National Curriculum but rather a broad and balanced one that includes English, mathematics, science, languages and religious education and promotes the spiritual, moral, cultural, mental and physical development of pupils preparing them for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of later life. Within the Trust individual academies will be responsible for their own curriculum development in accordance with the Scheme of Delegation and in line with expressed aims and values of the Trust.

The Trust will co-ordinate and promote its academies to work together more closely to encourage curriculum innovation and sharing of good practise. It is unlikely that pupils' experience of the curriculum will be significantly different.

**How does the admissions process work for academies?**

Parents will continue to be able to apply for the school of their choice, both primary and secondary. For the schools in the proposed group, the admission policies will reflect the previous status. The changes would in no way dictate children's journeys through the education system. Schools in the MAT would continue their strong relationships with feeder schools and would continue to support transition to all the schools parents choose. As

publicly-funded schools, academies must have admission arrangements that clearly set out how children will be admitted, including the criteria that will be applied if there are more applications than available places. There is no pressure or expectation that if we are part of the Mercian Trust the children at Lower Farm will go to one of the secondary schools; nor will being part of the Mercian Trust give any advantage to entry to the Queen Mary's schools.

Academies are their own their own admission authorities but must act in accordance with the legislation affecting all schools. In practice, it is unlikely that there will be any change to how places are allocated.

Academies are not allowed to charge for admission.

As before, because admissions are centrally coordinated by the LA, parents/carers only need to complete one application form (but they can name several schools on it) and, because a single place is offered, places are not tied up by parents holding on to more than one offer. Academies remain part of this process.

#### **Will the school day or term change?**

Although academy status would mean the school would have complete autonomy on these decisions, there are no plans at the moment to change these.

#### **Will the school name or uniform change?**

There are no plans to change these as we wish for each school to retain its own unique identity and character.

#### **Will the school have enough money to pay for the services it needs?**

Yes. The bottom line is that we will not be financially disadvantaged by a move to academy status and are likely to receive more funding – at least in the short term. Academies receive the same level of per-pupil funding as they would receive from the LA currently, plus additional money to cover the services that are no longer provided for them by the LA. The Government is clear that becoming an academy should not bring about a financial advantage or disadvantage to a school. However, academies have greater freedom on how they use their budgets.

In accordance with the scheme of delegation, all schools within the MAT will retain an individual school budget and the local governing bodies will continue to manage and monitor that budget in line with the school's stated aims and priorities. The Trust will have oversight of individual budgets and may intervene either on request or where a risk is identified in individual school(s).

#### **What Capital Funding do Academies have access to?**

Over the last few years, the amount of capital money received by each maintained school for building and renovation projects has diminished considerably. As academies, schools will be able to bid for funds from the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA). Academies can make bids to the Conditions Improvement Fund (CIF) to address

Health and safety issues, building compliance and poor building condition. Expansion projects can also be supported from this fund.

#### **What opportunities are parents given to engage in the decision for the school to become part of the Trust?**

We want everyone who might be affected by these changes to have an opportunity to comment. Typically, that will include staff, parents, the local community, the LA, staff unions and feeder schools and other local schools.

Our proposals have been sent to parents/carers and staff at each school, have been shared with stakeholders

such as on-site nurseries and pre-schools and are available publicly on each school's website. We invite comment on the proposals and have a paper form as well as on-line survey to make it easy to respond. Comment can also be made by emailing the school office.

**Has the decision already been made that the school will apply for academy status, irrelevant of the outcome of the consultation. Who will have the final say?**

No. This is why the Governing Body is having a consultation process where all parties can air their views. The final decision will be made by the Governing Body of each school as to whether it wishes to become an academy as part of Mercian Trust. Schools are able to withdraw right up to the point that they sign the funding agreement with the Secretary of State.