



Highwood Primary School,
Fairwater Drive,
Woodley,
READING,
Berkshire.
RG5 3JE

Tel: 0118 926 5493
Fax: 0118 926 6819

Email: admin@highwood.wokingham.sch.uk
www.highwood.wokingham.sch.uk

Head Teacher: Mr M Hickey BA(Ed), PE QTS

21/10/2022

Dear parents and carers,

Recently, I wrote to you about work that has been taking place with several other local schools to explore the potential of forming a new Multi Academy Trust (MAT). This communication is to give you an update with where we are on that journey.

Rather than simply joining an existing Trust and accepting the operating models and school improvement processes that already exist, both myself and the governing body have been clear that we want to be in charge of our own destiny. The prospect of co-creating and co-designing a new MAT has always been our preferred choice, so that everything that makes Highwood special to us will not be lost and anything agreed to in a MAT will be to Highwood's benefit.

Over the last few months, Highwood has been working closely with Church End Academy, Hawkedon Primary School, Hillside Primary School, Lambs Lane Primary School, South Lake Primary School, Waingels College, Willowbank Infant School and Willowbank Junior School. In addition to this, we are working alongside other schools who have also expressed an interest. These schools have been part of the co-creating and co-designing process.

To remind you, A Multi Academy Trust can be defined as:

"a group of schools working in collaboration as one entity to improve and maintain high educational standards across the group of schools".

If we academise and join a MAT, we will move away from local authority control and the Trust becomes accountable for the school. Seven of the interested schools, like Highwood, are still at present Local Authority schools and joining the Trust will result in them no longer being a Local Authority school.

The Local Authority's funding for school improvement is dwindling and has been for a number of years. To overcome this challenge, five years ago a group of school leaders decided to use the expertise that exists in all our schools and form an alliance, the Schools' Learning Alliance (SLA). The purpose of this alliance was to collaborate with other schools and learn from each other. The SLA has been very effective and Highwood are actively involved in supporting other schools, as well as receiving much needed support and challenge for our own school priorities. The natural next step for Highwood was to work with some of the schools in the SLA to investigate forming a MAT.

We are still in the process of designing the structures and systems that will enable all interested schools to work together. The end result would be each school maintaining their own distinct individuality, but belong to one organisation. When we have finished this work, we will formally consult with staff, parents and communities, before the Governing Board makes a final decision about whether or not to join the new Trust.

To provide as much information as possible for the consultation process, there have been a number of steps already completed. This will allow governing bodies to make an informed decision about whether to proceed. Collectively, we have already decided on a name for our Trust, and we have identified the values that we all have in common which will determine our Mission and Vision for the future. The MAT will be known as the **Orchard Learning Alliance**.

All schools will keep their existing school names and there will be no major changes to our school identity. An orchard is where we plant young saplings, where we nurture these saplings so that they grow into strong trees which bear abundant fruit – the metaphor for what we do in schools is clear. Together, we chose to call our trust the Orchard Learning Alliance because everything we do in schools is about learning and we are a group of allies, who have come together to form a trust for the benefit of our communities.

The Orchard Learning Alliance has been successful in recruiting a board of trustees who have a range of experience and skills. This voluntary, unpaid, body provides advice and challenge to schools in the trust while steering the direction of travel. Although trustees are overall accountable for the trust, each school in the Trust will maintain its local governing body. The trustees are working closely with head teachers and governors to ensure that the trust can operate smoothly and all parties are aware of their roles and responsibilities.

Before deciding whether to join the MAT, all stakeholders in the community need to be fully informed of the process and the impact of joining. Therefore, we will be sending out to you Frequently Asked Questions that will inform you further – the first of these FAQs is attached to this letter. We will hold in person meetings at the start of next half term, as part of the consultation period. If possible, governors will make the decision to join or not after taking all views into account, before the winter holiday.

Please look out for and read all the communications regarding the Orchard Learning Alliance and if you have any enquiries, please forward them to me.

Best wishes,



Matt Hickey
Headteacher
Highwood Primary School

Wendy Sabaroche
Chair of Governors
Highwood Primary School

FAQ

Q: If we join the Orchard Learning Alliance, will the school uniform change?

No, all schools in the trust will retain their own identity and uniform policy will be a matter for individual schools.

Q: Will all the schools have to teach the same curriculum?

No, schools have worked hard on developing their own curriculums that are bespoke to individual schools, therefore schools will teach what they have planned to teach the children.

Q: Will the staff in the school change?

No more than usual. Staff will remain in the school but will have opportunities to move to other schools if they wish, as they do now.

Q: Will the timings of the school's day change?

No, schools will decide in consultation with their parent bodies the timings of the school day, as they do now.

Q: Why should we join the Orchard Learning Alliance – what do we get?

When schools join multi academy trusts, over time many aspects of running a school become centralised. For example, health and safety procedures, IT infrastructure and policy production. At present these fall under the remit of the individual schools. However, with a centralised system, school leaders are able to focus on what they know best – teaching and learning, this will result in better schooling for all children in the Orchard Learning Alliance

Q: Will schools have to pay to be in the Orchard Learning Alliance?

Yes. At present, funding is sent to the Local Authority who then distribute funds to schools. The local authority take some of this money to run their services. In the Orchard Learning Alliance, all funds will go to schools who will be charged a small percentage to pay for the centralised systems. This figure will be agreed with the governing bodies.

Q: What will the school get for its money?

In addition to the centralised services the Orchard Learning Alliance trustees are committed to the formation of a head office that will employ people to focus on providing support to schools so that they can improve. At present the local authority can only provide very limited support (4 hours of support for Good schools per year), the Orchard will provide a far more intensive support programme that will improve educational outcomes for children.