

Consultation for parents and carers: Should Halstow Primary School convert to academy status and join with the other members of the Compass Partnership of Schools to become a Multi-Academy Trust with Sponsor status?

Thursday 11 February 2016

The following are questions by parents/carers put to the Executive Headteacher, John Camp, the Headteacher, Tom Gray, the Deputy Headteacher, Beckie Williams and a representation from the Governing Body.

Q: How will converting to a Multi Academy Trust (MAT) help the 12% budget cuts?

A: We will have more buying power as a MAT to negotiate costs such as cleaning costs, utility costs and resources costs.

Over the next 4 years, schools will undergo an 8-12% budget cut in real terms as we will not have an increase in per pupil funding but wages and services costs will increase. Also in 2017 a fair funding formula will be introduced. London schools currently receive more funding per pupil than those in other counties. There will be a redistribution of this funding and this is very likely to lead to an additional cut.

Since joining the Compass Partnership, we have been able to make money for our children through the delivery of training courses and by offering support to other schools.

Q: You mentioned greater purchasing power and the financial issues saving money. Surely, with the school belonging to the council this is a better saving?

A: The LA does not purchase for schools. Halstow already purchases its own services back from the LA or other providers.

Q: Surely the LA acts as a buffer regarding costings. How does removing this buffer help?

A: Certain funding measures are currently being taken away, we are losing the buffer and the LA is streamlining its support to schools already

Q Will there be a change in the curriculum?

A: The curriculum will not change under the MAT. Although at the moment the curriculum is open to changes from the government

Q: Will we have to pay other schools?

A: Each individual school will receive its own funding/budget. There will be a top slice amount, agreed by all schools, to fund central services and activities.

Q: Will there be a period of time in which to manage the change?

A: We will try to maintain what we already have. We will write Articles to enshrine our principles and values.

Q Sponsorship?

A: We are very wary around sponsorship. We are not interested in getting money from a private sponsor. There is no intention to do this, there have been no thoughts of this and it is definitely not an option.

Q: A recent article in the Guardian mentioned CEO in Academies salary in excess of £400k p.a. How can we ensure this does not happen?

A: The Articles will all contain the principles that will underpin our approach to remuneration for staff groups. We are governed, and will continue to be governed, by the National Pay and Conditions documents for our staff, including senior leaders who will all be school based.

Q: Will someone outside the trust make decisions about it?

A: No. All employees will be school based. There will be no central office. All leaders will be leading in schools. However, we cannot predict the future but will keep to legally defined articles.

Q Based on trends, what can you show us about how schools remain outstanding? How can this be maintained going forward?

A LA review recently graded Halstow as 'outstanding'. We will still be subject to local monitoring procedures and external inspection from OfSTED if necessary. Halstow School has gone from strength to strength as part of a collaboration. When we first entered the partnership there was a risk and at the time we were reticent. We put in place a 6 month time frame and we could have walked away from it at any point.

However, since Halstow became involved with the Compass Partnership dramatic improvements have taken place along with phenomenal teaching. A MAT is all about keeping that, preserving its strong leadership and about self-preservation – we do not want corporate sponsors coming in.

Q: I am alarmed with the background of governors (the questioner went on to elaborate that this statement was specifically as a result of her awareness that one governor works in an existing academy trust).

A There are clear procedures, we are not here to justify a place on governing body. The parent governor in question joined with a background in education. At the forefront of decisions is what is best for Halstow and the children. Whilst the parent governor works for an academy chain, this has had no influence on any decision to consult. This knowledge has been an asset to governing body. Governors are a professionally challenging group who focus on the needs of the Halstow Community.

Q How do teachers feel about becoming a MAT?

A: TG answered – there are thousands of ways of running a MAT. It is an opportunity to create an imaginative institution. The key behind change is to open out to the community. It is the leadership and the staff which make a difference regardless of the type of organisation

The teachers know the value being part of the Compass Partnership which has brought tremendous benefits, they trust JC and TG. There is strength and togetherness as a team. They are part of the consultation process and their views will influence the Governors' decisions.

All discussions are open, the unions are welcomed in. We are committed to Terms and Conditions remaining the same.

Q How does the support staff feel about becoming a MAT?

A: TG answered – I met with all staff a couple of weeks ago and have been responding to questions. All terms and conditions to remain the same and pensions will remain the same.

There are hugely challenging times ahead but if we go it alone the risk is too high. We don't know everything at this moment in time and I have suggested that staff go to national websites to research themselves. We are still in consultation with staff.

Q: I understand the Articles will be written to retain the pay and conditions however in the first year of a MAT there will be plenty of money, but the subsequent years there will be extra costs.

A: We will ensure we capture all of foreseeable costs in planning. We would not be able to convert unless we were financially viable in our planning.

Q: Currently we are a group of primaries. Do you envisage joining secondary schools?

A: We already have some secondary school provision at Willow Dene. We can grow as a MAT and would be interested in developing further secondary provision at some point if that were an option.

Q: Will you put a cap on 10 schools joining a MAT?

A: Successful groups are small groups and we are committed to maintaining quality as a priority. We do not envisage the partnership growing significantly in the future.

Q: Are we committed to the application to join a MAT?

A: No, the governing body are at the discussion stage, this is a proposal. The application has not been submitted to date.

Q: How will the MAT be affected if one or two schools from the Compass Partnership do not join?

A: There are no legal ties between schools within the Compass Partnership. If three or four schools agree to convert then we can go forward based upon this number. Schools can leave at any point prior to any decision to convert.

However, joining a MAT now will allow us to be there from the start to shape how it looks. No one wants to be taken over. Everyone feels the same. All staff are behind the Compass Partnership and all that it has brought. We don't want to be left behind. There is no option going forward which doesn't involve change.

Q: If the school is not sustainable will the LA close the school down?

A: No.

Q: Will you need to employ more staff to run the academy?

A: No we will use the current staff who are already carrying out the tasks. We have strong School Business Managers who run the finances of the schools.

Q: If this not reversible, is there any benefit in waiting for four years for the next general election? We are changing the whole educational landscape - can we not wait?

A: All the governors have agreed we can't wait to take some action. We need to move forward as a group. The general election will not change anything. Throughout the past years, regardless of which political party was in power, the educational policies have remained pretty consistent regardless of who is in power. We are making decisions from a position of strength.

What is important is that our children do not feel the change.

Q: If one of the schools jumps ship are the benefits as a group lost?

A: As an informal group, yes. As a formal group we could mitigate against this as each school would have bought into the ethos and values that underpin the group.

Q: Can you circulate draft Articles?

A: It is a public document, we will let you know the principles that underpin this.

Q: How can you change the Articles once in place?

A: Members would need to go through a formal process of consultation to change articles.

Q: Can parents have a vote? This is such an important, irreversible decision.

The purpose of the consultation is to get views and for the governors to draw on these to decide the future of the school. The governors have been elected to make decisions. We are taking the views of all parents into account but the school is not run by parental vote, we are following the process laid down.

The role of the governors is to seek views and to make strategic decisions for the future generations of Halstow Primary School. There has to be some form of change.

The consultation process runs until 14 March. As your governors, you can call us to account at any point.

Q: As a parent I know you want the best for my kids. We need to protect this place for future generations. The HT can retire.

A: The legacy is very important to us.

Q: I note you are saying you have no intention, and, you have no wish to see certain changes ... but leadership changes.

A: All schools face insecurities when leaders change regardless of whether they are maintained or not. As a partnership, we will have capacity to grow leaders and secure succession and sustainability for our schools.

Q: Will the admission system change?

A: No, Halstow will continue to be an inclusive school accountable to the local community. We will continue to meet the needs of all children and follow the locally agreed admission code.

Q: Will the level of SEND change?

A: The Compass Partnership and Halstow are committed to meet all SEND needs.

Q: What happens after today? How do we feed back into this consultation?

A: We envisage another opportunity to meet. There are lots of questions coming in and we want the process to be a genuine opportunity for all views to be listened to

Q: Will the individual schools have individual governors?

A: Yes, each school will have its own individual governing body.

Q: Who are the trustees?

A: These will be decided as part of a collaborative process should we proceed.

Q: Is the proposal to start a new MAT or to join another MAT?

A: We will start a new MAT continuing to build develop and nurture what we already have in place. We will be running it; we will be formalising it.

Governors have deliberated for a long time, looking into what is happening nationally. We want to retain our unique character.

The strength we have is not about the structure; it is about the strength of the leadership and staff that work in our schools.

We want to stay the same but have to respond to the changing climate. Whilst we cannot predict what will happen, change definitely will happen.

By keeping within the Compass Partnership, we can share our expertise, develop and retain great leaders. We can preserve our principles and control the strategic direction of the group. There will be no take over – there are no hands on Halstow. We can create a trust of schools who can continue to work together in the way we have done and go from strength to strength

Although there is no compulsion for schools to become academies, we have to do something, either an academy or a hard federation. Schools on their own will be unsustainable.

All decisions taken will be for the good of the children, their families and the community.

Q: Do we lose all ties with the LA?

A: No. The LA retains responsibility for standards, for SEND and place planning. The school will still be accountable to OFSTED and national testing such as the SATs.

The building becomes ours but we continue to lease the land under a 125 year lease from the LA.

Money comes direct to the school from the Department for Education. There is no slice kept back by the LA. Accounts will be audited every year and become a public document for all to see.

Q: What are the other options?

A: What makes us successful is us. Principles underpin what we do - our communities make us successful. If we wait there is the danger that in 2/3 years down the line we will not be in such a strong position.

Q: What do the other schools in the Compass Partnership feel?

A: The same questions are being asked but we feel it is a successful partnership and we can build on these relationships and successes to move forward. All schools are committed to consulting together.

Q: How does the increase in work for the Leadership team help staff or children. The Leadership team will have less time for this.

A: There are no additional requirements on Headteachers as part of the MAT proposal. The partnership is highly successful at supporting heads with their leadership.

Q: Will we lose our lovely teachers?

A: We always have teachers leaving us for various reasons. Becoming a MAT won't change this. By working together with the Compass Partnership, we give our teachers the opportunity to visit and observe other schools thus enhancing their professional development – The Compass Partnership has been a very positive experience for staff.

Q: Will teachers have to go to other schools?

A: No, teachers visit other schools to enhance their personal development - they visit for observations. By ensuring our teachers are happy and by enriching their professional development we will reduce the risk of losing them.

Q: Who employs teachers?

A: The Academy Trust would employ all staff and they will be under the same pay and conditions as they are now.