

Monday 26th February 2024

Dear members of our local community,

We are writing on behalf of the Oak Tree Federation governing body to inform you of an important decision we want to make with the support of yourselves.

The Oak Tree Federation Governing Body have a sustainability group that have met regularly over the last 3 years to look at the future of our schools and how to ensure they remain sustainable. Both Firle CEP and Laughton CP schools have benefitted hugely from becoming a federation since September 2018 and this has given us strength in the ever changing educational climate.

The sustainability group have researched different models for our future and this has included working with other organisations, attending presentations and conferences and also visiting different schools. As we have carried out this research we have identified what models may work for our schools and which may not. One of the key factors has been that we want to maintain our close working relationships with each school and continue to ensure that we keep our individuality through identity, uniform, curriculum, staffing structure e.t.c. We looked for opportunities that shared our values.

At a recent meeting, we invited the Diocese of Chichester Academy Trust (DCAT) to the Board of Governors to provide further information on their model.

Following this meeting, our Governors have decided that they would like to explore joining a Trust further, and as such we wish to begin consultation with the entire school community.

There is a formal process that the Governing body takes to ensure it has gained all stakeholder views on deciding whether to proceed. This begins today with the start of the consultation period and finishes on 29th March. After that the governing body will make the final decision of whether to proceed.

Rationale

The Board of Governors have decided to look closely into whether an academy trust model would be in the best interests of the children, teachers and staff at both Firle Church of England Primary School and Laughton Community Primary School. The Governors are keen that the Federation has full control of when and how we go forward with joining a trust, without pressure from Government departments.

Governors agree that the move to become one of DCAT schools is a good and sound strategic plan for both schools and will strengthen and extend the benefits of partnership working that we have experienced as a Federation.

Although DCAT is an organisation that has been established by the Church of England Diocese of Chichester, joining this Trust **will not mean that Laughton becomes a 'Church School'**, and legal documents will reflect that Laughton is, and will continue to be, a community school with no faith designation or faith character. The ethos and values that are central to DCAT match very closely to Laughton's values of 'Imagination, Curiosity, Collaboration, Resilience, Discipline', with children at the heart of everything we do.



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Executive Headteacher: Mrs RM West

Head of Schools: Mrs V Brown

The teaching of Religious Education will not change at our schools where we will continue to respect and celebrate diversity, making sure children learn about all world religions.

Consideration in joining DCAT

Joining DCAT will allow us to access an increased level of support across school improvement and operational areas. DCAT's role will be to provide tailored support to our schools, ensuring that we build on the work of the Federation and continue to make excellent progress. In particular, DCAT has a very strong professional development offer for all staff at all levels which will be greatly beneficial in ensuring that our teachers and support staff continue to be upskilled, knowledgeable and up to date with effective practice.

As governors, we believe that the opportunity to work with new partners and schools, working together to ensure standards across the Trust are consistently high, is an exciting proposition. However, we will continue to actively work with all local schools and current partners, ensuring the best of both worlds. DCAT has made it clear that academy trust status will not change all the things that work so well for our school.

As an academy trust, there are a number of additional responsibilities placed on the school in terms of financial management, the school estate and reporting. It is expected that on a day-to-day basis the pupils and their parents and carers, teachers and staff will not notice the difference when we become an academy. There will however be additional workloads for members of staff in the school office during any process of conversion.

DCAT recognise the additional pressures and will provide the school with a significant amount of support from specialists who will be able to pick up the majority of this additional work.

Feedback

We would like to make sure that the entire school community has had an opportunity to ask questions about what academy trust status means for the Oak Tree Federation. We are therefore holding a meeting whereby we would welcome the opportunity to talk to you about this on Monday 4th March 6p.m meeting at Firle or Wednesday 6th March 6p.m meeting at Laughton.

We have included a link below to an online form where you can provide anonymous feedback. We would be grateful if you could submit any comments or questions to us by 29/03/2024.

<https://forms.office.com/e/akerHX45Qp>

Additional Information

We have included some Frequently Asked Questions with this letter which we hope can answer some of your immediate queries.

Finally, we would like to thank you for your continued support of the Oak Tree Federation. The school communities are our strength and your engagement as key stakeholders help our governors make important decisions about our school's future which is extremely important to us.

Yours sincerely,

Debra Vice-Holt

Debra Vice-Holt
Chair of Governors

R. M. West

Rachel West
Executive Headteacher

Converting to an Academy Q&A Document

Further FAQs and detailed information is available on the Trust website here:

<https://dcat.academy/join-us/faqs/>

1. What is an academy? Academy schools are state funded schools in England that are directly funded by central government (specifically, the Department for Education) and independent of direct funding and control by the Local Authority.

2. Why are we becoming an academy now? The Government wants all schools to become academies and many schools locally and nationally are choosing to become academies now, joining Multi-Academy Trusts (MATs) like DCAT.

The values of the Federation align very closely with those of DCAT, and as DCAT have a mixture of Church and Non-Church schools, DCAT is a sound strategic fit for Oak Tree Federation schools to join a MAT together.

3. What will happen to the Federation if the schools become an academy? Legally, on joining an academy trust, the schools will be part of DCAT as a single legal entity and won't be classed as a Federation anymore. However, within the structures of the Academy Trust, the schools can continue with current Federation arrangements, i.e. shared Local Governing Body, shared staff etc. One of the criteria Governors considered when reviewing potential academy trusts was around continuation of the aspects of the Federation and schools that work well. Governors received absolute reassurance from DCAT that the arrangements could continue.

4. Is the Diocese supportive of Firle becoming an academy? The Federation will engage with the Diocesan Board of Education throughout the decision-making process. The school is required to seek the consent of the Diocese to convert to academy status and as such must apply for this consent. The Diocese has provided schools with a significant amount of guidance and support to ensure correct processes are followed when considering a move to academy status.

5. Are any other schools in our local area academies? Yes, there are academies in our local area. DCAT have academies across the region in West Sussex, East Sussex Hampshire and the Isle of Wight, arranged into geographic hubs.

DCAT has a growing number of member schools, however growth of the Trust is managed carefully to ensure the correct mix of good and outstanding schools and those who require additional support to improve.

6. Will a move to academy status mean new names for the schools? No. The schools will continue to be called Firle Church of England Primary School and Laughton Primary School. Other schools that have become academies with DCAT have also chosen to retain their existing names.

7. Will the proposed new academy have a new uniform? No. Parents will not need to buy a new uniform.

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8. Will the proposed new academy still be open to the community? Yes. There will be no change to the current provision and use of the school by different groups to hold events.

9. What will be the impact on our children with special needs? There will be no change to the level of support provided. Firle Church of England Primary School and Laughton Primary School will continue to recognise that every child is different and has the right to be included as a valued, respected and equal member of the school community.

10. Will the school hours be any different as an academy? Although it is highly unlikely that the school day will be changed, it is the decision of the DCAT Board to decide this as they have the power to do so. This decision is usually delegated to the local governing body of a school, so there is no real change from our authority in this regard. As is the case now, parents would be consulted prior to any change in school hours, although no change is envisaged.

11. Will pupils' education be disrupted by a transition to academy status? No. When an academy is approved to go ahead, it will do so with minimal disruption to the staff and students. Most of the changes will take place behind the scenes with support from a dedicated team from DCAT, who have gone through this process before with other schools.

12. If we move to being an academy will this change what is taught? The Trust delegates curriculum policy to each academy. As an academy, there are greater freedoms within the curriculum and the Trust would encourage a broad and balanced curriculum that supports 'life in all its fullness' for pupils. To note, the Trust would be cautious of too much deviation from the National Curriculum.

13. Would there be an increased emphasis on religion and Christianity in a DCAT academy? Firle Church of England Primary School would maintain its status as a Church School and the existing emphasis on Christian values and ethos would not change. Church schools are also subject to the statutory (section 48) Church School Inspection and this also would not change.

Laughton will remain a community school with no faith designation or ethos and there are no plans to change the current teaching of RE at Laughton Community Primary School. DCAT expects all its schools to operate as caring and supportive organisations in line with the Christian ethos, but the school will not become a church school.

14. How is an academy funded? In maintained schools, including church schools, all revenue funding (building funding is slightly different) goes directly to the Local Authority. The Local Authority (LA) takes a proportion of the money from the school budget to provide essential services to the school and the rest is delegated under the Local Management of Schools. Schools can, and do, buy additional services from the LA and other providers. As a result, schools currently depend upon the local authority for many services such as school improvement, HR, finance, etc. This has led to a dual system where the LA has taken the lead on school effectiveness whilst the Diocese has focused on the distinctive and inclusive characteristics of the school.

Academies will receive a similar level of per-pupil funding as maintained schools, plus funding to meet additional responsibilities that are no longer provided for them by the Local Authority (LA). With DCAT, the money that would have been provided to the LA to run the school is provided directly to DCAT. DCAT does retain some of the budget in order to provide services to the academy.

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Local authorities fund their core services in a similar way.

15. Does this improve on current funding arrangements?

Converting to an academy will not be to our detriment or advantage financially. Funding is available to cover the costs of the conversion process itself, which is provided by central government once the go ahead to convert has been approved. In addition, the MAT Board has access to capacity funding from the Department for Education as well as opportunities to bid for capital funding on an annual basis.

16. What are the Terms and Conditions for staff? On conversion to academy status teachers and staff employed by the school will transfer with the same terms and conditions, via a formal TUPE (Transfer of Undertakings Protection of Employment) process. In addition, conversion will not affect any union memberships.

17. Who will employ teachers and staff following conversion?

At present, Laughton and Firle teachers and staff are employed by the Local Authority – East Sussex County Council. Following conversion, teachers and staff will be employed directly by DCAT.

18. Will DCAT employ non-qualified teachers? All class groups of pupils will be registered to a qualified teacher, as is the case in the schools currently. It is common for schools (both Local Authority maintained and academies) to supplement teaching time with support from specialists such as sports coaches or peripatetic music teachers and DCAT would have no reason to change any arrangements such as these that are already in place.

18. Does DCAT have the capacity to raise educational standards? The Trust considers that its role is to develop and enable the academy leadership to ensure all pupils can achieve their maximum potential.

It fulfils this objective through providing appropriate support and challenge to academy leaders by provisioning appropriate personnel and services to support the Headteacher and other members of staff, both internally through its Head of Improvement and externally through other partnerships (e.g. Teaching Academy Alliances, academy-to-academy support and specialist services). Additionally, the Trust provides robust governance structures to ensure accountability at all levels, with a focus on the pupil's experience and outcomes.