

PROPOSAL TO CONVERT ABBEY PRIMARY SCHOOL TO AN ACADEMY AND TO JOIN THE WILLOW LEARNING TRUST

The background

An important element of the government's education policy is to encourage schools to enter into collaborative arrangements with other schools, usually by way of multi-academy or co-operative trusts. Although the requirement for all schools to convert to academy status by 2022 has been dropped, schools are still being encouraged to become academies and to enter into partnerships rather than remaining on their own.

At the same time, the education sector has been facing significant cuts in government funding which has had an impact on school-related services provided by local authorities. With funding likely to reduce further, schools have been considering how to ensure that their future development will continue to provide the best outcomes for pupils.

What should Abbey be doing?

Over the past 18 months the governors and senior leaders of Abbey Primary School have considered several different options for the school's future. These have included (a) remaining as a local authority maintained school; (b) joining a co-operative trust with other local primary schools; and (c) joining a multi-academy trust ("MAT") comprising a secondary school and one or more primary schools.

We do not think it sensible for Abbey to remain as a stand-alone local authority maintained school. We fear that, with continuing cuts to the school budget and a reduction in services provided by the local authority, we would struggle to maintain the excellent quality of teaching which we owe to all our pupils and their families.

We have considered whether we should join a co-operative trust made up of local primary schools. There are now several such co-operatives in the Sutton borough. However, whilst we can see that the co-operative model has a number of benefits, it does nothing to smooth the transition of pupils from primary to secondary education or to make use of the specialist subject knowledge available from teachers in secondary schools.

In the summer of 2016, Abbey was invited to join Glenthorne High School in a MAT. We were not at that time ready to make a decision as we were in the process of exploring the different options open to us. Having examined those options, and following a renewed approach from Glenthorne last summer, we believe after careful and detailed consideration that our pupils' and therefore Abbey's best interests will now be achieved within a multi-academy trust established by a local secondary school and that joining the MAT set up by Glenthorne, called "The Willow Learning Trust", would be the best way forward.

What is an Academy?

An academy is a school which is independent of the local authority and funded directly by central government. Being outside local authority control, academies have more freedom about how they operate. They receive more funding because the local authority no longer retains a portion of the school's funds for the provision of central services.

Why will joining The Willow Learning Trust be in Abbey's best interests?

The Willow Learning Trust currently comprises Glenthorne and Aragon Primary School which formally joined the trust in September 2017. Aragon is in the Merton borough but within a short distance of both Abbey and Glenthorne. At their most recent Ofsted inspections Glenthorne was rated "outstanding" and Aragon "good", the same as Abbey.

Glenthorne is an outstanding National Teaching School with just over 1,500 pupils. Its motto and guiding principle is "Achievement for All". Situated within a few minutes walk of Abbey, it has a reputation for high standards and high expectations, with all pupils encouraged to contribute to the local community. Around one-third of Abbey's Year 6 pupils progress to Glenthorne each year and we are thus an important feeder school for Glenthorne.

In recent weeks, a number of meetings have taken place between senior leaders of Abbey and Aragon, which is a three-form entry school. We were pleased to see how closely the ethos and values of Aragon aligned with those of Abbey. Collaboration within a MAT consisting of Glenthorne and Aragon (with the potential for one or more other local primary schools to join in future) will provide the following benefits for all our pupils, whatever secondary school they move to:

- Exchange of ideas for best teaching practice between primary schools, allowing easy transfer of knowledge and increasing teaching standards.
- A curriculum designed to ensure a smooth transition from primary to secondary education.
- Specialist teaching from secondary school staff. In particular, the curriculum for music, PE, computing, science and the creative arts will be enhanced.
- Reinforcing strong governance, ensuring teachers and pupils are held to the highest standards.
- Financial efficiencies and improved value for money through shared services and purchasing, particularly in the areas of administration, reprographics, ICT, insurance, premises, HR and finance.

The Trust

The Willow Learning Trust is a charitable company with directors (also referred to as trustees), who are accountable to the Secretary of State for all the schools within the trust. Each school within the trust will have one or two representatives on the board of

directors, whilst the headteachers of each school attend board meetings in an advisory capacity.

How will Abbey change?

Abbey will remain a local community school. Its ethos of caring and inclusiveness will not change. It will still have its own governors, serving on what is known as a Local Governing Board. The governors will continue to support Abbey, with particular focus on pupil achievement and attainment.

What is the timetable for conversion to an academy and joining the MAT?

The consultation period will end on 28 March 2018. During this time, governors and senior leaders of Abbey will seek answers to a number of detailed questions about Glenthorne whilst a similar exercise will be conducted by Glenthorne on Abbey. This exercise, called “due diligence”, is designed to ensure that neither party will be entering into an undue risk, financial or otherwise, to their school.

Subject to both the consultation and due diligence producing a favourable outcome and then to our application to the Department for Education being approved, we anticipate that the conversion process will be completed this calendar year.

We would like to know what you think

We would like to know what parents/carers and staff think about Abbey’s proposed conversion to academy status as a member of The Willow Learning Trust.

We will be holding consultation meetings on **Thursday 8 March** as follows:

9.15 am for parents/carers in the school hall

7.30 pm for parents/carers in the school hall

2.00 pm for support staff in the staff room

3.30 pm for teaching staff in the staff room

Whether or not you wish to attend a consultation meeting, we would welcome your views by email to: office@abbey.sutton.sch.uk by 28 March 2018.

Nigel Griffiths
Chairman of Governors

Louise Tunstall
Headteacher

1 February 2018