



**Board of Governors**  
**St James' C. of E. Primary School**

September 8<sup>th</sup> 2016

Dear Staff, parents, carers and other stakeholders.

I am writing at the start of the new academic year to clarify the next steps in terms of our proposal that St James' Church of England Primary School should convert to an academy and join the Diocese of Gloucester Multi Academy Trust.

As you know a full consultation process has taken place which included open meetings with both staff, parents/carers and stakeholders. The Local Authority, unions, local councillors, all Cheltenham primary schools and local community members were also involved.

The purpose of the consultation was to allow the Governors to hear as many voices as possible, so we could make an informed and balanced decision on the merits of the MAT proposal. During the summer break Governors have scrutinised further the responses received. We are now in a position to provide an overview of the views expressed along with the answers to some of the more frequently asked questions. Some of the issues raised can be dealt with quite simply as they are process related, others concern the ethos of the School or longer term political thinking. Please take the time to read the attached document.

As I have written before I am reassured by the diligence of our Governing Body and also by the challenge provided by our stakeholders, staff and parents/carers. I am confident that the future of our school is being considered appropriately and that due diligence is being followed.

As I made clear in my letter dated 15<sup>th</sup> July we will be making a final decision in October. The Governors will of course continue to keep you informed throughout the process.

Tim Brock - Chair of Governors

## Introduction

Every member of St. James' Church of England Primary School Board of Governors has given careful consideration and made a valuable personal contribution in the debate about whether our remarkable School should become an academy. If that is the chosen route then it would enable the School to join the Diocese of Gloucester Multi Academy Trust<sup>1</sup> (MAT).

The consultation process has been wide-reaching, thorough and is now complete. It is time for the Governors to look at the facts and, having listened to and read the feedback, to make a decision.

This decision will be taken alongside the School's values and with the overriding knowledge that it is made in the best interests of the children.

The Head Teacher and her Senior Leadership Team (SLT), in consultation with staff, have considered the pros and cons and have engaged in the debate.

The SLT and Governors have consulted with other schools in Gloucestershire who have already become academies and are members of with DGAT.

Staff and parents have been consulted and the feedback shared with all Governors.

There has been, and continues to be, an open and constructive dialogue with the management team at DGAT.

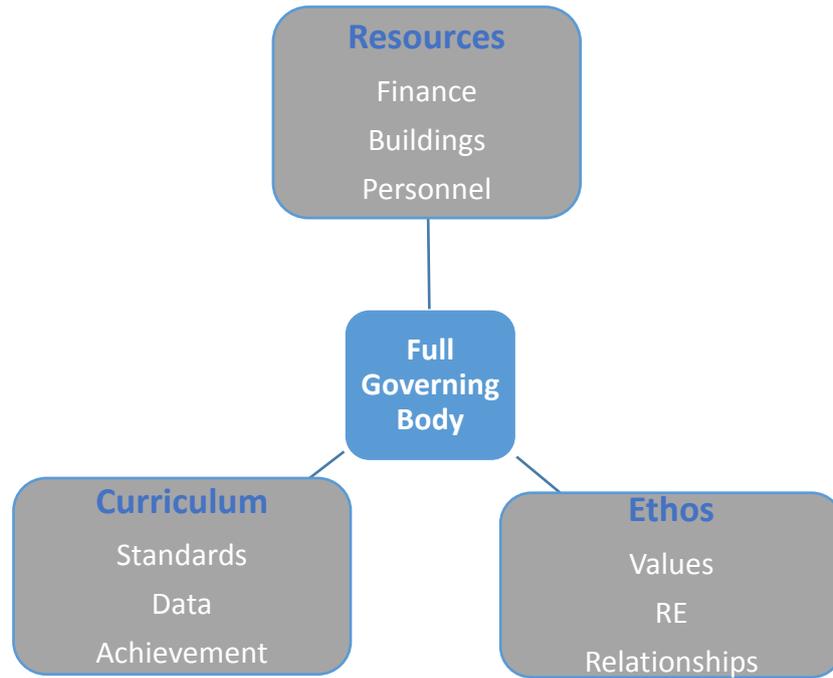
The work of the Board of Governors is carefully divided up to focus experience and expertise into the right areas. Governors felt it would be useful to use the committee structure of the Governing Body to focus on the different aspects of the decision to be made i.e.; Resources, Curriculum and Ethos. This can be best tackled in a question and answer format.

The questions have been formulated following parent/carer and staff meetings, individual correspondence and questions from the Governors themselves.

**A decision, at the time of writing, has not been made. Governors will take a vote in October.**

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<sup>1</sup> <http://dgat.org.uk/>



## General

### Have all options been considered?

We have spent many months discussing the various options available to us.

Our first option is to do nothing. We feel in the current situation that we have less support from the Local Authority (LA) and this will most probably reduce further with the increase in schools converting to academies. Along with the reduction in support we also feel that the School is being challenged less by the LA. By converting to an academy and potentially joining a MAT we feel the School will be challenged and supported to a greater extent.

Our second option would be to convert to a standalone academy and not join a MAT. We are concerned that the amount of support and administration required to become a single academy would distract from our main purpose of improving outcomes for children. It would also be less easy to benefit from sharing skills, ideas and resources with other schools. On the DfE website it identifies that a standalone academy option is still available however the Chair of Governors has been in contact with the DfE and they have said that although this is still stated on their website their preferences have now changed significantly. They will not be looking to take forward any standalone academies.

Our final option is to join a MAT. With this option we have discussed the

possibility of trying to join with local schools including senior schools in our area. We are concerned that joining with a senior school may result in us being the weaker relative due to the considerable size difference.

Some local (non-church) primary schools are in talks about joining a MAT with secondary schools.

As a result we have considered the option of joining the Diocese of Gloucester Academy Trust (DGAT). DGAT would allow us to keep our identity, ethos and values.

DGAT was set up to provide a home for all CofE schools wanting to or needing to convert to an academy. It is the Diocesan Board of Education's position that this would be the preferred option for our School. If we wished to pursue any other MAT then we would need the permission of the DBE. This will only be granted if the Christian character of the School could be guaranteed in perpetuity and the governance of the MAT was set up using VC principles of governance.

### **Why might we want to convert as part of a MAT?**

A MAT, in this case DGAT, is a single legal entity, it would allow St James' Church of England Primary School to achieve strong collaboration and to use this collaboration and accountability to drive up standards.

Where there are under-performing schools in the MAT, representation on the Trust can ensure there is sufficient challenge and support to turn those schools around.

The MAT can also agree to delegate as much or as little power down to the advisory bodies or local governing bodies of the schools involved, which again allows each MAT to define where power should sit according to the circumstances of the schools involved.

Having the MAT as employer of staff also allows flexibility around sharing resources to meet the needs of the individual schools involved. It can help build better staff development across the chain by providing scope for academies to develop their staff with exchange schemes and provide more job opportunities and shared professional development. The MAT can also provide a clear, consistent strategy and vision across a group of schools working together. MATs can often negotiate contracts and services that achieve much better value for money than if each school was to negotiate individually.

## **What actually is DGAT and how does it work?**

The Diocese of Gloucester Multi Academy Trust is a charitable non for profit trust which governs a group of schools through a single set of members and directors. It is a company limited by guarantee which must insure compliance with both company and charity law. Each school will continue to have a local governing body to which certain functions can be delegated. The MAT will ultimately be accountable and responsible for the performance of schools.

Funding is governed through a master funding agreement between the Secretary of State and the MAT. Having a single Trust governing all schools results in there only being one employer for all staff which allows the moving of resources through schools in the chain. Some MATs operate so that, to the extent that this is permitted through the funding agreement, some of the individual school's budget is combined and used to fund shared services such as contracts. This helps the chain to achieve economies of scale and can be particularly beneficial for primary schools. DGAT says its purpose is to "provide children of all faiths and none with excellent educational provision which transforms lives within a caring and supportive Christian ethos".

## **How would we be more accountable as an academy?**

We are currently accountable to the Local Authority. It is clear the LA struggles to pursue this accountability and scrutinise our performance as closely as it did in the past. There would be no more layers of accountability as an academy, it would just come from a different place. Teachers are already subject to rigorous monitoring but the amount of monitoring would not need to increase or put further pressure on teachers. DGAT would appoint someone to work with the school as an advisor and they will look at our agreed improvement areas and work with governors, the Head Teacher and staff to deliver the highest possible standards.

There would be three forums:

- One for Principals (Heads)
- One for Chairs of Governors
- One for Business Managers.

These will look at the best practices across the Trust with the aim of matching outstanding practices to schools which are underperforming. We would be bench marked against other schools and share expertise between the schools as we do now. Specific schools may lead in specific areas where they have shown excellence and best practices e.g. pupil premium, closing the gap and SEN needs.

## **With national political uncertainty how do we know that with the new Government academies are still the way forward?**

We cannot foresee what the future holds, all we can do is work with what we know. It is promising to see that academies were introduced by a Labour Government for struggling schools and has been adopted by the Conservative Government for outstanding schools, initially, but they have hopes (at the time of writing) for all schools to convert to academies.

Teresa May is on record as being supportive of schools becoming academies<sup>2</sup> although we do accept that recent history has proved that Government policy can change very rapidly.

Government policy in recent years (from all parties) has steadily reduced the role and funding of local authorities in education. There is no sign that this historic trend will stop or go into reverse.

### **What is the growth plan and vision for DGAT? The trustee objectives state they are aiming for steady growth.**

In the first year DGAT started with two schools then added 3 more. In the following 12 months 4 more schools were added. DGAT did not want to grow too rapidly without the infrastructure in place.

DGAT currently has 1 school about to convert and 4-5 schools in a similar position to St James' Church of England Primary School. It is a challenge for DGAT to support the smaller schools but they do believe it is important to balance the good and outstanding schools with those that are more vulnerable. DGAT audit the schools to see what their areas of strength and weaknesses are and the support needed. They then look at the shared visions and ethos to see whether they are similar so they are not looking at just one type of school. DGAT says it aims to balance the intimacy, family feel and support throughout the growth of the MAT. They are looking at developing Hubs within the MAT to focus the support and maintain values and intimacy.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.tmay.co.uk/>

## Resources

### **How much more scrutiny would teachers be subject to? Can we change pay scales or make teachers move to other schools that are underperforming?**

Teachers will not be subject to any further scrutiny than they are already under. The additional scrutiny would not be at class room level but at school level and creating more challenges for St. James' Church of England Primary School. As an outstanding school it is clear we are not challenged enough by the LA, as an academy we can be challenged and guided more closely to achieve our next steps. We would benefit from high level support at senior leadership level which the LA can no longer offer. Teachers would not be forced to move to other schools but there may be opportunities for them to move for career progression if they would like to. The teachers will be covered under TUPE<sup>3</sup> (Transfer of Undertakings [Protection of Employment]) rules to protect their rights and salary etc. Under TUPE rules continuity of employment, salary and terms & conditions will stay the same. DGAT would become the new employer.

### **What would we pay DGAT for their services?**

There is currently a 5% top slice taken from the funding received directly from the government for each school in the MAT. This covers all the services and support offered by DGAT. The top slice is not taken from additional monies including pupil premium, children in care, special education needs etc. Becoming an academy is not about making more money and profit, it is about delivering a quality service and outcomes whilst maintaining value for money.

### **What funding will be available to help schools become academies and how can schools claim the money?**

The total cost of conversion will vary from school to school but the DfE will pay a flat-rate grant of £25,000 to support the conversion process. To reduce potential legal costs the DfE has produced template legal documentation which is available to download from the website. In the vast majority of cases the DfE grant will adequately cover the cost of conversion. The £25,000 is only released once an academy order has been issued.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/transfers-takeovers/overview>

### **What affect would conversion have on the process for applications and appeals for school places?**

Whilst the Trust becomes the admissions authority, the LA is still the commissioner of places. Applications are processed by the LA and any appeal has to be independently heard (the Trust cannot hear its own appeals). Therefore whilst the process may be different, the same safeguards are in place.

### **What is the potential for future increases to capacity?**

If there was a demand for additional places, DGAT would apply to the Regional Schools' Commissioner (RSC) to take more children. The RSC would seek the views of the LA before allowing any academy to expand. However our School's land is already at capacity under Sport England guidelines and after the previous expansion. It is not likely that an expansion would be suggested or accepted due to recent changes in the school's footprint.

### **Who would have ownership and control of the assets of the school; e.g. the playing fields and the potential for them to be sold to housing developers?**

The land and buildings (with very few exceptions) of VC schools are owned by the LA (land) and Diocese (buildings). Upon joining the Trust there is a 125Yr lease between the Trust and the LA and a Church Supplemental Agreement between the Trust and the Diocese for the use of the facilities whilst the Trust continues to deliver education preserving the Christian foundation of the school in perpetuity.

### **Will our School get more money as an academy?**

Academies receive the same level of per-pupil funding as they would from the local authority as a maintained school plus additions to cover the services that are no longer provided for them by the local authority.

The Department for Education is clear that becoming an academy should not bring about a financial advantage or disadvantage to a school although they do have greater freedom on how they use their budgets.

### **How do we know that top slicing our budget by 5%, to give to DGAT, will offer us good value for money?**

We have reviewed the School's resources and annual expenditure to identify where savings may be made. We have also noted areas where DGAT will provide advice/support that the school no longer receives due to the gradual withdrawal of services from the LA. Governors are still seeking clarity and need to be satisfied that the School's resources would not be

compromised by converting to an academy and joining DGAT.

Ultimately any decision must be about improving standards and outcomes for our pupils and not purely financially driven.

## Curriculum

**We have used key words 'outcomes for children' and 'greater controls and freedom'. Can we use our freedom to opt out of SATS, KS1 phonics etc.?**

We do have more flexibility to look at a 'values' based curriculum. We do not have to follow the national curriculum but we do need to keep adhere to the same assessments, as all state maintained schools. Therefore we cannot opt out of SATS or phonics screening but we can have greater flexibility with our curriculum to determine how we facilitate our children's learning to get the best outcomes.

**Why rush towards academy status when there is little proof that it will improve performance?**

Firstly this matter has not been rushed, Governors have spent many months debating the pros and cons, and this has included a consultation with all stakeholders

St James Primary School provides an excellent education and learning facility for our children. The academy status will not guarantee that our results will improve instantly but it will provide us with the opportunities and flexibility within the School to challenge ourselves further, share ideas and meet the needs of our pupils. Progress and performance depends on a variety of elements, in particular the capabilities of the staff, the opportunities given to all and the different experiences the children bring to school.

**Apart from sharing 'best practice' what advantage is there of collaboration with other schools and how does it benefit our staff?**

If any collaborative arrangement does not yield a net benefit then its continuation must be in question. Collaboration can broaden professional development and career progression for staff, and when linked to performance management can be a powerful motivator and ensure the retention of skilled teachers. Staff at St James' Church of England Primary School can learn from other schools as well as providing support to others. Working, for example, in an inner city or rural school can have a very positive advantage and enable staff to experience a wide range of teaching methods and pupil characteristics.

## **Will the School follow the National Curriculum?**

The Head Teacher at St James' Church of England Primary School knows that she does not *have* to follow the national curriculum<sup>4</sup> and has spoken enthusiastically about what such a freedom could offer whilst ensuring the schools approach to learning and main skills match those of other local schools. However:

Academies, by law, *must* teach a broad and balanced curriculum which promotes the spiritual, moral, cultural, mental and physical development of pupils and prepares them for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of later life. Subjects that must be covered include English, Maths and Science as well as Religious Education. For pupils below key stage 1 (i.e. reception) St James' Church of England Primary School would be required to follow the Early Years Foundation Stage, as at present. It is important to note that our School will continue to face the same statutory tests as every other state funded school, academy or not, so we will be judged on how effectively we teach our children. How that teaching is delivered is up to the Head Teacher and her SLT. During the consultation process the Board of Governors heard from the leadership team at Dursley Church of England Primary School which has recently joined DGAT. They described how they had introduced philosophy into their own curriculum which had produced significant and measurable benefits. It's all about a school by school interpretation of how to teach children most effectively.

There are other statutory requirements that our School would need to continue to provide such as:

- Safeguarding
- Exclusions
- Alternative provision
- Admissions (the School Admissions Code)
- Sex and relationships education (SRE)
- Special educational needs (SEN) / health needs

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/types-of-school/academies>

## Ethos

### **How close is the school's ethos to that of DGAT?**

The Governing body has considered the aims and objectives of DGAT and they are very similar to our own. You should not see any changes in the day to day life of the School, we would maintain our ethos underpinned by Christian values.

At the very least you would see no change in our excellent performance but we hope, through further support and challenge, we can deliver even greater outcomes for the children. We would continue to work with the LA to ensure the admissions policy works for the community.

### **Will our position as a Church School change in any way?**

We value our 150-year connection with St Philip & St James<sup>5</sup> and the Diocese of Gloucester, We have a strong sense of community and our relationship with the local parish gets stronger every year. We are a church school and must maintain our ethos which is underpinned by Christian values. We will continue to cherish children of all faiths, and none.

### **What guarantees are in place to ensure we maintain our ethos and values?**

If St. James' Church of England Primary School became a member of DGAT we would still be inspected by SIAMS<sup>6</sup> (Statutory Inspection of Anglican and Methodist Schools) under Section 48 of the Education Act 2005. In 2014 a SIAMS inspection rated the School as "outstanding"<sup>7</sup> stating that "The commitment from the leadership and management, including Governors, ensures that the School is continually reviewing and developing its Christian vision". During the current debate about academy status the Board of Governors have been clear that this position should not change.

## How we got here

The subject of St James' Church of England Primary School considering academy conversion was first discussed by the Board of Governors in 2012 under a different Chairman and different Head Teacher.

The School was at the start of a significant expansion programme and building project. It was decided the time was not right to discuss conversion as there was so much going on in the life of the School along with a strong

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.pipandjims.org.uk/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.churchofengland.org/education/church-schools-academies/siams-school-inspections.aspx>

<sup>7</sup> <http://stjamescofeprimary.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/StJames-VC-SIAMS-Report-2014.pdf>

collaboration with the local authority.

The matter was raised again early last year. Setting the vision and strategic direction of the School is one of our core statutory roles. The Governors agreed to look at the options available whilst considering the possibility of becoming an academy and joining the Diocese of Gloucester Multi Academy Trust.

The Governors formally opened a consultation process which they made sure was open and fair and indeed went further than the statutory guidelines in seeking a cross section of opinion.

All parents and staff were invited to an open meeting where they were able to talk publicly with the Chairman of Governors, the Chief Operating Officer from DGAT and the Head Teacher. Local schools, the LA, unions, local community groups and councillors were also invited.

There have been further meetings with staff, one included Governors. All correspondence on the issue has been shared with Governors and the Head Teacher.

Since the consultation period closed a group of Governors has been studying the feedback and has reported back to the board. The board will shortly be meeting with the newly appointed Chief Executive of DGAT to seek further clarification and assurances and to make absolutely sure that the way forward, whether it be academy status or not, is decided in the best interests of the children at St James' Church of England Primary School.

The Board of Governors meets to make a decision in October.

