

**Aim High Academy Trust Meeting
At Gillas Lane Primary School
Tuesday 12th July 2016
Notes of the Public Meeting**

Introduction

Mr Graham Stephenson (CEO, Aim High Academy Trust) and Mrs Sarah Alsop (Head Teacher, Gillas Lane) opened the meeting and explained the reasoning behind the move to convert Gillas Lane Primary School into an academy as part of the Aim High Multi Academy Trust (MAT).

Mr Stephenson explained that Newbottle Primary School had become the first school in the Aim High Academy Trust in 2014. The benefits of making Newbottle an academy were that the school would have more freedoms to choose what it taught, how it organised teaching and how it spends its money. Its aim was to focus on the Coalfields area and have a localised MAT with schools involved in a tight geographical area. Whilst he had received approaches from some other schools to explore becoming part of Aim High Academy Trust, these had been rejected because of geographical reasons.

He had been approached to sponsor Dubmire School as part of a move to convert it into an academy under the Aim High Trust in March 2016 and work was continuing on that. With Gillas Lane, the MAT would have some 1100 pupils for the foreseeable future.

Mrs Alsop wanted to ensure that Gillas Lane continued to thrive and improve and saw an opportunity to strengthen the school's position and educational future. The school would be able to share facilities and resources with other schools in the MAT and achieve some financial savings through better bargaining power that would benefit the school.

Mrs Alsop was also keen to retain the character of Gillas Lane as a family-oriented, friendly and caring school under any new arrangements. Aim High had assured her that there was no intention to "Newbottlise" the school and that Gillas Lane would retain its unique character.

Teachers would be able to share best practice between schools in the MAT but, to all intents and purposes, the pupils would see little disruptive change.

Mrs Julie Milner (Chair of Governors) confirmed that her overriding aim, in this conversion to an academy, was to ensure a high quality of education for all of the pupils at Gillas Lane.

Questions and Answers

What about the traditional barriers between the areas of the Coalfields and how will they be addressed?

It was thought that this is mostly a parent problem more than a child one. The children take part in inter school PE tournaments and transition sessions with feeder schools for Kepier Academy throughout the school year at the moment. These enable our children to mix with others across the geographical area. This will be more frequent when we become part of the MAT and will only benefit the relationships of our children further.

The timing of the meeting was not ideal for many parents due to work and other childcare arrangements. Why was this?

This was an oversight and hopefully no parents have been excluded who wished to ask any questions or had any concerns regarding the MAT. If parents do have any further questions and concerns they can talk to the people below.

Graham Stephenson, CEO of Aim High Trust, said that he had an 'Open Door' Policy and that he could be contacted by telephone/email should anyone wish to do this.

Newbottle Academy Tel No: 01915536566

Email: graham.stephenson@schools.sunderland.gov.uk

Sarah Alsop, Headteacher of Gillas Lane Primary can be contacted by the same methods and by an appointment in school.

Gillas Lane Primary Tel No: 0191 5536517

Email: sarah.alsop@schools.sunderland.gov.uk

Julie Milner, Chair of Governors, always has a presence in and around the school if you need to speak to her.

It was noted that letters and items on the weekly newsletter have been distributed regarding information on the Academy conversion in the past but no queries had been brought to the attention of the Head Teacher on any matters.

Why were parents not consulted before the decision to convert to an academy was taken?

The point was raised that, in view of the history of the school and its fight against closure some 7 years ago, it would have been more sensitive to consult parents on the possibility of conversion before taking the decision. The lack of proper consultation had been an issue in the fight against closure and had resulted in 4 complaints to the Local Government Ombudsman.

The legislation on conversion to academies does not require the same strict adherence to consultation procedures although everything so far has been done in accordance with the legislation and the guidance that is available. Mrs Alsop has tried to keep all parents aware of progress through letters and through the newsletter and had invited anyone who had questions to talk to her. She had had little response so far. She would continue to keep parents informed of progress.

It was pointed out that there has been very little detailed information made available to parents on the academy conversion and that this could, even now, be improved either through the website or an expanded newsletter.

What is the role of the LA in this conversion?

The LA will only work alongside Gillas Lane in the transition. However, the school will make its own decisions. The role of the LA is seen as a potential provider of services such as Human Relations/ personnel advice. School meals will remain as it is. Under the MAT structure, which is basically a privatised charitable trust, the local authority will have no further responsibilities or control.

What is the long term goal for the MAT – are you going to increase size in the future?

There is no intention to increase the size of the MAT for the foreseeable future. There will be over 1100 pupils under the MAT on conversion and it is seen as important to concentrate on making this work for the benefit of those pupils. So, there is no intention to add more schools to the MAT and grow in size.

Will Gillas Lane lose its identity?

No, Gillas Lane is joining this particular MAT at this stage to make sure none of its identity is compromised. There will be a strong presence of Gillas Lane Governors on every level of the MAT's governance arrangements to ensure this happens. There is also no intention

to merge Gillas Lane with any other school ensuring that there will be a school on each of the existing sites for the foreseeable future.

We have chosen to return to navy sweatshirts so that we maintain our individuality, being a different colour to the other schools in the MAT. Each school will run its own budget, as currently happens. Due Diligence has been carried out also.

Why is the conversion date 1st October instead of 1st September 2016?

This is purely a legal issue – legalities such as land registry searches need to be completed prior to opening the new academy and this has affected the timescale.

How will joining 'Aim High Academy Trust' improve the education of our children?

Our aim is to make sure that all the children across the MAT achieve good outcomes and that they will benefit from other wider opportunities that, at the moment, our budget does not stretch to, e.g. music/arts/PE/educational visits, achieving better value and inclusion.

The staff will benefit from best practice in teaching and learning across the 3 sites with bespoke coaching and mentoring.

This way we are trying to ensure the children have the best chance of a more inclusive education in the future. If the other schools in the MAT are oversubscribed in future, it will be possible to offer those children places at Gillas Lane putting the school in a healthier position with growing numbers.

How will the Governing Body be set up across the MAT?

There will be a localised Gillas Lane Governing Body Committee. This Board will make the key decisions on the running of the school. Each school in the MAT will have its own separate committee of governors.

The role of parent governor will remain. At the Aim High Academy Trust level, there will be representation for Gillas Lane at all levels. The Aim High Academy Trust board of governors and its committees will make decisions on how the trust in general will operate. This is one of the benefits of a voluntary conversion to an academy at this point in time.

If the MAT ever expands in the long term, Gillas Lane representative positions will remain the same – making sure that Gillas Lane has a say at levels, at all times.

Who is the Academy accountable to?

- Aim High Academy Trust is accountable to the Regional Schools Commissioner who is ultimately in charge of all Academies
- The Regional Schools Commissioner is responsible to a National Schools Commissioner and through them to the Secretary of State for Education.
- Ofsted will still inspect periodically
- There will be termly, no longer annually or 3 yearly, financial audits by the Education Funding Agency (EFA)
- The same rules applies to the trust as a charitable organisation. All accounts are held at Companies House.

Were the teachers consulted beforehand?

Yes. Whilst wary of the idea at first, the staff have understood the school's vulnerability and the potential opportunities for children and staff in the future of a conversion to an academy at this time. This is clearly a sensitive time for staff as well as children. The staff changes will be governed by TUPE (Transfer of Undertakings) regulations.

Does the Governing Body have the right to be on the Personnel Committee if a Headteacher is to be employed in the future?

Yes. The appointment of Head Teachers will happen at Aim High Board Level with representation of Local School Governors. The procedure and terms of reference have yet to be defined but there will be school board representation as a key component.

Has a project plan been put in place?

Yes. There is a Strategic Trust Plan covering the academy conversion process.

Can key dates be shared with parents?

The only date we have so far is the 1st October 2016 – conversion date.

What steps are in place to stop any turbulence in the children's learning and tests?

Familiarity is important for the children. We will carry on with the same approach to learning as always. This year the whole country sat a new type of SATs tests and this has been a huge change for our teachers. Children have continued to make significant progress under these new arrangements. The change to an academy should not cause any further change or disruption to the teaching and test arrangements.

Concern was raised over the Head Teacher's part time secondment to Dubmire Primary, how will this affect our children?

There will be minimal disruption to the day-to-day running / management of Gillas Lane Primary. Under the secondment arrangements. When Mrs Alsop will spend time at Dubmire school her absence will be covered by a leadership team of 3 senior teachers until the secondment has finished. We have also secured an additional, full time teacher to ease the cover arrangements. Mrs Shovlin will teach the children in the classes of Mrs Todd and Mrs Johnson when they are absent – with the continuity of the teaching assistant in their class - to ensure there is a familiar presence for children in those classes.