

Academy Conversion: Frequently Asked Questions

What is an academy?

Academies are publicly-funded schools that are independent of local authority control with greater autonomy given to the headteacher, staff and governing body. Academy headteachers and governors are able to use the freedoms this brings to innovate across all aspects of their work and to run their schools as they see fit to provide the best education for their pupils. This can take in the curriculum, discipline, pastoral care, staff development and assessment. They also have greater control over their budget, all of which comes directly to them, rather than a proportion being held back by the local authority. Academies are required to follow the law and guidance on admissions, special educational needs and exclusions as if they were local authority maintained schools.

Why is Hartpury School considering becoming an academy, and why now?

An increasing number of schools within Gloucestershire have converted to academy status over the past few years, and this has had a major impact on the funding provided by central government to the County Council's Education Department, thereby placing a greater strain on resources available to support schools. Over the past few months the school's governing body has been investigating the possibility of converting to academy status, and has held discussions with the diocese and with a number of existing and planned MAT's to examine the advantages and disadvantages of converting. The conclusion was that it would be in the best interests of the school to become an academy at some stage, and particularly by joining the Primary Quest group. The decision by Primary Quest to apply to convert to MAT status in 2018 meant that we had the opportunity to be in at the beginning and to help shape the MAT rather than join as a new member at a later stage, and this has been a key factor in the timing of our decision.

Who is Primary Quest?

Primary Quest is a federation of three local schools: Highnam C of E Academy, Staunton and Corse C of E Academy and Redmarley C of E Primary Academy. A federation of schools works together in a collaborative way, sharing resources but retaining their independence. These three schools are now considering the creation of a formal Multi Academy Trust as the next stage in their development.

What other options have been considered?

We decided at an early stage that the most important potential benefits of joining a MAT would only be achievable if we were to get together with other local schools, and the more local, the better. This would enable real day-to-day co-operation and sharing of best practice to be realised in a way which would be very hard to achieve if the other partner schools were at a significant geographical distance. We also decided that we would prefer to join a MAT with a primary school focus, rather than a MAT involving one or more secondary schools. We felt that this would optimise the benefits of co-operation and sharing of resources and prevent the MAT from becoming dominated by a much larger secondary school. Among the existing or proposed primary-focussed MAT's operating within the county, only two met the additional criterion of having a church-school focus and associated Christian ethos, namely Primary Quest and the Diocese of Gloucester Academies Trust (DGAT), which comprises approximately 20 schools across the whole county. The Diocese's

Director of Education, who is also the Chief Executive Officer of DGAT, is supportive of our decision.

How will the church school status and the Christian Ethos be protected?

We will remain a Church of England (Voluntary Controlled) school following the proposed academy conversion. All the other members of the Primary Quest group are also church schools. We will work closely with the diocese during the conversion process, and indeed the consent of the diocese is required before we can convert. For Voluntary Controlled schools the Diocese stipulates that 25% of the governance at every level (i.e. within the local governing body and also within the MAT) must be approved by the diocese, and for Voluntary Aided schools (including Corse and Staunton school) the requirement is for 50% approval. These requirements, along with the stated policy and ethos of the Primary Quest MAT, will ensure that the Christian character of the school is maintained.

What does the conversion process involve?

A school hoping to convert to academy status must initially submit an expression of interest form to the Regional Schools Commissioner (RSC), along with details of the Multi Academy Trust (MAT) which it intends to join. The RSC will appoint a named contact to guide the school through the process. The school will need to secure the agreement of the governing body (and in our case as a church school) the diocese and to consult with parents, pupils, teachers and the local community. The conversion process involves a good deal of legal support so we will need to commission a solicitor to work on our behalf.

Do schools need to consult before converting?

Yes. There is a statutory requirement for the governing body to consult with interested parties.

Do schools have to cover the full cost to convert to an academy?

No. A flat-rate grant of £25,000 is provided. This will be specific to Hartpury school for its academy conversion process and does not relate to the establishment of the MAT.

What is a Multi-Academy Trust?

A Multi-Academy Trust (MAT) is a group of academy schools overseen by an educational charity. Our MAT would be formed by a partnership between the three Primary Quest Academies (PQ: Highnam, Redmarley and Staunton and Corse) and Hartpury C of E Primary school. Our charity trust board would be made up from governors from all schools and, as appropriate, other trustees specifically recruited for their skills. MATs are directly funded by and accountable to the Department for Education in the same way as the PQ academies have been since their academy conversion in 2011. Academies are still part of the community and serve children and families in a particular area and retain the same responsibilities as any other school. Outstanding MATs also help to support other schools. The Trust is accountable for all of the schools that are a part of it, deciding which powers are retained by the Trust and which are delegated to individual schools.

Why is the Primary Quest group considering forming a Multi-Academy Trust?

The direction of Department for Education policy is for all schools to become academies and become part of a multi-academy trust. By creating its own MAT now Primary Quest would get to lead the way and keep the characteristics that have underpinned its success in recent years. This is an opportunity to shape, control and future-proof our schools. After becoming a MAT the group will still work with a number of other schools as is already the case. As has been learnt through existing partnerships, collaborative working with other schools can provide an improved educational experience for all our students through various areas including teaching and learning, an enhanced and engaging curriculum, staff development and progression opportunities, finance and human resources, legal services, school improvement structures and governance arrangements. Over the next few years there is going to be a tightening of budgets and we need to prepare for further cuts. By being in a MAT we can secure greater opportunities for financial savings.

Why set up a MAT now?

Although there is no current requirement to set up a MAT, the schools within the existing Primary Quest federation feel the time is right to establish a MAT on its own terms with partner schools, giving all an equal voice and a chance to tailor the MAT to best support the local community, as opposed to joining an existing MAT.

Would the admissions arrangements change?

The current admission arrangements would remain in place and we see no reason to change them. If for some reason the MAT wanted to change its admissions arrangements in the future, consultation would be required and the policy would still comply with the Admissions Code.

Will our school change?

We want to continue to be great schools where every child is valued. We therefore do not intend to change except in ways we think will improve the school even more. For children, it is unlikely that they would see much, if any, change in their day-to-day school lives. As an academy we will have more freedom than other state schools over finances, curriculum, length of terms and school days. However, the existing Primary Quest schools have not made any such changes since they converted and there is no intention to take any such steps as part of a MAT.

Will the term dates change?

All schools have the ability to set their own term dates. We plan to continue working with other local schools and use the Local Authority calendar to try and provide term dates that suit both the needs of our children and parents. There is no intention to alter the current arrangements.

Do academies have to follow the National Curriculum?

Our school already has an outstanding curriculum framework tailored for the needs of our children, and we have no plans to change this.

Would academy status affect the SEND provision?

No, SEND services would stay exactly the same and we would continue to provide SEND services as we do now.

What would the changes mean for staff?

Staff would not notice significant changes in their everyday working lives. They already experience and champion the benefits of partnership work and that would not only continue but grow. Professional development would further expand and there would be a greater range of opportunities for advancement.

Who makes the final decision on whether the school converts to an academy?

The Board of Governors.

Would other schools join us and who would make the decision on if additional schools join us?

Any decision on additional schools joining our group would be made by the MAT Board of Trustees. We would expect other schools to join as time goes on and any school that joins us would be expected to abide by our vision & ethos and governance structure and to fully contribute to and learn from the other schools. In our discussions we have agreed on the importance of carefully managing any future growth so that the MAT did not get too big or try to grow too quickly.

Would the schools have to change their uniform?

No, schools would retain their own uniform policies.

What would the group of schools (the Trust) be called?

The Trust name will be The Primary Quest Multi-Academy Trust. Each School would be still called a primary school, as it is currently. The Trust vision would build on our core ethos and values – we would maintain and strengthen our focus on each child enjoying their learning and achieving their academic best in a stimulating, nurturing Christian environment, maintaining our high expectations and approach to inclusion.

Academies are still subject to Ofsted inspections. Any school which is not making satisfactory progress or does not meet expected standards is at risk of intervention.

Who are the Trust accountable to?

The Trust would be accountable directly to the Department for Education and our accounts audited by the DfE's Education Funding Agency and external auditors as is the case for the existing academies already. We would be overseen by our Regional Schools Commissioner, as well as continue to be subject to Ofsted inspections.

Will you be the only primary Multi Academy Trust in Gloucestershire?

No. Schools recognise the value in working closely together for the benefit of the students by developing self-improving school systems so there are several primary school only MATS in Gloucestershire. They also recognise that this is where the future lies.

Who runs a MAT?

A MAT is run by a Board of Directors and Trustees who receive no remuneration for their function and serve as volunteers for their charitable endeavour.

Some academies are reported to have had troubles with financial management.

The Trust will monitor the finances closely and the Trust board will have financial expertise on it. Our own school finances are robust and the PQ academy governors have experience of academy trust finances as they have been operating under this system for over 7 years.

As a partnership of schools will you have increased purchasing power?

Yes, it's probably the case that a group of schools will be able to obtain better value when negotiating contracts for services essential for running a school, such as insurance, accountancy, HR, Payroll, broadband and other internet and IT services.

What process have the governors gone through in deciding to begin this process and will we definitely become a Multi Academy Trust?

Each school's board of governors voted individually to confirm that we would proceed to investigate the formation of the MAT. This is not a decision that has been taken quickly. For the existing Primary Quest schools this is the result of the evolution of everything they have been through on their journey to outstanding, 3 schools working very closely together over 8 years and a great amount of research and training undertaken by governors. Following a rigorous process of due diligence (into finances, buildings, staff etc), each school's board of governors will further consider their decision and then have a final vote on whether to convert to MAT status. When all 4 schools have voted after the consultation period, we will update you with the result.

Can schools withdraw from the conversion process?

Schools are able to withdraw right up to the point that they sign the Funding Agreement. Once this is signed there is a legally binding agreement between the Secretary of State and the Trust and the termination process would require a long notice period. If one school decides to withdraw after consultation, the remaining schools would be likely to continue to form the MAT.

What is the timescale for conversion?

The entire process from start to finish generally takes 6 months or more, with conversions being official on the 1st of the month. However, there is no set time. It would be a smooth transition in which children, staff and parents are unlikely to perceive any change, and no disruption to the normal running of the school. If we convert, the date would be determined with the Department for Education and we would let you know when it is confirmed.