

Orchard Way Academy Consultation

You may be aware that on the 10th September, a letter was sent to staff and parents regarding the proposal to become an academy as part of the South Orpington Learning Alliance Multi-academy Trust (SOLA). The consultation letter is a standard letter to notify the school's intentions and has understandably raised some questions. We have tried to address some of these questions below.

Why Is Orchard Way considering academisation now?

The Board has discussed the possibility of becoming an academy for a number of years, originally back in 2016 when the Government's stance was that every school should become an academy by 2020, which later became an aspiration. Over the years we have had discussions with The Greenshaw Trust and The Folio Education Trust and reviewed other local MATs but never felt that they were the right fit for our school. We are a good school that has always been able to manage our budget and did not feel the need to move forward, adding to the fact that we have had 3 Headteachers since 2016, it never seemed the right time to really consider the process further and in the short term it was not considered a priority. In the last two years, it became increasingly clear that the school is missing out on opportunities from working with other like-minded schools which led to the collaboration with SOLA.

In March 2021, the then Secretary of State for Education, Gavin Williamson, firmly placed academisation back on the agenda, saying he wanted the end to the "pick and mix" of school types. The Governors and Senior Leaders at Orchard Way now feel that the school must have the opportunity to determine its own destiny and find the Trust that fits with the ethos of our small school.

Why SOLA?

SOLA was formed in 2016 when six schools, with similar values, came together to create a multi-academy trust. At the time, the London Borough of Bromley moved towards all its schools becoming academies. Three schools in the Trust are small schools and none of the schools are sponsored or "taken over". The six Headteachers/Heads of Schools sit on the Senior Management Team and work collaboratively together to raise standards within their schools. Each school maintains its individual characteristics and no two schools are the same.

The Trust Improvement Partner is a serving Headteacher and was formerly a teacher and Senior Leader at Orchard Way and Mrs Taylor was a Deputy Head Teacher at a SOLA school. Governors feel that there is a good understanding of the unique opportunities and challenges of being a small school. There is good capacity to support Orchard Way on the journey to becoming an outstanding school.

Based on reputation, ethos and capacity, Governors did not feel any local academy trust would be suitable for Orchard Way. The distance between the schools will not be a challenge in a time where remote working allows staff to collaborate online.

What have been the benefits of Associate Membership?

While the school has been working under that DfE guidance during the pandemic it has been difficult to demonstrate the benefits in a way that is tangible to parents and carers but they have been felt. Leaders have had specialist school improvement support, there have been shared training opportunities for teachers and collaborative working opportunities. We have been able to draw upon expertise with regard to Special Educational Needs that would have taken months or years to receive otherwise.

In time, this will have an impact on outcomes for children.

Will our school be affected financially?

There was a real-terms cut in school funding between 2010-2020 of 9%. The new National Funding Formula will be put in place and this will affect all schools and academies. It is difficult to say the impact that this will have on our school at the moment .

Multi-academy trusts do “top-slice” their costs from the school budget but as a maintained school we still have to buy in all our services from the local authority. The academy top-slice pays for these services.

As part of SOLA, Orchard Way would have access to a pooled fixed capital budget which could be advantageous as a small school. We would also have access to the Condition Improvement Fund which would provide opportunities to complete building work on the school we otherwise could not afford.

What will happen to our staff?

We are hoping that they will all choose to continue to work as part our team. SOLA have adopted the School Teachers Pay and Conditions as their pay policy which means the teachers will all remain on the same pay and conditions they already have. This is the same in the other SOLA schools.

Orchard Way support staff will continue to be paid on the NJC Scale.

As a matter of course, SOLA do not employ unqualified class teachers.

Will the school admissions policy change?

The admissions policy will remain mostly the same; the only change would be to include the children of staff and children living with someone with an acute medical or social need. However, any changes will be consulted on beforehand as per the school admissions code.

What about parent choice?

Orchard Way is the only maintained school in the area. All other non-faith primary and secondary schools are academies. During secondary transfer, parents will acknowledge that no two secondary schools are the same. Orchard Way will retain its individual characteristics and continue to fly the flag for small schools everywhere.

Has the academy order been granted?

A business case has been made based on the *intention* to become an academy as part of SOLA MAT but a formal written resolution has not been passed by the Governing Board yet. The consultation, ***which we have extended to the 19th November***, and due diligence process must be completed before this will happen. The local community will also be notified.

Governors will consider all responses to the consultation as part of the decision making process.

If you would like to respond to the consultation please email admin@orchardway.croydon.sch.uk.