

Frieth School Governors' decision to seek academy status

The Full Governing Board of Frieth School has spent some time over the last few years investigating the possibility of becoming an academy. We considered forming our own Multi-Academy Trust (MAT) with other local schools, either with other Church of England primaries such as Ibstone and Cadmore, or with both primary and secondary schools within the Marlow Liaison Group. The problem with creating our own MAT with local primary schools is that all the church schools are small, most of them smaller than Frieth, and the DfE will no longer allow the creation of MATs unless they have a substantial number of pupils, more than would be provided by say Frieth, Ibstone, Cadmore and perhaps West Wycombe put together. We would probably need about 6 schools, and we felt that we just did not have the necessary skills to form such a MAT. An alternative would be to join with some of the Marlow schools, who were considering forming what is now the Marlow Educational Trust. However there are two main drawbacks: one, that the majority of the schools are considerably bigger than Frieth and we felt that our voice would be lost; two, that virtually none of the secondary schools in Bucks are church schools. We are bound to join a trust which respects our status as a Foundation school, and we felt very strongly that any agreement from schools such as Sir William Borlase and Great Marlow to respect that status would be nominal only, and that we would be constantly struggling to maintain our church principles.

While we were carrying out these investigations, the situation regarding the support we received from Bucks for such things as HR and personnel, staff and governor training, school improvement, and legal advice, was deteriorating. Bucks County Council had set up Bucks Learning Trust in 2013 as a separate company to offer such support, but as more and more secondary schools became academies and no longer bought these services, the Trust lost key employees and eventually went into liquidation in March 2019. By this time the school had been getting most of its support services from the Oxford Diocese, and the FGB came to the conclusion that its only real option of becoming an academy was by joining the Diocesan Trust. During this time the government position on whether all schools would have to become an academy was changing, but it still appears to be the general aim for all schools to achieve academy status in due course.

Various members of the FGB attended information evenings and started to express an interest in joining the Diocesan Trust. At this time there was only the Oxford Diocesan Schools Trust, ODST, which mainly covered schools in Oxfordshire and was nearly full, but in due course the new Oxford Diocesan Bucks Schools Trust, ODBST, was set up and began to admit schools. Individual members of the FGB met Chairs of other governing boards and Heads of schools both in and outside the ODBST, and the then Headteacher and the Bursar also met their opposite numbers in other schools within the Trust. In March 2020 the then Headteacher, Mrs Jo Reid, resigned, and the governors appointed Mrs Tina Nowell as an Interim Head for the year 2020-21, with one of the key aims being to oversee the move to academy status. Mrs Nowell and the FGB have taken part in a number of meetings with David Cousins, CEO of the ODBST, and other members of his staff, and the Trust has now in principle agreed to support our application to join the Trust. We feel that this is the only way that we can obtain the support we need, that the ODBST will respect and support our foundation status, and that the school will be able to retain its own individuality, uniform and name, rather than becoming a part of a much bigger organisation, as is the case with some of the more commercial academy trusts.

As a foundation school, the agreement of the incumbent (at present Revd Sue Lepp, who is shortly to take up her appointment as Priest in Charge in the Hambleden Valley Group) and the churchwardens of the Hambleden Valley is necessary before the conversion to academy status can

proceed with the Department for Education. Also, part of the land on which the school stands was originally given by a trust deed and the trustees are the churchwardens (and Rector, when there is one) of the parish of Hambleden (now Hambleden with Frieth and Skirmett). It would be necessary for the trustees to agree to lease the land to the ODBST. The land in question is the part on which the original school buildings sit, while the remainder of the site at present belongs to Buckinghamshire Council, who would also grant a lease to the Trust.

The FGB seeks an assurance from the trustees that they are minded to agree to granting such a lease.

The FGB also seeks an assurance from Revd Sue Lepp and the churchwardens of the Hambleden Valley that they support the school's application to join the ODBST.