

## **Meadowbrook College, Radcliffe Academy Trust**

### **Consultation to join River Learning Trust**

#### **Academy Schools in England and Oxfordshire**

Academies now account for over 47% of primary schools and 98% of secondary schools in Oxfordshire. Nationally, just under 39% of primary schools and just over 79% of secondary schools in England are academies, and these numbers continue to grow.

When the academy programme was first introduced, schools were ‘sponsored’ by another organisation or school to help support improvement; this still happens and these academies are referred to as ‘sponsored academies’. In more recent years, all schools that were performing well were able to choose to become academies and did not require a sponsor. They were referred to as ‘converter academies’, as is the case with Meadowbrook College.

Whilst the political landscape has continued to shift, schools becoming academies and small academy trusts joining larger trusts is still very much part of the government policy and, in particular, for schools to join multi-academy trusts. This was made clear in the Government’s most recent White Paper where it aims for all schools to be part of a strong trust by 2030. Whilst the Schools Bill underpinning elements of the White Paper is not progressing, the intent remains for the majority of schools to be part of a strong Multi Academy Trust (MAT) by 2030.

#### **Multi-Academy Trusts**

Many of the first schools that became converter academies were set up as single-school academy trusts, where the newly-formed charitable trust was only responsible for one school. However, the vast majority of conversions to academy status have now amalgamated into strong multi-academy trusts, an approach that is replicated in Oxfordshire and nationally as a preferred model. MATs are created when there is one charitable company and one board of trustees, for more than one academy school. The most common structure is that each school within a MAT has their own (local) governing body, much as they would a local authority school, with the MAT board of trustees delegating authority. The trust board retains control for non-delegated responsibilities.

The increased number of MATs reflects the significant advantages that can be achieved by individual schools working together with other schools in a structured way. The following is a brief extract from ‘Governance in Multi Academy Trusts’, published by the National College of Teaching and Leadership (2014), which outlines the potential benefits of this structure.

*Headteachers and chairs of governors cited a strong sense of moral purpose and an aspiration to improve the quality of teaching and learning as key drivers for adopting a MAT model*

*The MAT model has also allowed them to capitalise on the benefits of this approach, including:*

- sharing best practice*
- economic benefits, such as centralised services*
- the ability to focus funds where they are most needed*
- increased and flexible staffing resources*
- the opportunity to establish succession planning programmes and, in doing so, retain good staff who might otherwise move on – including headteachers*

These benefits are reflected in the reported experience of good MATs and would be particularly beneficial for an alternative provision college. For example, a school may be supported through a period of transition by trust resources, including other schools and staff within the trust, where changes in staff and leadership may have left the college in a vulnerable position. Centralised trust services helps to ensure that the key focus of the headteacher continues to be education and the development of outstanding 'alternative provision'. Being an alternative provider commissioned by local schools and the local authority requires Meadowbrook College to be agile and adaptable in meeting the needs of learners and to be able to work in collaboration with stakeholders.

## **What is the current status of Meadowbrook College?**

Meadowbrook College provides alternative education provision (AP) for primary and secondary age pupils across Oxfordshire. The college provides essential, specialist support to schools and the local authority for students who need appropriate educational provision; provision which is highly tailored to their needs and enables them to continue to access education. Meadowbrook College is part of the Radcliffe Academy Trust (RAT), which was established on 1st February 2015. Meadowbrook College was previously a Pupil Referral Unit and converted to an academy as part of the converter academies programme for schools which achieved a minimum Ofsted rated of 'Good'.

The trustees of Radcliffe Academy Trust have carefully considered the further opportunities of academisation and are keen that Meadowbrook College benefits fully from being an academy within a larger, local MAT. Meadowbrook College is the only educational establishment within Radcliffe Academy Trust and the trustees believe that a larger MAT offers greater opportunities to develop further and grow to secure the ambitions the college has for every student while also improving the range and quality of support to mainstream schools and the local authority.

It is an important factor in the present and future local educational landscape that children and young people who struggle in mainstream education have access to the very best support to enable them to remain and thrive in local schools. This is something which the trustees believe can be best served through joining a high performing and inclusive local MAT.

### **Why does Radcliffe Academy Trust want to merge with another MAT?**

The unique position as the first choice AP provider to Oxfordshire schools would be further enhanced by working in a MAT with a culture of securing excellent and inclusive education for all.

Through joining a MAT with other local, like-minded schools Meadowbrook College stands to gain through:

- Having a partner that has the capacity, expertise, infra-structure and quality of staff to help on the journey towards becoming genuinely outstanding;
- Being part of a larger organisation that can provide professional and career development opportunities for all staff along with greater opportunities for students;
- Helping to both recruit and retain quality staff;
- Further enhance and develop the educational offer for alternative provision to meet the needs of Oxfordshire schools and the local authority;
- Sharing expertise, resources and best practice and raising standards and improving outcomes across all key stages;
- Support colleagues in Meadowbrook College to manage the complexity of securing financial support and commissioning with the evolving landscape of alternative provision;
- Increased access to capital funding which can help improve buildings and the learning and work environments for all;
- Greater purchasing power for contracts and cost savings through economies of scale, thus helping to secure the medium and long-term financial future.

The trustees have undertaken extensive research, at both local and national levels, into the possible MATs Meadowbrook College could join. This includes detailed analysis, visits and face to face presentations. The board is now seeking stakeholder views to enable the trust to progress to the next stage of the process.

## The River Learning Trust

The trustees are keen to secure the very best future for Meadowbrook College and are proposing for Meadowbrook College to merge with the **River Learning Trust (RLT)**.

RLT is committed to excellence and responsible for a number of schools and is also a school-centred Initial Teacher Training provider (SCITT). RLT schools and SCITT are united by their commitment to the principles of the trust and a common belief in the benefits of everything that is gained by working together.

The principles of the River Learning Trust are:

- **Commitment to Excellence**; striving for the best educational experience
- **Everyone Learning**; creating and taking opportunities that enhance lives
- **Respectful Relationships**; acting with care, integrity, and fairness in all we do

RLT recognises that education has the power to change lives, communities and society for the better and that it can achieve more for its pupils, staff and communities by working together rather than alone.

The River Learning Trust currently has 28 schools, 19 primary, 9 secondary, a School Centred Initial Teacher Training provider (Oxfordshire Teacher Training) and a Teaching School Hub (Oxfordshire Teaching School Hub). It is developing what is recognised as a highly effective way of organising a MAT, with the capacity that comes with scale to support its schools and system work.

The trust writes a report to stakeholders each year which explains more about how it supports schools, which can be found here: <https://riverlearningtrust.org/information/>

Currently, the following schools are part of the River Learning Trust:

### Primary Schools:

- Cutteslowe, Oxford
- Wolvercote, Oxford
- Tower Hill, Witney
- New Marston, Oxford
- Edith Moorhouse, Carterton
- Garsington CofE, Garsington
- Horspath CofE, Horspath
- Madley Brook, Witney
- Witney Community School, Witney
- Middle Barton, Witney
- Beckley CofE, Beckley
- Rose Hill, Oxford
- Sandhills, Oxford
- Larkrise, Oxford

- Seven Fields, Swindon
- Charlbury, Charlbury
- Windrush, Witney
- Bayards Hill, Oxford
- Barton Park, Oxford

#### **Secondary Schools:**

- The Cherwell School, Oxford
- Wheatley Park, Wheatley
- Chipping Norton, Chipping Norton
- Kingsdown, Swindon
- The Marlborough CofE, Woodstock
- The Swan School, Oxford
- The Oxford Academy, Oxford
- Gosford Hill, Kidlington
- Cheney School, Oxford

RLT has proven capacity and experience as a local, larger MAT, securing for its schools improved outcomes for learners as well as through its work as Oxfordshire Teacher Training, a School Centred Initial Teacher Training provider (SCITT). SCITT provides outstanding initial teacher training provision across Oxfordshire schools as well as the work of the Teaching School Hub supporting Oxfordshire schools with implementation of the Early Career Framework and with delivery of National Professional Qualifications.

Further details about the River Learning Trust can be found on its website: [www.riverlearningtrust.org](http://www.riverlearningtrust.org)

### **Will Meadowbrook College change if it joins River Learning Trust?**

The board of the trust forms the legal entity to which trust schools belong, while each school typically has a governing board which oversees activities. As Meadowbrook College is the sole school with RAT the current trust board also undertakes the responsibilities of a governing board.

Post-merger, the RAT board will cease while Meadowbrook College will be overseen by a governing board similar to other schools within RLT. The new governing board will exert independent control over Meadowbrook's activities, but will ultimately be accountable to the RLT board, which has responsibility for all academies within the trust. Like RAT, RLT is a company limited by guarantee. It does not pay dividends and is not for profit, with any surplus generated re-invested in its schools. It is a legal entity where the trust is able to enter into contracts and employ staff.

The stated wish of RLT is for Meadowbrook College to continue to be the first choice AP provider to all Oxfordshire schools. This was explored extensively as part of the selection process and underpins how Meadowbrook College would remain Oxfordshire's key AP provider to all of Oxfordshire's schools.

In RLT different schools retain their characteristics and culture, but with a clear expectation that all share certain characteristics. There is no intention for changes to the college's curriculum, the policies on teaching and learning or behaviour. It will continue with Meadowbrook College's ethos. The responsibilities as an academy in relation to Special Educational Needs and Disabilities would be just the same as at present but with the added support of RLT's inclusion team.

The governors and headteacher will be accountable to the trust board and chief executive of the River Learning Trust for the overall quality of education, but will have autonomy about exactly how that could be achieved. The trust works by a principle of 'Aligned Autonomy'. If there were to be a drop in standards or a drop in Ofsted grade, the level of autonomy may be reviewed to protect the quality of education. It is expected this structure will lead to further improvements towards the goal of becoming an outstanding school.

Trust responsibilities will include the legal and fiduciary aspects of running the MAT, including compliance with the Companies Act, adherence to the Charity Commission's regulations and the filing and publishing of annual accounts each year. The current RAT trust board would be dissolved on merger with RLT and the new local governing body would operate within a scheme of responsibilities delegated from the RLT board.

### **How will the MAT change and grow? What about other local schools?**

The River Learning Trust may grow further over time, and this presents an opportunity to be part of the developing MAT as well as one with significant capacity. Whilst Meadowbrook will link with RLT schools to support its provision as appropriate (for example supporting delivery on mainstream curriculum subjects) it will continue to work across Oxfordshire to provide alternative provision expertise and services to all schools and the local authority.

To ensure Meadowbrook College continues to reflect the needs of all Oxfordshire schools it is proposed to establish a headteachers' advisory board. This group will have representatives from the primary, secondary and special school sectors drawn from across Oxfordshire. The Meadowbrook College local governing body will also include a non-RLT headteacher appointed governor to support the strategic governance of the college.

It is anticipated that the proposed merger with RLT will further enhance the quality of provision to all schools across Oxfordshire through the support Meadowbrook College would secure from RLT.

### **What are the implications for students?**

From a student's point of view, there will be no obvious change except a continued development and improvement of the educational provision and opportunities which is the aim in all RLT schools. The trustees are confident that robust accountability, strong school-to-school improvement networks and staff development opportunities will help to improve the quality of learning and have a positive impact on outcomes for students.

## **What are the implications for Meadowbrook teaching and support staff?**

All employees will transfer to the River Learning Trust under the TUPE provisions which give protection surrounding terms and conditions. The School Teachers Pay and Conditions Document will continue to be the contractual basis for teachers and the Burgundy Book for non-teaching support staff. Meadowbrook College will align with RLT policies on all aspects of pay and HR. Each member of staff would be employed by RLT following the TUPE process (TUPE) but their place of work will remain as at present.

The River Learning Trust aims to provide an excellent professional experience for all employees. A high priority will be professional learning for all. Teachers, support and admin staff will be based in one school and would not normally be moved to other schools within the trust. If the opportunity or need were to arise it would be with the negotiated agreement of the member of staff involved.

The River Learning Trust would be able to provide many opportunities for professional development and teamwork across its schools. Membership of the River Learning Trust provides an opportunity to improve recruitment and to retain excellent staff.

There are also posts that are part of the RLT's 'central team', working across the trust for the benefit of all schools. The River Learning Trust employs staff to deliver the core support services for schools including a chief executive, directors of education (primary and secondary), director of inclusion, chief operating officer, operations director, HR director, finance staff and an education team which offers extensive support across phases for ongoing school improvement.

## **What are the implications for Trustees and Governors?**

In a MAT, the academy trust is overseen by members of the trust board, who have specific areas of expertise such as education, business, and finance. More details about the board of trustees and who they are can be found on the River Learning Trust website [www.riverlearningtrust.org](http://www.riverlearningtrust.org)

RLT operates within a scheme of delegated responsibilities which provides the terms of reference for the local governing body and the trust's responsibilities. Meadowbrook College will have a local governing body which would be appointed (and elected in the case of parent governors) to fulfil a role that is very similar to the one the trust board does at the present time. It is expected that the new governing body is likely to have a greater focus on academic performance, with higher level business and financial considerations, currently considered by the RAT trustees, becoming the responsibility of the RLT Trust Board.

## **What are the implications regarding funding and finances?**

There would be no changes to how Meadowbrook College is funded. As with all larger trusts, all schools make a financial contribution towards the central services supplied by RLT. This is offset by a reduction in local costs where activities are duplicated.

One of the key factors RAT Trustees considered when deciding on the most appropriate MAT to join was the capacity of a MAT to support securing a sustainable financial model. RLT are well placed to directly support in such negotiations and have a strong, county-wide commitment to inclusive practices, local knowledge and long standing experience of working with Meadowbrook College. RLT will aid the current and future strategic development of Meadowbrook College, providing a sustainable model of high quality alternative provision across Oxfordshire schools.

River Learning Trust schools are directly involved in setting the percentage of school income that is used to fund central Trust services at the most appropriate level. Meadowbrook would also be eligible for an annual capital grant, which may ensure more regular funding of capital projects.

### **Summary**

The trustees of RAT have undertaken extensive research over the last twelve months and have concluded a merger with River Learning Trust will be in the best interests of Meadowbrook College, its staff and students.

Over the last few months, closer ties have been established with RLT and a positive and constructive working relationship has been developed. All the initial signs give the trustees confidence that a more formal merger will deliver the benefits they anticipate.

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