

The March Church of England Primary School

Parent consultation meeting 27 September 2018

Questions, comments and responses

School perspective

John Proctor, Chair of Governors gave a presentation on the school's rationale for the proposal. The slides are available on the school website.

Key points:

A significant drive for the decision had been the impact of reducing support from WSCC, particularly reflecting the reduction in funding from the Government. This was not a criticism of the County Council, but a statement of fact. The initial impetus had been given by WSCC in 2012 when it encouraged all schools to convert to academy status; though that position had now changed.

Governors are determined to maintain the Christian distinctiveness of the school and voluntary aided status means that the school's choice of academy trusts is limited to those with a church majority in the company membership. Bishop Luffa is a stand alone academy using that model, but was not interested in extending to include other schools; the Diocese of Chichester Academies Trust (DCAT) is the option provided by the Diocese for church schools. The Diocesan Board of Education had also given its consent to the school's conversion into DCAT.

The governors sought the DfE's view on the proposal in order to be sure that the proposal was viable before consulting parents. If the DfE had rejected this particular proposal, the governors would not be making it.

Since The March is judged a good school, the governors had the choice of whether to seek conversion to academy status or not. Governors had undertaken their own due diligence on DCAT – including discussion with existing DCAT academies - and concluded that it had reached a level of maturity that makes it a viable option.

The March is focused on improving beyond good, but will welcome support in doing so. DCAT offers a practical school improvement visit once a week by someone who will get to know the school and work with the head, governors and staff in making improvements. WSCC can currently only offer two meetings a year and there is regular turnover of advisers so no consistency.

The school will continue to work closely with other local WSCC schools; the head is fully involved in the leadership of the local school's groups. DCAT encourages that.

Trust perspective

Mark Talbot – DCAT CEO – made a presentation on behalf of DCAT. Darren Carpenter, Chief Operating Officer and Beruk Berhane, Head of Improvement, also attended.

DCAT would be delighted for The March to join the Trust. It is a great school, living its Christian values and with a strong approach to learning.

DCAT is looking for options to grow in Chichester – but it does not target schools for conversion. Schools approach the Trust – and that is what has happened here. March is not joining the Trust to provide support to Central – DCAT already has strategies and actions in place to address the challenges at Central and OfSTED's recent reports are positive about the impact of that support.

Central is a sponsored academy and therefore attracted additional sponsorship funding that the Trust has used to support improvement. The costs of additional support required do not impact on other schools.

DCAT is not a Trust that believes in homogeneity – but in celebrating the autonomy of its schools and in providing high quality services to support them, in particular so that headteachers can focus on teaching and learning.

Presentation includes slides on improved performance at DCAT schools and an assessment of impact from OfSTED.

Q – As parents we want our child to be happy – does that conflict with continuous improvement

MT – No. DCAT is about the whole child. We want children to be happy because that engagement in learning helps them to learn better. Inspection of Church schools values the holistic approach. And The March demonstrates it really well.

JP – We don't want to lose the happiness around the school – but we must have an eye to the demands of the DfE. This proposal seeks support for the school in moving forward – but in the context just described.

Q – What will you do to support staff?

MT – DCAT offers high quality support for the head and strong central services in order to free up the head to support her staff. We are developing a growing CPD offer. Teachers at The March are strong and want autonomy to continue. Trust experts can support them.

Q – Will staff stay here or will you move them elsewhere?

DC – Under the TUPE transfer existing staff are able to remain here. It would be possible to move newly appointed staff between schools – but DCAT does not do that. There are development opportunities for staff to work elsewhere in the Trust but only by mutual agreement of all concerned – staff member and both schools.

DCAT follows all national terms and conditions including on calculating Headteacher pay and has good relationships with Trades Unions.

Q - Who appoints the headteacher

MT - DCAT is the employer and works closely with the governors in any headteacher appointments. Panel would be Chair, 2 GB members and the CEO.

Q – Will you employ unqualified staff?

MT – No!

Q – How does the DCAT top slice work?

DC - DfE provides grant direct to DCAT. All pupil specific and directly guaranteed funding (high needs SEN, pupil premium, sports premium etc) is passed on in full. DCAT takes 5% of the budget share and passes on 95% to be spent by the governors of the school. DCAT's funding is used to provide cost effective services.

Recognise that a reduction in Government funding results in budget pressure in all areas of the Education service – not a criticism but the consequence is a degradation in service performance

from WSCC – or the same service at increased cost; support for HT performance management increased from £300 to £650. DCAT can and does provide better.

Q – What's the added value financially?

DC – There is no increase in funding. But DCAT has stronger financial management, the ability to secure economies of scale and opportunities to bid for additional funding streams not available to maintained schools.

Income is pupil number led, not outcome related.

Q – How would you summarise the benefits?

MT – Adding value to provision for the children by allowing the HT to focus on teaching and learning; releasing the head from other pressures, including budget management and sourcing different services.

Q – Who decides on the enlargement of the school to meet demand for places following local housing growth?

A – Decision is with local governors because they have the local knowledge – the Trust would back the school. But the LA holds the funding for growth and decides where to allocate it.

Q – Who is the Trust accountable to? What role for parents?

A – There will continue to be 2 places for elected parents on the LGB.

All schools are accountable to Trustees who are themselves held to account by the DfE for the performance of schools in the Trust. CEO, COO and chair are called to meet with DfE 3 to 5 times a year. Schools and DCAT itself remain subject to OfSTED.

Heads and chairs attend trustee meetings.

Academies in DCAT don't feel any different to the predecessor school

Q – How does DCAT link to the diocese?

A – DCAT is a company with 4 members, all of whom are appointed by the Diocese and responsible to the Diocesan Board of Education (DBE).

DCAT officers share an office with the DBE's officers – which helps maintain strong working relationships.

Q – Is this an irrevocable change?

A – It is not possible to return to maintained school status after conversion. The school could be moved to another Trust – and parents and governors could request that. Any Trust would have to be acceptable to the Diocesan Board of Education.

Q – Will Brexit have any impact?

A – Not obviously any direct impact – it depends on the impact on costs and available income. All schools will be equally affected and have to deal with whatever arises.