

Questions asked at the open meeting on 9th May 2016

In attendance: J Barker (headteacher), Paul Cavanagh (Vice chair of Governors), Lindsay Warner, Sarah Bashford, Richard Hackney, Bev Pursglove, Jason Hall (Governors)

c. 30 parents and other stakeholders

Here follows non verbatim notes of the questions and answers. All answers were supplied by either J Barker or P Cavanagh

Abbreviations

MHS = Marple Hall School
GB = Governing Body
DfE = Department for Education
MAT = Multi Academy Trust
LA = Local Authority

Which schools would MHS join with – just primary schools?

Only local primary schools have been approached (ie those who are the main feeder schools of MHS), no other schools.

What is the impact of the statement from Nicky Morgan (on not forcing academisation) on the plans?

The GB has not met since this announcement was made. Initially, the GB took the decision to open the consultation before the DfE announced that all schools were to convert, and the positive reasons for doing so still remain. However, Government position will need to be discussed further by the GB.

Are primaries interested and will this change with the recent announcements?

Yes, at least three primary schools are interested. No conversations have been held with the primary schools since the announcement from Nicky Morgan.

Would being an academy mean MHS would open a sixth form?

No, but it may mean that we revisit the idea of opening a sixth form in the future.

How quick would the process be if the decision is made to convert?

Firstly, we would delay if needed due to a lack of clarity from the Government. If we do go ahead then conversion can take between 5 and 18 months.

How is a trust governed

A trust has a number of 'Members' who appoint a board of 'Trustees'. The trustees are accountable for the standards in the MAT. Beneath this, each school in the MAT has a local governing body.

What if there is a change of leadership – ie a new Headteacher?

There can be no guarantees on what may happen should the school get a new Headteacher. However, the GB would be expected to recruit a head with a similar vision and ethos to the school. Mr Barker does not intend going anywhere soon. However, it is true that different leadership would have power to amend terms and conditions of staff in the future, which is an understandable concern for colleagues.

What is an academy and what benefit will it bring to the school?

There are different types of academy ranging from 'sponsored' academies to newer 'converter' academies, which is the type that MHS would like to become. An Academy is free from Local Authority control and has greater freedom over finances, staffing, curriculum etc. The benefits of the proposal for MHS would be the chance to work much more closely with primary schools and close the 'academic transition' gap – ie learn from KS2 in order to make KS3 more effective.

What evidence is there that academy status improves results?

There is a big national debate about this with a lot of confusing/contradictory evidence. Part of the issue is that there is not a neat divide between 'academies' and 'non'academies', as the academy group includes schools who have been struggling and 'forced' into being sponsored, alongside some of the most successful and forward thinking schools who converted to gain from the freedom and (at the time) a large amount of money that was available in 2010-2013 for new converters. Therefore it is hard to compare like with like. Fundamentally there is no reason why converting should automatically improve or worsen a school, just as there is no reason why remaining in the authority would do the same. Ultimately school improvement comes down to the quality of the wider school leadership.

Would parents still be governors?

Yes, and MHS has already resisted the suggestion to limit parents on the GB.

What would happen if the books don't balance?

Academies cannot set a deficit budget, and so savings will have to be made to ensure the books balance. There would be no cutting costs in terms of staff pay, as that would be a long term error for the school. Academies are under much greater financial scrutiny than state schools

Would we be under more pressure to recruit unqualified teachers?

No, not while Mr Barker is the headteacher!

Would we be under pressure to increase numbers?

There is pressure to increase numbers in coming years due to the increased numbers coming through primary school. It may be that converting to academy status means the school has a greater ability to keep numbers at an effective and manageable number.

How many other secondary schools are thinking of converting?

There are 5 non-faith secondary schools (including MHS) in Stockport yet to convert, and 5 who have already converted. It is not known if the other schools plan to convert or not.

What do staff think of the plans?

Staff have so far had two opportunities to meet with the Headteacher, and to date three colleagues have taken up this opportunity. The questions have largely been around terms and conditions and what may happen if there is a change of headteacher. Further opportunities are planned during the consultation.

What do teaching unions think of the plans?

To date no response has been received from the unions

What services may we buy back/lose if the school converts

There are definitely some services that the school would buy back from the LA. The school already has the option to buy back or source services elsewhere, and does so for some key services. Most current academies in the LA still buy back most services.

Will the money come straight to us?

Yes, directly from the government. The interest alone would be a major source of income for the school.

What if the primaries don't want to join – will we continue?

The GB will have to discuss options in this scenario. The DfE may want us to still convert, but we would need to look at the pros and cons of doing so. The previously rejected option of joining with other secondary schools may be revisited.

What are the benefits to the students?

Students will not see an immediate benefit, as part of the plan is to maintain our ethos and vision. However, over time students will benefit from a more rigorous and well taught KS3.

If MHS becomes an Academy in Spring/summer 2017, what impact will that have on the new year 7 pupils beginning in September 2017?

As above, students themselves should not really notice a difference. The uniform, ethos, expectations etc will all be the same, and any changes will be to the quality of lessons and curriculum especially at KS3. Therefore the students themselves shouldn't really notice anything as being especially different.

Would we be taking money from primary schools and then redistributing the money if necessary?

It is true that some trusts do this, and this has been discussed with primary headteachers. However, the school would not be looking to 'top slice' any money from schools in the MAT, but rather provide services at cost. The specific financial parameters of the MAT would need to be worked out with partner schools.

Can the trust be swallowed up by a bigger trust in the future?

We do not believe so, but will have to discuss this with the DfE

Does an Academy need to recognise unions officially?

The answer to this is not known, the headteacher undertook to find this out.

Have we had any input from teaching unions?

None as yet

Are there any plans to change the school day or holidays?

No changes planned. If in future there are proposals to change the school day then these would be done under a similar process to how secondary schools can currently change the school day.

Do we own the land as an academy? Could it be sold off?

Our understanding is that the DfE owns the land and the school has use of it. Land ownership is one of the first things to consider under the conversion process, if the GB chooses to go ahead. An attendee at the meeting suggested that the school would own the land and that this could lead to controversial action such as selling land. The headteacher undertook to find out more on this issue.

Would we continue to rent out our sports facilities?

Yes, they are a good income stream and we would look to increase this.

(Private question) What would happen if a Labour government gained power – would they roll back the changes?

We think that it would be unlikely that academies could return to LA control, but we have no idea what a Labour administration may decide.