

## **The Richard Clarke First School (RCFS) and the Uttoxeter Learning Trust (ULT)**

As most of you know, several schools in the Uttoxeter Pyramid have joined together to create a Multi-Academy Trust (MAT). The schools include Thomas Alleyenes High School and Oldfields Hall Middle School but not, as yet, RCFS. We have been welcomed as observers of the formation process but, now that the ULT is in place and operating as a single entity, we are no longer privy to their decision-making processes. RCFS is obviously still part of the Uttoxeter Pyramid and continues to work with them on a daily basis, but we will not be able to attract the potential benefits which would come from being a full member of the ULT. The benefits which are claimed for being a member of the ULT, and for MATs in general, have been broadcast widely. For example, economies of scale giving access to scarce resources leading to increased financial security; ability to share particular skills and facilities between schools; weaker schools being supported by their stronger partners; increased career development opportunities for teachers, particularly in small schools; and freedom from the impositions of the local authority.

Discussions about joining the ULT have taken place at most RCFS governors meetings since the ULT was proposed. Our conclusions have always been that, whilst accepting that some schools could benefit, we firmly believe that RCFS is currently in excellent shape and would not immediately gain from becoming a member of the ULT. Our conclusions are based entirely on what is best for our children, not on concerns about the ideological drivers for multi-academy trusts. However, there is also a more significant issue which has held us back from committing to membership. There is no such thing as a free lunch. In order to reap the benefits of membership, some degree of local control would have to be relinquished to the senior echelons of the MAT. This latter concern does not derive from direct knowledge but on our uncertainties about how the ULT decision-making processes would work if we were full members.

Throughout discussions between RCFS and the ULT it has been clear that they wish us to become a full member. It is not simply that they need to add scale by adding schools. They also see us as an excellent school which would add much to their capabilities as well as their size. The ULT has recognised and respected our uncertainties and, to this end, has created an 'associate membership' with a significantly reduced annual fee and of one-year duration. This would give us a seat at the ULT meetings; potential access to resources and a wider pool of expertise; and financial benefits from scale economies which would, we believe, repay our membership fee. The 'trial period' would be the financial year from April 2019 to April 2020, but participation at some level would begin in the near future. If, at the end of this period either RCFS or the ULT felt that the trial had not delivered the hoped for benefits it would be ended without any ill-feeling.

The RCFS Governors and Senior Leadership Team (SLT) have agreed to sign up for Associated Membership on the basis that we have little to lose and a great deal to gain, particularly knowledge of and insight into what Full Membership could mean

for RCFS in terms of monitoring, control and decision-making in this hierarchical structure. The ULT have said that a good school such as RCFS should not see any changes compared to 'life under the LA'. The trial period, if we use it properly, will show us if this is true or simply marketing-speak. Throughout the trial period we will still be an LA-maintained school and will not have given up any safeguards that this brings. I know that some of you reading this will think that it is the slippery start of a process which will irrevocably change the nature of the great school that is RCFS. Please be assured that the prime role of the Governors and the SLT is to make sure that the best interests of RCFS and its children remain paramount in all decisions made. We intend to participate fully in the associate membership but will not hesitate to withdraw if we are not seeing benefits. We will, however, contribute fully to the ULT during our membership period so that good practices are shared, improvements are secured and knowledge gained. The decision that we make at the end of the trial period must be based on hard evidence and hands-on experience, not on uncertainties and fears of the unknown.

**John Hough – Chair of Governors**

**Kay Hanson – Headteacher**

**The Richard Clarke First School, Abbots Bromley**