

# JOIN OUR TRUST



Girls' Learning Trust

The decision to join a Trust is a significant one for any school community. Working as part of a group of schools to improve and maintain high educational standards over a sustained period can be very rewarding, and can bring substantial benefits, including formal collaboration to develop teaching and learning, sharing best practice to enhance the experience of young people, and increased efficiencies to better enable frontline delivery.

But joining a Trust can also seem daunting, and it can be difficult to know where to begin. Based on sector guidance, we've produced this simple FAQ document to help any school interested in joining our Trust

## **WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF JOINING THE TRUST?**

Joining a MAT offers substantial long-term benefits for schools. Whilst there is always a temptation to focus on the immediate challenges facing the sector, it is the security, stability and sustainability of the support model that will ultimately deliver significant positive impact for students and staff.

Schools within our Trust regularly share best practice, collaborate on innovative curriculum development, and engage in ongoing specialised professional development for staff. This collaborative environment ensures enduring improvements in teaching and learning. Additionally, we provide long-term financial stability and can achieve economies of scale, providing better value for money through our shared service, thereby allowing more funds to be allocated towards improving outcomes for students.

Being part of a MAT with a clear sense of purpose – in our case the education and empowerment of girls and young women - cultivates a lasting sense of community and shared mission, promoting an environment where schools can innovate and improve together over the years.

## **WHAT IF WE'RE ALREADY A 'GOOD' OR 'OUTSTANDING' SCHOOL?**

Much of the initial discourse around MATs was focussed on 'turnaround of failing schools'. But the sector has moved on, and we're now at the point where successful schools can also see the benefits of the model.

It's more important than ever that leaders and governors consider the long-term future of the sector and make decisions now that will ultimately safeguard the future success of their school.

## **WHAT IS THE HISTORY OF THE GIRLS' LEARNING TRUST?**

In 2015, Nonsuch High School for Girls formed a multi academy trust with Wallington High School for Girls, the Nonsuch & Wallington Education Trust. In 2018, the company became the Girls' Learning Trust (GLT) and later that year Carshalton High School for Girls joined. Our schools are a mixture of selective and non-selective and are held in high regard by the local community. All three are high performing and each delivers a broad, balanced and challenging curriculum that sets high expectations and encourages aspiration. Students are taught by well-qualified, dedicated and committed staff who are experts in girls' education. The Trust benefits from the expertise within an executive support staff team that provides shared services for schools, including Finance, Estates, IT, Procurement, Capital Development Projects, HR, Governance, Audit and Risk. This shared team of professionals ensure consistent methods of operation, strong quality assurance and best value across the Trust.

Relationships in the Trust, between staff and students or between colleagues, are built on mutual trust and respect. These relationships drive school improvement and contribute to the wellbeing of everyone. Visitors often comment on the high levels of motivation and positive behaviour of our students, the commitment and professionalism of the staff and the well-equipped school buildings. Strong academic performance is complemented by highly effective pastoral care. We believe in offering a broad experience that goes well beyond the academic, and girls are encouraged to develop their confidence, independence and resilience across a wide range of enrichment and extra-curricular activities.

## **WHAT VISION DO YOU HAVE FOR EDUCATION AND SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT?**

While we work across the Trust to support school performance and ensure value for public money, we believe in allowing our schools autonomy in developing approaches to pedagogy and the curriculum that will deliver the very best outcomes for their students. Nevertheless, our shared values and the many opportunities we have for collaboration across our schools mean that we learn lots from each other and that we remain outward-focussed. We are committed to offering an outstanding education that promotes wellbeing and personal development for everyone in our schools, enriched by the opportunities that arise from being part of a girls' education trust.

We believe education should be about:

- Encouraging risk-taking and developing reflective approaches to teaching and learning.
- Championing equality and inclusion and challenging social and economic disadvantage.
- Building supportive and collaborative networks whilst allowing schools the autonomy to develop in ways that are best for their students.
- Offering broad and rich experiences that go well beyond the academic and lead to satisfying and rewarding career paths.
- Fostering a sense of pride in diversity.



We currently comprise three large secondary schools, each with a full Key Stage 3 to Key Stage 5 offer. Within the Trust this accounts for circa 4,500 students, 500 staff, and an annual financial turnover of over £30m. All our schools are currently located within 5 miles of each other in the London Borough of Sutton.

## **HOW MANY SCHOOLS WOULD YOU WISH TO SEE JOIN THE TRUST?**

When our third school joined the Trust in 2018, we took the deliberate decision to pause future growth to consolidate our organisation and allow our schools to make the most of the benefits of trust membership. During this period (which was also significantly impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic) we've continued to develop and refine our operating model, the most recent element of which has been the appointment of a new Chief Executive Officer and a re alignment of our Executive Leadership Team. We believe our operating model can comfortably grow to five schools (an additional two secondary schools) without any major changes, and that is where our focus currently lies.

## **HOW DO YOU KNOW THAT A SCHOOL WILL BE A GOOD FIT FOR YOUR TRUST?**

This is a complex question. Whilst we're clear about some specific features (see below), the overall decision will always be based on the answer to our 'key growth question' using what we call our 'three key tests':

- *Key Growth Question:* on a long-term and sustained basis, are students in a school better off in our Trust?

The first two tests relate directly to the impact we are seeking – in this case providing an outstanding education that promotes wellbeing and personal development for everyone in our schools:

- *Test One:* how can our Trust add educational value to a potential school?
- *Test Two:* how can a potential school add educational value to our Trust?

The third question takes a different view, looking inwards at the organisation and, in particular, at our shared infrastructure model. It relates directly to how we think our Trust can leverage power through collaboration and sharing services:

- *Test Three:* how can a potential school help our Trust better support schools on a long-term and sustained basis by:
  - i. Solving common problems more efficiently together
  - ii. Delivering more specialised strategic support for schools
  - iii. Securing better value for money from our services and activities
  - iv. Creating more autonomy through internalisation
  - v. Guaranteeing greater resilience in high-risk areas
  - vi. Reducing the management burden on education-focussed staff.
  - vii. Monitoring and securing compliance with our legal duties.



## **WHAT TYPE OF SCHOOLS MIGHT JOIN THE TRUST?**

We believe that the most significant benefits of the Trust-model can be delivered when our member schools share some important key features. We've therefore made a decision to retain our current model, and are looking for schools who are:

- In broad alignment with our vision for education
- All-girls schools (with some flexibility for some mixed provision at KS5)
- Secondary phase
- State-funded (including schools already with academy status)
- Selective or comprehensive.

## **WHAT GEOGRAPHICAL AREAS WILL BE CONSIDERED?**

Whilst we have embraced the changes to working patterns that technology provides – including the lessons learned during the Covid-19 pandemic – we also think it's important that staff within the Trust can move easily between schools. Physical proximity is therefore reasonably important when we look towards our next member school. We're looking for a school within an hour of our current footprint.

## **HOW IS THE TRUST GOVERNED?**

In common with all other multi academy trusts, the ultimate accountability for all activities that take place within the organisation rests between our Trust Board (a committee of volunteers), our Trust Members (responsible for appointing Trustees), and our Accounting Officer (Chief Executive Officer). The Trust Board has established a range of subcommittees that are responsible for in-depth

consideration of key areas – for example, Finance and HR. These are continually reviewed to make sure they remain fit for purpose.

In addition to this, each school has its own Local Governing Body (which reports to the Trust Board) that has a significant amount of delegated responsibility for the performance of the school. More specifically, these LGBs:

- Support and challenge the Headteacher and the school leadership to secure strong outcomes for students
- Provide oversight and monitoring of the school’s activities to ensure an excellent standard of education is delivered
- Ensure that the School KPIs set by the Trust Board are delivered as part of the school development plan
- Contribute to the wider work of the Trust through membership of Trust subcommittees.

We are committed to the highest standards of governance and publish an annual Governance Handbook on the Trust website that clearly sets out how we operate, and who is accountable for what in a formal Scheme of Delegation.

## **HOW IS THE TRUST LED?**

Alongside our governance structure, on a day-to-day basis the Trust is led by the Executive Leadership Team (ELT). From September 2024 the ELT consists of the following roles:

- Chief Executive (Chair)
- 3 Headteachers
- Chief Financial Officer
- Chief Infrastructure Officer
- Chief People Officer

It is supported by the Head of Governance, who attends where formal decisions are being taken and minutes are required. The purpose of the ELT is defined as:

- Strategic Development: responsible for developing the strategy of the Trust for approval by the Trust Board
- Strategic Delivery: responsible for delivering the strategic objectives of the Trust and developing transformation and large-scale improvement initiatives
- Operational Oversight and Delivery: responsible for oversight and guidance on the day-to-day operations of the Trust, ensuring that all schools within the trust operate efficiently and effectively
- Resource Management: responsible for leading the financial management and allocation of resources for the Trust, including budgeting, financial reporting, and ensuring compliance with regulatory requirements
- Stakeholder Engagement: responsible for leading and managing the stakeholder engagement strategy for the Trust, working together to ensure a coherent and targeted plan is in place.

## **HOW ARE HEADTEACHERS APPOINTED AND SUPPORTED?**

We firmly believe that every school should be led by a high-performing and well-supported Headteacher. The Chief Executive Officer (as Accounting Officer) of the Trust is responsible for managing the recruitment and line management of the Headteachers in the Trust, working alongside members of Trust Board and the relevant Local Governing Body on school review and objective setting.

## **HOW ARE FINANCES MANAGED WITHIN THE TRUST?**

As a Trust with a relatively small number of schools, we operate integrated budgeting – that is, we don't operate any form of automatic 'top slice'.

Instead, we manage a Trust-wide annual budgeting process that engages all our Headteachers and leads of our professional Shared Services. We do not 'GAG pool', we apportion shared costs to schools on a simple ratio based on their government funding levels.

Each school has a target to deliver an annual 3% surplus to fund core capital expenditure (including IT and major estates-related projects). We pool our reserves (other than those ring-fenced for a particular school) to make sure we can deliver large projects that create significant impact where it is needed most. Importantly, however, all our Headteachers are part of this discussion and have a strong voice in establishing these priorities.

## **HOW DOES THE PROCESS OF JOINING A TRUST WORK?**

There are broadly four key stages that need to take place. The amount of time the process takes will depend on the specific features of any potential school – however we envisage any school joining fully approximately 3-6 months after 'in principle' agreement is reached.

### 1. Initial Engagement / Discussions

The initial engagement stage begins with discussions between senior staff within the Trust and the potential school. Trust staff will also visit the school site to gain a better understanding of its environment and operations. These initial discussions expand to include key governors and trustees, fostering a collaborative dialogue. An informal approval is then sought from our Trust Board to continue discussions, followed by presentations at the potential school's Governing Body and other stakeholder meetings. This stage aims to build a mutual understanding and interest in moving forward.

### 2. In Principle Agreement

At this stage, a Strategic Business Case is developed collaboratively by the GLT CEO and the potential school's Headteacher. This case is then agreed upon by both the Trust Board and the School Governing Body, and subsequently sent to the Department for Education (DfE) for consideration. Essential agreements, such as a Memorandum of Understanding, Non-Disclosure Agreement, and Data Sharing Agreement, are signed between the two organisations in preparation. A formal stakeholder engagement plan is also developed, and a public statement is issued regarding the school's intention to join the Trust, initiating the consultation process.

### 3. Detailed Mutual Due Diligence

During this stage, a Joint Steering Group with representatives from the Trust and the school is established to consider consultation responses and approve a due diligence framework and plan of action. A Joint Working Group of staff is then formed to carry out due diligence activities and develop

an integration plan – focussed on six key areas: education vision & strategy, finance, governance, legal & compliance, staffing, estates & facilities and IT.

#### 4. Approval and Integration

The final stage involves securing formal resolutions from both the Trust Board and the School Governing Body, followed by obtaining formal approval from the DfE Regional Director. A formal project manager is appointed, and detailed action plans and a Gantt chart are developed to map key tasks. Communication and stakeholder engagement activities are initiated to ensure a smooth transition. Post-integration, regular review meetings are conducted at 3, 6, and 12-month intervals to monitor progress, with ongoing oversight provided by the Trust Board. This stage ensures the successful integration of the new school into the Trust and continuous evaluation to address any arising issues.

### **WHOM SHOULD I CONTACT?**

We understand that the decision to join a trust is complex and sometimes political.

We'd urge any school looking for an informal and completely confidential conversation to contact the CEO of the Trust via email at [tflynn@girlslearningtrust.org](mailto:tflynn@girlslearningtrust.org).





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[www.girlslearningtrust.org](http://www.girlslearningtrust.org)