Consultation about whether The Willink School should become an academy school within Pioneer Educational Trust

Academy conversion Questions and Answers

This document has been issued as part of the consultation about whether The Willink School should convert to become an academy school within Pioneer Educational Trust.

Our commitment to parents. The Willink's vision – that all students flourish to achieve their full personal and academic potential – and our ambition for every student remain our first priority. This proposal is about sustainability: making sure The Willink has the capacity, expertise and financial resilience to keep providing an excellent education, so that our students continue to thrive and achieve.

Parents have told us they want reassurance that the things they value would not change. If The Willink joins Pioneer, the school name, vision and values, uniform, timings of the school day, Headteacher and staff, school transport arrangements and SEND provision (including support for students with an EHCP) would all stay the same. These are explained in more detail below.

Why has this proposal been put forward?

Put simply, this proposal is about positioning the school for its future success. Governors want to secure The Willink's future so that it can continue to deliver its vision and ambition for students – not to change what makes The Willink special.

1. **Does the school have to become an academy school?**
   - As of 1 September 2026 there are over 12,000 academy schools within England, representing 56% of all schools in England. Almost 85% of secondary-phase schools are academies.
   - Schools have been able to choose to become an academy since 2010, and as of 1 September 2026 almost 8500 schools have chosen to become academy schools, including almost 1750 secondary-phase schools.
   - The government has published three white papers (2016, 2022, 2026) that stated a desire for all schools to become academies.
   - The government has the legal power to require individual schools to become academies in certain situations (usually as a result of an adverse Ofsted and/or lower standards than the Department for Education (DfE) expects), and over 800 secondary-phase schools have been sponsored to become academies.
   - For schools that are not eligible for DfE intervention, it is a Governing Bbody's decision whether to convert. For The Willink School, it is a Governing Body decision about whether to convert.

2. Why is The Willink School considering converting to academy status?

The primary focus of every school is on providing the highest possible quality education to its students. The landscape for schools is one of increased competition to recruit and retain staff, and increasingly challenging financial situation as a result of costs (including pay but also the other supplies that a school needs) rising much faster than funding. This is coupled with educational change and ever increasing government expectations. The challenge for all Governing Bodies, therefore, is to increase the effectiveness and efficiency of the school.

The rationale for proposing to join Pioneer is that it positions The Willink for a stronger future than it would have as a stand-alone school. It would do this by:

- Sharpened capacity to focus upon quality of education and student success – Headteachers within Pioneer focus upon educational provision due to the capacity of the trust to support or lead some business management and compliance aspects. Similarly, Local Committees focus upon their specific school while the Board of Trustees oversees trust-wide aspects and much of the business and compliance governance.
- Opportunities to improve financial performance and management – Pioneer has a strong approach to financial management to ensure that funding is invested to improve the quality of experience for staff and students. Being part of a trust enables consolidation of processes, greater expertise and capacity, and shared approaches to secure financial efficiency. Pioneer is financially secure and has reserves of over £3m.
- Building capacity – trusts are able to build capacity and expertise through collaboration between staff and through establishment of trust roles. The Willink's educational provision would benefit from trust-wide subject and middle leader networks that bring colleagues together to share curriculum planning, assessment and moderation; professional support and challenge for the Headteacher and senior team from the Trust's central education leadership, including the Director of Education; access to Pioneer's leadership and early career programmes, such as the Pioneering Leadership Programme and Teacher Learning Communities, and cross-phase links with Pioneer's primary and middle schools. In turn, The Willink would contribute its own strengths – including its leadership of the Mobius Maths Hub, delivery of National Professional Qualifications and initial teacher training through the Two Counties Training Partnership – for the benefit of all Pioneer schools. Similar principles apply for our business and support services, including benefiting from trust-wide roles where individuals have expertise that individual schools find difficult to replicate.
- Strengthening recruitment and retention – recruiting and retaining excellent staff is a challenge for all schools nationally. Being part of a trust with a strong reputation for professional development and wellbeing, and with clear career pathways across several schools, would help The Willink continue to attract and keep high-quality teachers and support staff.
- Greater resilience – being part of a larger organisation provides additional capacity and specialist expertise to draw on, for example when responding to unexpected challenges or planning for the long term, while the school keeps its own identity, leadership and ethos.
- Wider opportunities for students – collaboration across Pioneer's schools creates opportunities for joint enrichment, competitions, student leadership and cross-phase projects that would be harder for a single school to provide on its own.

3. Why has The Willink chosen Pioneer Educational Trust as the trust to join?

The Governing Body undertook research to identify and evaluate potential trusts. Governors concluded that Pioneer is the strongest fit because:

- Shared culture and values – Pioneer's values of being pioneering, inspiring collaboration, being consciously liberate, and investing intelligently, closely reflect The Willink's own commitment to high standards, inclusion and continuous improvement
- Respect for school identity – Pioneer values the heritage and identity of each of its schools and builds on their existing strengths rather than imposing uniformity. The Willink would keep its name, uniform and leadership, as well as its own vision, mission and values: our vision that all students flourish to achieve their full personal and academic potential, our ERA values of Engage, Respect and Achieve, and our "Village School, Global Outlook" ethos
- Quality of leadership and governance – Pioneer has stable, experienced leadership, has grown steadily and carefully since 2014, and every school in the Trust has been judged at least 'Good' or 'Expected Standard' by Ofsted. Its Board of Trustees provides strong strategic oversight, while Local Committees keep governance close to each school community
- Collaboration, not competition – Pioneer's schools are close enough for staff and students to work together regularly, while serving different communities, so the partnership is built on collaboration rather than competition

4. Did The Willink consider conversion before but decide not to proceed? If so, how is this time different?

Yes, The Willink has explored whether to become an academy before. There was an earlier proposal for a number of local schools to jointly create a new trust, but that did not proceed. Since then, the Governing Body has kept abreast of the evolving landscape of schools and of trusts, focusing upon whether becoming an academy would strengthen The Willink further.

This consultation is upon the proposal to join Pioneer.

About Pioneer Educational Trust

5. Does Pioneer provide high quality education?

Yes, as demonstrated by:

- A strong track record of school improvement. Every school has retained or improved its Ofsted judgement since joining Pioneer. This includes Upton Court Grammar School which is graded Outstanding in all categories, Foxborough Primary School improving from Special Measures to 'exceptional' in all areas, and Trevelyan Middle School progressing from twenty years of Requires Improvement judgements to Good with Outstanding for behaviour and attitudes and personal development at its first inspection following conversion.
- Extensive investment in continuing professional development and learning, focused on building expertise, confidence and capacity in all staff to deliver high-quality teaching and support for every pupil. Pioneer also has a commitment to sustainable excellence. Their approach, therefore, includes thoughtful consideration of staff workload and wellbeing, with very high levels of staff retention and experience.
- In terms of specialist support, Pioneer provides expertise and support across the Trust in key areas, including SEND and safeguarding, supporting schools to meet pupils' diverse needs and provide safe, inclusive learning environments.
- A robust and evidence-informed school improvement model which combines clear expectations for teaching, learning and assessment with intelligent quality assurance, peer review and specialist support. Pioneer operates a range of cross-trust networks, such as for SENCos or enrichment leads. This model enables Pioneer to identify strengths, address areas for development and share effective practice across their schools.

6. Would SEND provision, or support for disadvantaged pupils, be neglected as part of Pioneer?

No. Inclusion is central to the values of both The Willink and Pioneer. The Willink's current provision for pupils with SEND and for disadvantaged pupils would continue under the same leadership and staff, and the school's legal duties would not change: academies have exactly the same SEND obligations as maintained schools, and the local authority remains responsible for EHCP assessments. Joining Pioneer would add opportunities for our SENCO, pastoral and teaching staff to work with colleagues across the Trust, sharing expertise, training and effective strategies – including how Pupil Premium funding is used to close gaps – and The Willink would contribute its own expertise, such as its delivery of the NPQ for SENCOs. SEND provision and support for disadvantaged pupils would certainly not be neglected as part of Pioneer.

If your child has an EHCP, the support set out in their plan would continue to be delivered by the same SENCO and SEND team, and their annual reviews would continue in the same way. The local authority would remain responsible for EHCP assessments and for naming the school in the plan, as now.

7. What is the financial position at Pioneer?

The financial year for academies runs from 1 September to 31 August. The latest completed accounts are for the 2024/25 financial year – these are available on the Pioneer website (https://www.pioneereducationaltrust.org.uk/our-trust/trust-financials/). They demonstrate the strong financial management within the trust, including reserves to provide financial security. The accounts for the 2025/26 financial year will be published in spring 2027; they will continue to show strong financial management.

8. Do Pioneer schools follow the national curriculum?

Yes (all academies have to follow the national curriculum from 2028, but Pioneer schools have always done so).

What is an academy?

9. What is an Academy?

An Academy is an independent state school, funded directly from central government rather than through the Council. A charitable company limited by guarantee (the Academy Trust) is responsible for the academy, and the Academy Trust signs the Funding Agreement (the contract) with the Secretary of State as part of the establishment of the academy.

Legislation requires that an academy has the following characteristics:

- That it offers a balanced and broadly based curriculum;
- That it provides education for students of different abilities; and
- That it provides education for students who are wholly or mainly drawn from the area in which the school is situated

10. How many academies are there?
As of September 2026, there are over 12,000 academy schools in England. This includes almost 3,000 mainstream secondary-phase schools (85% of all secondary schools) and over 8,350 mainstream primary-phase schools (50% of all primary-phase schools). There are 365 additional schools that are in the process of potentially converting.

Within West Berkshire, in September 2026 eight of the ten mainstream secondary schools are academies (only The Willink and Little Heath remain), one of the two special schools are academies, and 10 of the 67 primary-phase schools are academies.

11. How is an academy different from a community school?
The Willink School is a community school. This means that the council owns the owns the land and buildings, sets the admissions policy, and is the employer of staff (and able to set their own terms and conditions for support staff). An academy school has several differences to a community school, including:

- Admissions – the academy trust would be responsible for setting and implementing its admissions policy and for prioritising applications (rather than the council as it is for community schools). An academy must continue to operate within the requirements of the national School Admissions Code in the same way as maintained schools, including full participation in the local coordinated admissions scheme administered by the local authority;

- Land and Buildings – the land and buildings of the schools would be leased to the Academy Trust for 125 years at a peppercorn rent from the Local Authority and the academy would be responsible for the land and buildings (and reliant on the Secretary of State for capital funding);

- Curriculum – an academy has to offer a broad and balanced curriculum for students of differing abilities, including Maths, English, and Science, and Religious Education. From September 2028 academy schools will be required to follow the National Curriculum, although all Pioneer schools have continued to follow the national curriculum even when academy schools have not been required to;

- Employment – the Academy Trust becomes the employer of school staff, rather than the local authority. Academies also have freedom to set new terms and conditions for future staff; and

- Governance – Pioneer Educational Trust (which is a charitable company) is responsible for all the schools within the trust, with the Board of Trustees being the legal governors for all schools within the trust. There is a Local Committee for each school, and these include staff and parents.

12. What does not change if The Willink School becomes an academy?
The following elements do not change if the school becomes an academy:

- School transport arrangements – if your child currently travels via school bus this will continue; eligibility for home-to-school transport would continue to be decided by West Berkshire Council under its usual policy, as now

- SEND – academies are subject to the same SEN obligations as maintained schools and the same SENCO and SEND team would continue to support students, including delivering the support set out in EHCPs;
- School name and uniform – these would stay the same;
- Staffing – Ms Browning would remain Headteacher and all staff would transfer their employment to Pioneer;
- Ofsted and national assessments – academies are inspected by Ofsted in exactly the same way as for maintained schools, and students at academies still complete the national assessments including at the end of Year 11 and Year 13;
- Freedom of Information – academies are subject to this as if they were maintained schools;
- Charging parents – the Funding Agreement requires academies to act as if they were a maintained school with respect to charging parents;
- Behaviour – academies are required to act as if they were a maintained school with respect to student behaviour; and
- Exclusions – academies are required to act as if they were a maintained school with respect to exclusions.

13. Does Ofsted inspect academies?

Yes, in exactly the same way as for maintained schools.

14. How can the Secretary of State intervene in an academy?

The Secretary of State has the ability to terminate the Funding Agreement for each of the schools within the Academy Trust if specified situations, predominantly following an adverse Ofsted, if pupil performance is unacceptably low, if there has been a serious breakdown in the governance or management of the academy, or if the safety of pupils or staff is threatened. In this situation the Secretary of State would be able to transfer the school(s) to another academy trust.

Academy governance

15. How would the school be governed?

- Pioneer is already a trust. The trust signs a Supplemental Funding Agreement (the contract) with the Secretary of State for each school within the trust.
- Pioneer has a Board of Trustees that are legally responsible for the schools within the trust (technically they are the legal Governing Body for all of the schools).
- A Local Committee for each school provide local governance, and support and challenge to the Headteacher and leadership team, and include parents and staff.
- A trust also has a small number of Members (generally five). These Members have a similar role to 'shareholders' in a private company limited by shares (but they do not receive payment or dividends!), with the ability to appoint and remove the Trustees.

16. How would parents become part of the Local Committee?

The same process as now would apply. When there is a vacancy, applications are sought from the parents at the school, which may outline particular skill sets that would be useful to the Local

Committee. If there are the same number or fewer applications than vacancies then those individuals who applied are appointed. If there are more applications than vacancies, the parents vote to decide who becomes a governor.

The same process is used for the staff role on the Local Committee (with staff rather than parents eligible to nominate and who would vote if required).

Academy funding and services

17. Do academies receive extra funding?
Academies receive their funding direct from the Government rather than via their local authority. The budget is calculated in the same way as now, with a few fairly small technical changes for areas such as business rates. The academy financial year runs from September to August.

Academy policies

18. Would there be changes to the number of pupils admitted into Year 7 or Year 12 at the school, or the over-subscription criteria used to prioritise applications?
No. The admissions policy for the 2027/28 academic year has already been determined by West Berkshire Council, and the policy for 2028/29 would be determined by the council before The Willink joined Pioneer. The policies approved by West Berkshire would transfer to Pioneer. There is no intention to change the number of pupils admitted into Year 7 or Year 12 or to change the over-subscription criteria that are used to prioritise applications for entry.

Educational implications

19. What are the safeguards for vulnerable students?
Under the terms of the Funding Agreement (which is the contract between the trust and the Secretary of State), an academy has to act in exactly the same way as a maintained school in relation to Special Education Needs, behaviour, and exclusions.

20. Who is responsible for deciding if a student needs an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP)?
The local authority would retain the legal responsibility for assessing whether a child needs a EHCP and determining which school is named on the EHCP.

21. Would the daily experience of pupils change if the school joins Pioneer?
There is no intention for significant change – this proposal is about evolution as we benefit from collaboration. It is not about revolution – The Willink is a good school seeking to become even better, not a school where there is a need to significantly change our provision.

Behind the scenes, our students would benefit from the increased staff collaboration and the increased opportunities that come from being part of a trust. Over time this may lead to our approach evolving if staff identify changes that they believe would improve The Willink, and may also result in evolution of approach in other Pioneer schools as they learn from our good practice.

The term dates for 2026/27 would not change, and those for 2027/28 would remain the same as for West Berkshire local authority. From September 2028, The Willink may align its term dates with other Pioneer schools, which have a two-week October half-term. This would make it easier for staff to train and work together across the Trust, which benefits students. No decision has yet been made, and the 2028/29 term dates would be confirmed and published well in advance so that families can plan. We know that some families have children at other schools, and we would take this into account when finalising the dates.

22. Would the curriculum change?
Not immediately or radically, but as it is reviewed periodically those reviews would benefit from the collaboration of our staff with colleagues in other schools.

23. What services does the school receive from the council that it would lose if it converts? How would it replace those services? Would they cost more and / or be lower quality?
The council provides certain statutory duties for the school, several of which (such as safeguarding and SEND) would remain. Other council services are already traded – i.e. the school has the choice whether to buy from the council or from other providers and we make those decisions based on quality and cost.

24. How would the academy cope in the event of an emergency (such as a fire) if it is not maintained by the local authority?
Academies continue to work closely with the local authority to collectively provide high quality education for our community. That relationship continues irrespective of the legal status of the school – we are all on the same team!

So if an emergency arose, any local school would work closely with the council. For a number of issues the council may still have statutory responsibilities – such as if there was a safeguarding concern. For emergencies that are covered by insurance, such as a fire, the school would continue to have adequate insurance in place and the process would be the same as now; in addition, the local authority retains the legal responsibility for providing sufficient school places and so would need to work closely with the school to secure alternative accommodation if the school building was unavailable.

Employment in an academy

25. What is the impact of becoming an academy for current Willink staff?
All qualifying staff would transfer from their current employer (West Berkshire Council) to the employment of Pioneer. Qualifying staff are generally those who would have been employed at the school on the date of conversion to academy status. This transfer would take place within the TUPE regulations for staff transfer, which ensures that staff retain their existing rights, terms and conditions and pension arrangements, including continuity of service.

Academies are required to offer membership to Teachers' Pension Scheme (TPS) or Local Government Pension School (LGPS) to all staff (the relevant scheme depending upon their role). Employee costs and benefits are set nationally. Access to the pension scheme is therefore not affected by academy conversion.

26. What is the effect of TUPE?
The TUPE Regulations provide that the current employer's "rights, powers, duties and responsibilities" under the contract of employment of any transferring member of staff would be transferred automatically to the new employer, in this case Pioneer.

27. Do academies have to recognise Trade Unions?
Yes. Pioneer already recognises the main trade unions who have members in schools.

Land and buildings

28. What happens to The Willink site and buildings?
As a community school, the land is owned by the local authority. The council would grant a 125 year lease at peppercorn rent to Pioneer. The local authority would retain the freehold title to the land. Pioneer would become responsible for the land and buildings in accordance with the lease.

29. How does an academy access capital funding?
Academies receive some capital funding, called Devolved Formula Capital, according to the same methodology as maintained schools. This funding is provided directly to the academy.

Whereas the school currently relies on the local authority for funding for more substantial works, whether these are for repair / maintenance or for improvements, academies are generally reliant on central government (as the other schools within Pioneer already are). Pioneer has to bid to central government each year for funding for identified projects; the table below shows projects that have been funded in recent years.

Year	School	Project	DfE Funding	Trust Contribution		Total
2024/25	Upton Court Grammar School	CIF - Urgent Fire Safety/Electrical Imprmnts	£1,200,203.00	£63,169.00		£1,263,372.00
2024/25	Upton Court Grammar School	CIF - Urgent Heating Distribution Replacement	£787,065.00	£41,425.00		£828,490.00
2024/25	Trevelyan Middle School	CIF - Heating/Water Distribution replacement	£904,595.00	£100,551.00		£1,005,146.00
2023/24	Trevelyan Middle School	CIF - Urgent Fire & Electrical Works	£948,634.00	£106,576.00		£1,055,210.00
2023/24	Trevelyan Middle School	CIF - Urgent roof repair	£1,082,709.00	£108,270.00		£1,190,979.00

2023/24	Foxborough Primary School	CIF - Urgent Fire & Electrical Works	£787,334.00	£88,455.00		£875,789.00
2023/24	Foxborough Primary School	CIF - Urgent Roof Refurbishment	£571,580.00	£64,205.00		£635,785.00
2023/24	Desborough College	SSICB Project - Urgent Capital project	£4,413,813.11	£631,564.52		£5,045,377.63

Total secured from DfE – nearly £10.7m.

What could change in the future?

30. What could change in the future?
If the school remains as a community school maintained by West Berkshire Council and does not join Pioneer, changes in the future could originate from central government, West Berkshire Council, or the Governing Body. The Governing Body already has the powers to propose changes to the school day, curriculum, or how the budget is spent. West Berkshire Council could propose changes to the admissions number and policy, the overall school year, and support staff terms and conditions.

If the school joins Pioneer, the trust could propose changes in the future. Many of these changes would require formal consultation with parents and / or staff and their trade unions. The Trustees could decide some changes, while others would require the agreement of the Secretary of State.

Consultation process

31. Who is being consulted?
Governors want to hear the views of any interested person or group. In particular, Governors want to understand the reasons for those views to help ensure that they have considered all relevant issues before they make their final decision.

The school has distributed the consultation document to parents and staff, to West Berkshire Council, to local schools, to the local MP and to local Councillors.

32. Will the Governors' listen to the views from the consultation?
Yes, every response will be considered. Responses might include arguments for and against the proposed conversion, as well as questions or concerns about conversion or joining Pioneer. The information from the consultation will be considered alongside other information about the implications of remaining as a maintained school or becoming an academy. The consultation enables Governors to understand the views of The Willink community and to use that information to inform their decision. Governors are required to take the decision that they believe to be in the best interests of the school.

Pioneer's approach is to respect the identity of each of its schools and build on their strengths. Any future change would be made with the aim of improving the education and experience of our students.