

1 December 2012

Dear Parent/Carer

I am writing to inform you of a recent decision taken by governors and trustees to apply to ministers in order for Brymore to convert to academy status from September 2013 and to extend the age range to take Year 7 and 8 boys from September 2014. The intention of this letter is to put you fully in the picture and to explain the reasoning behind this decision.

Firstly, it has to be said that the recent history of Brymore and the many educational reforms that have taken place on a national scale have combined to lead us to where we are today. When I arrived two years ago it was clear there were three main challenges. Initially, leading the school through a successful safeguarding review and ensuring that systems and a culture were in place to prevent the school facing similar difficulties again in the future. Ofsted have certainly reported to me recently (the care standards report will not be out for a couple of weeks) that huge progress has been made on this front. The second main challenge was raising academic achievement so that examination results reflected the true potential of the boys. Although this continues to be the main focus, I am pleased to report that in two years the school has moved from the 91st percentile (bottom 9% of schools in the country) for progress in 5 A*-C grades to the 3rd percentile (top 3% of schools in the country). We are also placed in the top two and three per cent respectively, on a national scale, for two other measures. Clearly Brymore boys can achieve excellent examination results.

However, the third challenge appears to be much harder to solve, which is to ensure the financial viability of the school. Every year, Brymore receives an additional £250,000-£280,000 from the Local Authority, compared to all other schools in Somerset (approximately a quarter of our teaching budget). This is to reflect the specialist nature of what we offer; a farm being more expensive to run than a geography department for example. It also allows us to run smaller classes, which I believe is essential when delivering the vocational courses we offer. This additional funding is in no way guaranteed, although Somerset Schools Forum met recently and agreed its continuation in the medium term. In addition, although boarding is run and funded separately, the recent increase in staffing to ensure effective staff-student ratios has led to an obvious increase in expenditure, without an increase in student numbers and therefore income. This is an issue facing all boarding schools on a national scale at the moment.

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The implications for Brymore, which is currently a foundation school, becoming an academy are as follows:

1. We would be sponsored by Bridgwater College which would mirror the current relationship we have with the College through the National Challenge Trust partnership.
2. We would be accountable direct to the Department for Education rather than the Local Authority.
3. We would receive the same level of per-pupil funding as we would from the Local Authority as a foundation school.
4. However, we would have greater freedom over how to use our budget to best benefit our students
5. The governing body would directly employ the staff, as we do now, however foundation schools are required to comply with the School Teachers' Pay and Conditions Document (STPCD). Academies can employ new staff outside of the STPCD.
6. The governing body is the admissions authority (we are already as a foundation school)
7. The governing body owns the land and buildings (in our case the trustees already do as part of the National Challenge Trust agreement).
8. The school has the ability to determine its own term dates (we do already as a foundation school).
9. We will not have to follow the National Curriculum.
10. There will be approximately £350,000 worth of funding to assist with the conversion.

Many of the changes will be internal in the way the school is funded and how it secures services which will in turn allow it to become more efficient. The day-to-day nature of the school will not change significantly. I have no intention of changing the name (not even to Brymore Academy), the ethos, curriculum, class sizes etc, other than normal developments that would take place as the school evolves. Moreover, freedom from the National Curriculum gives us more scope to be innovative in our curriculum.

The decision to extend the age range is a separate one to academy conversion and neither decision is dependent on the other. There are two driving factors behind extending the age range. Firstly, securing financial security and therefore the future of the school is paramount. I envisage Brymore being full and therefore over-subscribed by September 2015 at the latest, which would bring us an additional £570,000 in funding per year. Clearly there would be additional staffing costs needed from the teaching budget but significant increases would not be needed from the boarding budget. This would allow us to invest in the infrastructure of the school and improve the experience for the boys. Secondly, it would allow us to work with students for five years rather than three, so that those that under-achieve for two years before they come to Brymore, or become switched off, are more likely to make progress. It would also allow Brymore to remain a boy's only school, which I know is a key factor for many parents.

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One of the strengths of Brymore is the loyalty shown by parents and old boys who have attended the school in the past. However this does often lead to me facing questions regarding changes and the future direction of the school. Change is necessary and safeguarding procedures and academic performance needed improving, as did the boarding experience; but I must reassure you again that I do not believe that much of what makes Brymore unique does need changing. I strongly believe in the three 'Rs', traditional values, the farm, gardens and workshops, Chads Hill, manners, behaviour and uniform, small class sizes, nurturing the person as a whole, hard work and respect..... the list goes on. I hope that the two changes I am proposing will ensure that Brymore, and all it stands for, will continue to provide boys with the best education available for another sixty years.

I have shared this information with the boys, as I believe it is important they are aware of the real issues the school faces and many have seen me to give their views. Should you wish to discuss or comment on any of the points raised in this letter, then please do not hesitate to contact me at the school for either a chat on the telephone, a meeting or via e-mail should you prefer. Alternatively there will be a briefing for parents on Saturday 15 December at 9.30 am in the school hall, where academy status and extending the age range can be discussed. This will finish in time for parents to attend the annual carol concert at Cannington Church at 11.00 am.

I will of course keep you updated, once ministers have made their decision.

Yours sincerely



MARK THOMAS
Headteacher