

Academies Open Forums: Background briefing

What is an academy?

Academies are publicly-funded schools which operate outside of local authority control. They receive their funding directly from central government, through the YPLA, rather than through a local authority. The government describes them as independent, state-funded schools.

Academies have more freedom than other state schools over their finances, the curriculum, length of terms and school days and teachers' pay and conditions.

How many are there?

The number has grown dramatically under the coalition government, from 203 in May 2010 to 658 primary and secondary academies currently having academy status.

In the coalition's first year, 1,070 schools have applied to become academies, of which 647 had been approved and 384 of those had converted to academy status by May 2011. By the 1st June the number of Academies had risen to 704 and there had been 1,244 applications to convert.

Why the dramatic increase in academies?

Academies were a Labour policy, but have accelerated since the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition came to power in 2010.

They invited all schools - primary as well as secondary - rated as outstanding by the schools watchdog, Ofsted, to become academies, and passed the Academies Act to allow this in July 2010.

From April 2011, the government expanded the conversion programme to all schools that were "performing well" - with stable or improving results above or

moving towards the national average - and judged by Ofsted to have the capacity to improve.

All other schools can also apply to become academies, as long as they apply in a formal partnership with a school that is performing well.

Education Secretary Michael Gove says academies will drive up standards by putting more power in the hands of head teachers and cutting bureaucracy.

He says they have been shown to improve twice as fast as other state schools.

What were academies before the change of government?

The "old" academies were a flagship policy under the then Labour Prime Minister, Tony Blair. Mr Blair saw them largely as a way of turning around poorly-performing secondary schools in disadvantaged areas of England, although some of the earliest academies were established in good schools.

Labour-style academies were usually new-build schools with state-of-the-art buildings and a new name. The philosophy was that transforming children's environment would help them engage more with learning.

The first wave of academies in the early 2000s had to have sponsors who put forward up to £2m towards the cost of the new school. However, the financial requirement was eventually dropped by Labour, and the new academies under the coalition do not need sponsors.

How do schools benefit from becoming academies?

Converting schools receive more money. To start with, the Department for Education pays £25,000 towards conversion costs.

Once operating as an academy, the school receives the same per pupil funding as other state schools. However, it also gains control of a portion - up to 10% - of its budget which would previously have been held back by the local

authority and used to provide services, such as special needs support, across the borough.

If the school is able to buy in the services it needs more cheaply, or has proportionally less need of those services than other schools in the area, it might benefit financially from becoming an academy.

The freedom to pay staff more can help academies attract and retain good teachers, while control over the length of the school day can allow them to teach more lessons and greater control over the curriculum allows flexibility in terms of the balance and mix of subjects.

What do critics say?

Labour and the classroom teachers' unions are the chief critics of the policy. They say it will fracture the state education system and open the door to privatisation, as private providers run large "chains" of schools - although they are not allowed to do so for profit.

Labour says the changes will benefit more privileged neighbourhoods and that the best schools will be able to "suck the best teachers and the extra money", leaving those left under local authority control being regarded as second best.

Critics also say that the ability of local councils to provide extra services for schools will be weakened. They say such services will stop being viable for councils to run if they are not used by enough schools.

There have also been concerns that the changes will give too much freedom to faith-based schools or fundamentalist agendas - as well as criticism that the Academies Act itself was rushed through Parliament without enough debate.

Teachers have held strikes against conversions in several schools, angered by the fact that national pay agreements negotiated by their unions would no longer apply.

How accountable are academies?

They are subject to inspections by the watchdog, Ofsted, as other schools are, although outstanding schools will no longer be subject to routine inspections.

Academies' Sats (primary national curriculum tests), GCSE and A-level results will be published, alongside those of other state schools, and made into rankable "league tables".

Opponents argue Academies are less accountable than other state schools, because they are not overseen by the elected local authority leaders, although they do answer directly to the education secretary.

In addition, Catholic Academies would still be accountable to the Diocese under S48 and would be inspected by the Diocesan Education Service.

What will happen about admissions?

Academies are subject to the same admissions code as other state schools. This sets the rules for fair admissions and prevents schools from selecting on the basis of ability. They also remain part of the local authority application system.

However, academy trusts become the admissions authorities for their schools - rather than the local authority. This means the academy can set its own criteria for awarding places if it is oversubscribed.

Schools which already select some or all of their pupils will be able to continue to do so if they become academies, but schools becoming academies cannot decide to become newly selective schools.

What about exclusions?

Academies have to follow the law and government guidance on excluding pupils. This includes reporting exclusions to the local authority.

However, academies do not have to consult the local authority before deciding to exclude a pupil and they can arrange their own independent appeals panels which would be supported by the Diocesan Education Service.

What about Governance, does that change?

The principles of governance are the same in academies as in maintained schools, but the governing body has greater autonomy. Academies are required to have at least two parent governors.

Under the Diocesan MAT Model it is envisaged that each school will retain its own 'Local Governing Body' which may be slightly smaller in size because there will no longer be a need to accommodate LA governors. There will then be an overarching Executive Committee (single governing body) made up of a majority of foundation governors appointed by the Bishop including representatives from each of the partner schools.

What is the process for schools to become academies?

Initially schools register their interest online with the Department for Education. If the governing body votes to pursue conversion, the school submits an application to the Department for Education.

In addition our schools must seek approval from the Diocese before submitting an application to the Department for Education.

When the education secretary approves the application, he issues an academy order. A trust is then set up which in effect has a contract to run the academy for the government.

The school then registers the academy trust with Companies House and agrees leasing arrangements for school buildings and land.

The final stage is the signing of the Funding Agreement with the secretary of state.

Schools must hold some form of consultation before the funding agreement is signed. Although there has been criticism that it has been left up to the school to decide who is consulted, and when and how this is done.

The education department says it expects conversions to take a minimum of three to four months.

The Academies Act removes the requirement for a local authority to agree to the creation of an academy.

The Diocesan Multi-Academy Trust model

The MAT model maintains the identity of each school in the trust as separate Academies each retaining a Local Governing Body, Headteacher and its own budget. It requires, though, the establishment of a single governing body, an executive committee, for the whole group of schools. The Executive Committee would be made up of governors from each school and Diocesan representatives. It would be the employer of all the staff in the multi-academy trust and the admission authority for pupil places. The DES would become the 'Shared Company' or 'Sponsor' in the DfE language for clusters of schools that do not have a 'good' or 'outstanding' school.

What are the particular advantages of the MAT model?

There are obvious advantages in terms of ability to employ specialist staff to work across all the schools, agreeing common shared ethos, policies and practice, economies of scale in terms of brokering services. Succession planning for school leadership, mentoring and opportunities for senior staff across the family of schools for professional development.

Why can't we become an academy as an individual school?

This is not possible as Catholic Schools are relational and do not exist in isolation. We are families of schools, stronger together. The Diocesan model ensures that no school is left isolated and vulnerable and strengthens relationships.

Are there other Catholic Schools close by that should be brought into the proposals in order to protect them (following Mr Gove's announcement of 200 target primary schools to convert from Sept 2011)?

No, It is very unlikely that other Catholic Schools in our or neighbouring Diocese's will need to be brought into our proposals. Any schools at risk would be working with their own cluster of Catholic Schools. However, we might wish to support other Catholic Schools to improved standards without bringing them into the formal Trust arrangements.

Could we not join in alliance or trust with other local non-catholic schools in our area that we work closely with?

No. Other trusts would not contain a majority of foundation governors on their governing body executive committee. There is the risk therefore that the Catholic identity and ethos of the school would be lost.

We have a good school and work well in partnership already so why can't we stay as we are?

The position of the LA is changing regardless. They are preparing for the climate by 'selling' packages of services. They will also have less capacity to support schools, for instance, school improvement partners are finishing. The Government as we see is pushing ahead with its policy and vision for all schools to be academies by 2014. It remains, however, that the Governing

Bodies will following the consultation process consider all the options including staying as they are.

Retaining our identity?

Each school will become an Academy in its own right and a separate company with accounts logged with Companies House. There is no desire or reason for any one of the schools to 'run' anything although sharing of resources including staff experience and expertise across the partner schools is one of the advantages of converting to Academy Status. Each school will retain its school name, Head teacher, budget and governing body.

Won't the Exec Committee run everything, leaving the LGB as just a talking shop?

Whilst it is true that the Exec Committee would be the 'employer' of all staff in the trust. It will be for the schools themselves to decide between them how much control to delegate upwards to the Executive Committee. To begin with this is likely to be at a minimal level but as the trust becomes more confident the schools may choose to undertake more activity centrally through the Exec Committee. Each school will always retain its own budget although they may choose to pool some monies for certain joint projects.

Won't we be 'outvoted' on the Exec Committee? What safeguards are there to prevent the Diocese taking decisions we don't like?

It will be for each school to decide for themselves how much control to delegate upwards to the Executive Committee. Representation on the Executive Committee will be balanced between the schools and the Diocese and each school will have equal representation on the Executive Committee, so it is likely that each school will be represented by its Headteacher and Chair of Governors.

What is to prevent you changing the length of the school day or term times once we convert? Will parents have a say?

This will be enshrined in the legal documentation and the Trustees would have to approve any such changes.

Will we become too ‘inward looking’?

Just because a formal collaboration of Catholic Schools will be established in the MAT it does not and should not mean that our schools would stop working in partnership with other local schools or within their communities. In fact the role(s) in supporting other local schools to raise standards ensures that we remain outward looking.

Will parents of children at primary schools still have a choice of which secondary school to send their children?

Yes. There will be no change to admissions policies or impact on parental choice.

What will happen to staff pay and conditions?

Staff pay and conditions will be protected. This will be built into the legal documents. Any converting schools will track the conditions in the national School Teachers Pay and Conditions Document. So there will be no change to pay and conditions, length of school day or holidays. The Diocese will only give consent to conversion on that basis.

Will there be new buildings and facilities?

In the present economic climate this is unlikely in the near future.

Will the Bus services be affected?

Conversion to Academy status would have no effect on school bus services.

The Local Authority is responsible for school transport and has already made changes to school bus services.