



Archdiocese of Birmingham

Diocesan Education Service

DIOCESAN ACADEMY STRATEGY FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Please find attached a list of questions that have been asked at many of the numerous meetings with headteachers and governors over the past 6 months.

Many governors and headteachers have requested access to these questions and answers in order to help them improve their knowledge and understanding of academies, MACs and the conversion process, as well as gaining more information about the academy strategy.

This is by no means an exhaustive list and it will be under constant review with amendments taking place as and when required following further meetings scheduled across the diocese.

We hope that you will find it helpful. If you have any queries around any of the questions or the answers then please contact either John Dwyer at the DES on:

j.dwyer@bdes.org.uk or on 01675 464755 ext. 102 or Mark O'Connell on academies@bdes.org.uk

Becoming Academy Ready

1) What does the Diocesan Education Service mean by the term 'Academy Ready'?

Academy Ready means that a school is ready to form or join a MAC. It is the expectation of the Archbishop and Trustees that all catholic schools under the trust deed, will in time, convert to Academy status.

2) What support is available to help discussions with our Governing Body?

The DES can arrange bespoke meetings with governing bodies or academy information evenings using specialist professional partners. We would recommend that the chair contact the DES in the first instance to arrange any bespoke support that is necessary.

3) How long have we got to become Academy Ready?

This will depend on local circumstances and the situation of each individual school.

4) How long does it usually take for a School to convert to Academy status?

Normally conversion would take between 6 and 12 months depending on the circumstances of the school.

5) What is the best way to start our journey of becoming 'Academy Ready'?

We recommend that individual schools start by having discussions between the head and governors in order to establish a working party typically involving the headteacher, chair and another foundation governor to act on behalf of the governing body.

This might then be followed up by a meeting between the headteachers and chairs from across the proposed grouping of schools. This could be facilitated by the DES if schools wish.

In all instances we would recommend that you contact the DES for advice depending on the individual circumstances of the school. The DES academy project manager Mark O'Connell is available to assist schools as and when required and can be contacted via academies@bdes.org.uk.

6) How will becoming an academy affect our existing Governing Body?

Existing governors may choose to apply to remain as governors on the new local governing body for the academy, if they wish to. This may result in very little change to the membership of the existing local governing body but their role within the MAC will change. Please refer to the scheme of delegation.

7) Who is responsible for undertaking the 'Due Diligence' work?

The governors of the VA school seeking to convert and the board of the MAC that the same VA school is seeking to join have responsibility for undertaking Due Diligence.

8) What is the rationale behind the suggested groupings?

A number of factors were originally considered when developing the initial suggested groupings including: locality, secondary with primary feeders, preventing any isolation, economies of scale for finance and governance purposes.

9) Do schools have to convert in the suggested DES groupings?

No. They are only suggested groupings. The DES would welcome feedback from any schools that have an alternative proposal for their grouping.

10) What happens if some schools in a suggested grouping are not ready to convert?

Schools in a grouping do not have to convert all together. They can convert at a time best suited to their needs. This phased approach to conversion can help to keep the process manageable and allows school to convert at the best time for them – whether it is sooner or later.

11) What will happen if our Governing Body is unable to proceed to become Academy Ready?

There may be very specific reasons preventing a school from participating in the academy strategy. The DES on behalf of the Trustees will expect an explanation from the governors of the school outlining why they are unable to implement the wishes of the Archbishop in terms of the academy strategy at this time, and how they plan to overcome any such obstacles in order to become 'academy ready'.

12) Can we talk to groups of schools who are already in a MAC to learn from their experience?

We encourage all schools to meet with academies to learn from their experiences and use it to inform the best way forward to being academy ready. The DES is developing a bank of case studies that will soon be published on the website which can then be referred to by all schools.

13) Is the DES Academy Strategy a distraction from our school and pupils?

No. The Trustees consider it an essential strategic step for all schools to take to secure the continued long term provision of the best Catholic education to both current pupils and future generations of pupils.

14) What is expected by 31 May 2017?

The DES will expect that the chair of governors on behalf of the school, or chair of the board on behalf of a MAC, will submit a completed form outlining the progress made by the school to date and a proposed action plan outlining how the school, or MAC, will move towards being academy ready. This information will be used to plan the support required by different groups of schools.

The Conversion Stage

1) How is the conversion process and the academy (on an ongoing basis) funded?

The process is funded by an academy conversion grant currently £25,000 per school. The academies are then funded as individual schools directly from the ESFA (Education and Skills Funding Agency).

Funding is allocated directly to the academy. Revenue funding guidance is available on the DFE website. Please refer to the website for further detailed guidance.

2) What would the Archdiocese predict is the cost of conversion for a MAC of the size suggested by the DES?

The costs of conversion depend on the size and circumstances of the proposed MAC.

The significant costs incurred in conversion are legal costs and these would largely depend on the legal provider being used chosen from the two designated DES legal providers. Other costs may include financial costs of auditors, and perhaps the purchase of new finance software.

3) How much capital funding goes to academies?

All schools are entitled to DFC – currently paid at a lump sum of £4,320 per school, plus £12.15/primary aged pupil; £18.23/secondary age pupil. For a typical 1 FE primary this equates to just over £7,000/year. The rates for Academies are the same at present.

However, for MACs with more than 3000 pupils, the MAC would currently receive £115 per pupil automatically on an annual basis. In cases where there are less than 3000 pupils capital funding would be accessed through an annual bidding process.

4) What financial incentives are there to convert?

There are no financial incentives currently on offer apart from the standard conversion grant of £25000 available to all schools which covers all costs associated with the conversion process.

5) Who is responsible for staff contracts?

The MAC board of directors is the new employer and takes responsibility for contracts.

6) Who is responsible for staff pensions?

Teacher's pensions remain with the Teacher's Pension Scheme and pensions for non-teaching staff remain with the Local Government Pension Scheme.

7) Is the pay of employees affected by conversion?

No. On conversion schools undertake the TUPE process which ensures that pay and conditions remain the same on conversion.

8) What responsibilities does the MAC undertake on conversion?

All of the existing responsibilities of the governing body transfer to the board of the MAC on conversion including HR, health and safety, finance, premises, repairs, insurance, contracts etc.

The MAC may choose to continue to use existing external providers for these services or move to a new provider or employ a team within the MAC. For example the diocese has recommended preferred partners for HR who have a successful track record and experience of working with Catholic schools. Contact details are available on the DES website – all HR enquiries can be made through the Archdiocese.

9) What is the time line for converting to academy and for joining MACs?

This will be determined by the governors of individual schools or boards of existing MACs depending on local circumstances.

10) Who is expected to do work before during and after conversion to an academy?

The work is shared among the board, committees, local governing bodies and principals by using the respective skills of individuals. It is good practice to appoint a member of staff to act as the coordinator for the process in order to oversee the work and make the process manageable for the principals.

11) What does LA take responsibility for?

The LA remains responsible for a limited number of statutory functions including: SEND, co-ordinating admissions and providing sufficient school places as well as safeguarding (including attendance).

12) Can we convert with one secondary School?

If this was part of a staged approach this would be acceptable. The Trustees expect that ultimately there would be more than one secondary school where possible in order to avoid any secondary school working in isolation.

13) What local parish involvement can there be in a MAC?

The involvement of the Parish and parish priest with an academy and or the MAC would remain as it is with existing VA schools. As is the current practice, parish priests can be appointed by the diocese to the local governing body or to the board.

14) Can a school be an academy on its own outside of the MAC structure?

No as this school will be deemed to be working in isolation contrary to the wishes of the Trustees.

15) Is it too soon for new MACs to expand as they may need to embed?

The time frame for the merger of MACs is determined by the respective MAC board. Planning and preparation can still be ongoing even if the time frame may be longer for certain MACs.

16) How do schools find time to do this?

By appointing a coordinator to oversee the business of conversion and delegating tasks to members of the 'shadow board'. It is important that schools allow themselves enough time for the conversion process to keep it manageable for all those involved.

17) How much help is available?

The DES employs an academy project manager Mark O'Connell to assist schools through the conversion process and to share best practice in terms of establishing the MAC, the structures and the processes. Mark can be contacted on academies@bdes.org.uk

Strategic partners are available to offer specialist support with legal issues or financial matters.

The Operational Stage

1) How would schools joining a MAC be represented on the board of directors?

The board of directors are appointed by the Archbishop and represent all schools within the MAC, and some directors may also be on their local governing body.

2) In terms of Governance what are the accountability structures in a MAC?

These are explained in the scheme of delegation available on the website.

3) How does academisation affect representation of different stake holders?

All existing stakeholders are still represented within the new MAC at local governing body level.

4) How is the appointment of Principals undertaken?

This is the responsibility of the directors with the assistance of the local governing body and is explained in the scheme of delegation.

5) What are the costs of running a MAC?

The actual costs will depend on the schools and how the MAC operates. Normally the collective costs of the schools within a MAC are reduced when the MAC takes advantage of the freedoms and the efficiencies that MACs have, by establishing central services and functions for all the schools.

6) Who is paid and who is voluntary?

All local governors and directors on the board are voluntary with the exception of members of staff employed by the schools or staff employed by the MAC.

7) How much do academies contribute to fund central services within the MAC?

This depends on the way the MAC operates, its size and the level of centralised services provided by the MAC to the schools. It is determined by the board of directors.

8) Who owns the school buildings and the school land?

Typically the diocese owns the school buildings and often the LA owns the playing fields. This depends on the specific school.

9) Who recruits/interviews/appoints new staff?

Teachers and support staff can be recruited by the local governing body.

Senior Leadership positions are appointed by the directors.

10) Are individual schools OFSTED rated?

Each individual academy within the MAC receives its own Section 48 and Ofsted inspection. Strategic partners are available to offer specialist support with legal issues or financial matters.

11) How will MACs lead, support, monitor and evaluate schools?

We do not see the DES being prescriptive in this matter, it will be for MACs to decide what the local support model should be, based on best practice. It is likely that the MAC will employ an external school improvement partner and a consultant for headteacher performance management to secure continued school improvement.

12) How do you envisage leaders working across this number of schools?

This will be for the MAC board and principals committee to determine the best mode of operation which would be based on existing good practice and what works best under the local circumstances. Becoming an academy enables greater freedoms in the ways schools work together and how they develop their school structures collectively.

13) How can we be assured that senior leaders are not taken away from their prime responsibility – namely the education of the pupils?

MACs that are operating successfully at present are providing centralised support services that enable headteachers to concentrate on their prime responsibility of education - the teaching and learning of pupils. Support services such as HR, finance, buildings and premises can be dealt with by a central team with the necessary expertise and skills enabling greater efficiency in terms of time and finance across the MAC.

14) How will unpaid Directors with varying degrees of expertise lead, monitor and support so many schools?

This will be achieved through effective use of local governing bodies and the principals committee - in a similar way that governors oversee standards in their schools at present. Clearly, there will be a need for directors to be offered further training and guidance as the models of MAC structures develop. We share best practice across our diocesan area through termly meetings with the chairs of MACs.

15) If you are on the board should you/will you be able to be a member of an academy committee?

In some of our MACs at present there are directors who are also on the local governing body of schools within the MAC.

16) How will the MAC ensure that schools not represented directly on the board feel involved?

Communication will be the key. Some MACs have a link director for each academy committee, or establish sub committees with responsibility for different aspects of the MAC and allow representation by members from the different local governing bodies. In these ways individual academies are made to feel involved and represented.

17) How will you recruit more representatives and board members with appropriate skills and sufficient time to be effective in their role?

In the same way as we currently do for foundation governors of VA schools.

This is one of the challenges the DES currently faces; the recruitment of suitably skilled directors. We use our extensive contact of networks to identify suitable directors, along with advertising locally in parish bulletins etc. in addition to using recommendations made by existing directors and governors.

18) How will the MAC ensure there isn't overlap between the board and committees?

This will be achieved through the use of the Scheme of Delegation.

19) It was suggested there could be a centralised HR, legal and financial support. Is this in each MAC or the Diocese?

We expect this to be in place in the MAC but it may include external providers and as such the diocese has tested the market to procure strategic partners in HR, legal, accountancy and finance. Strategic Partners for building consultancy are already in place.

20) How will the MAC ensure the uniqueness of every school and encourage consistency across a wide range of schools?

It would be expected to have consistency across schools in terms of policies and procedures used by schools across the MAC. This standardised documentation brings efficiencies. However the uniqueness of schools is defined by their mission, uniform, buildings etc. which still remains in place as it is determined by the local school.

21) How do we avoid too much work and too many meetings for certain individuals?

This can be achieved through careful planning of board, committee and local governing body meetings. Delegating responsibility and accountability to individual committees and avoiding the same people on a number of different committees. Effective use of the scheme of delegation will ensure best use of the local governing body too. Combining these actions should effectively spread the workload and make it manageable – just as it is done with the governing bodies at present.

22) Does the DES have a preference for centralised or decentralised models of organisation?

It is not for the DES to direct how a MAC works operationally, a one size fits all solution clearly would not suit all MAC's, therefore a local solution needs to be developed to meet local need. However for the MAC to be successful and benefit from its new freedoms there would need to be a different way of working by the schools collectively. For the financial efficiencies to be realised there would need to be centralised functions undertaken by the MAC on behalf of all of the schools.

23) Can we have case studies of innovative and successful practice within MACs in the various aspects of school life including finance, staffing, curriculum, teaching and learning?

The DES is in the process of collating 'success stories' from across all MACs to share with all schools in order that they may all benefit from these examples of good practice from which academies within the respective MACs have benefitted.

24) How do we go about the consultation with staff and parents and when does that take place and how do we allay any fears?

Full open, honest and transparent communication is key to building trust and overcoming any worries and fears. Meetings with staff and parents help to deal with the typical misconceptions some people have about academies.

25) What services will the DES provide to MACs in the future when they are up and running?

The services offered to MACs are explained in detail on the DES website. The DES expect that the services made available to MACs will continue to expand and develop as the academy strategy continues to grow. The services are under constant review and we seek to constantly improve them to meet the needs of our MACs within the current educational landscape.

Other questions

- 1) Why are the DES pursuing an academy strategy if the Government have changed their position on forcing all schools to become academies?

The diocesan academy strategy was developed and implemented by the Trustees to secure, protect and improve Catholic education regardless of any government's political position.

It is still the intention of the current government that all schools become academies even though they are not forcing the issue.

- 2) Who are the 'professional partners'?

They are the professional firms required to be used as part of the conversion process leading up to, during and after the conversion. They include legal firms and auditors. Their contact details are available on the DES website.

- 3) What is the view of the DFE on the Diocesan Academy Strategy?

The Regional Schools Commissioners, on behalf of the DFE, are very supportive of the academy strategy and the approach adopted by the DES. They have attended academy information meetings and offered guidance and support to schools where necessary. They have agreed to be on the Diocesan Academy Board.

- 4) What evidence is there that academies in Multi Academy Companies (MACS) perform better than VA Schools?

Performance of MACs depends on the same factors that influence performance in VA schools.

However we know that the MAC structure builds in collaborative working and collective accountability which has seen several of our vulnerable and isolated VA schools saved by being part of a MAC. MACs have a successful track record for improving schools. More specifically in key areas such as leadership, self-sustaining school improvement, transition key stage 2 – 3 and financial and business efficiencies our MACs are demonstrating good practice.

- 5) What are the benefits to the children?

Many MACs will have achieved many different benefits for their children depending on circumstances of local schools. The diocese is seeking to secure, protect and improve Catholic Education not just for current pupils but for generations of children to come.

- 6) What is the 10 year vision for the Academy plan from Archdiocese?

Securing the continued provision of Catholic education for the long term, protecting and developing the school buildings and estate, improving the quality of Catholic Education across all schools so that it is consistently good or better.

7) Is there a risk of a MAC being too big?

If the process of expansion is managed and planned for carefully any risk will be minimal.

There is a greater risk to a MAC that is too small which restricts future capacity and limits financial viability.

8) Are there current MACs considering merging?

Yes. There are MACs that will need to merge in the future and are currently planning for it.

9) How far can individual schools retain their distinctiveness within a larger organisation?

All schools retain the distinctive identity on conversion and this has been the case for those schools that have already converted and are currently part of a MAC.

10) Can a conversion take place if the school is in debt?

The final decision rests with the RSC and headteacher board. Typically a modest deficit is allowable provided there is a repayment plan in place but the level of debt is unlikely to be more than 3% of budget. As good practice we expect all diocesan schools to be debt free or working towards this goal, regardless of whether it is a VA school or an academy.

If a school is issued with an academy order because it is in special measures category, the debt remains with the LA on conversion.

11) What level of decision-making can be made at school?

The details are in the scheme of delegation on the website.

12) Can our schools continue to use the services provided by our LA if we join a MAC?

The best providers that offer the best service at the best price will be used by the MAC and this is the expectation of all schools and academies.

13) What would be the diocesan stance on other forms of alliance rather than joining an existing MAC?

The Trustees have stated that the expectation is that all schools are moving to form or join a MAC as part of the academy strategy for the diocese.

14) Are the DES forcing all Schools to become academies?

No. As part of the diocesan academy strategy the Archbishop and the Trustees expect all schools to prepare to become an academy but the timing of any conversion and the proposed groupings of schools are open to discussion with the DES.