

MULTI-ACADEMY TRUSTS UPDATE 1 – 19 MAY 2016

Just shortly after we published the initial information about MATs for the diocese, we received the news of a “U-turn” on the Government plan to have all schools converted to academies by 2022. Whatever joy that may have created was short-lived because a subsequent document made it plain that the Government still intend to get all schools converted in due course. Underperforming schools will be forced to convert (through an academy order that will be directive rather than enabling); good schools will be encouraged to convert; and, when the number of schools left within an LA drops below a certain level (or if the overall performance of schools within an LA is poor) then they will all be forced to convert.

This changed situation has limited impact on what we were proposing as the diocesan approach. Our starting point, with the Trustees decision in January, was to allow our schools to explore the possibility of converting to academy status. Then, following the publication of the white paper (*Educational Excellence Everywhere*), we were in the realm of not “whether” to convert but “when”. Now we find ourselves in the position of having the deadline removed but still having to plan for the day when academy conversion is universal.

So, the deadline is gone but the direction of travel remains the same. We need to proceed with the request to schools to begin considering their own preferred option at this time. What are the pros and cons, for each particular school, of looking to convert sooner or waiting until a later date? We also need to begin the process of setting up our diocesan MATs so that we can accommodate those schools wishing to convert soon (or any forced to do so by an academy order) and then be ready for others to join in due course.

Proposed MAT Structure

As notified in previous weekly e-mails from the Diocesan Department of Education, we have put together a proposed structure of MATs to serve the diocese and we submitted this to the DfE for comment. In drawing up this structure, we were concerned to respect and (where possible) preserve existing working relationships between schools. Consequently, the basic pattern for the MATs reflects the current LA groupings of schools but with two exceptions: some larger LAs have been subdivided and the smallest LAs are incorporated with their neighbours.

The DfE are happy with the model we have developed, which they believe gives a good blend of schools within each of the proposed MATs. All of these MATs are cross-phase. The Academy Conversion Committee had a long discussion about the pros and cons of this approach, as opposed to setting up single phase MATs. Our conclusion was that the cross-phase approach better reflects the understanding of a family of schools within each area of the diocese. Should it be desirable, there is nothing to stop a MAT organising itself into single-phase clusters or geographical clusters (e.g. a high school and feeder primaries) within the MAT. Likewise, although schools belong to a particular MAT, there is nothing to stop them working collaboratively with same-phase schools (or cross-phase schools) within other MATs.

The proposed structure is attached to this update. Whilst we are not formally consulting on it, if a particular school believes it has a compelling reason for being in a different MAT then that argument can be presented to the Academy Conversion Committee for consideration.

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We have a number of schools within the diocese that are under the trusteeship of religious orders. For the sake of our proposals, we have assigned each of these schools to a particular MAT but it will be a decision for the school's own trustees whether or not they wish that school to be part of our MAT structure.

It is important to note that the numbering of the MATs (whilst we are awaiting names) does not reflect any proposed order for their creation. The order and the rate at which we develop will depend on the interest of schools in particular places, as well as the capacity to process the conversions. Our plan at present is to establish one or two pathfinder MATs by the autumn, with a view to the first schools joining them in the spring. We will then phase the creation of the other MATs.

Governance

An important aspect in establishing the MATs is the need for the diocese to determine the directors. So we are currently thinking about potential names of people willing and able to serve in this capacity and also about the initial (and ongoing) training that the directors will need.

Individual schools considering when to convert also need to reflect on the question of governance. Some of the current responsibilities of a governing body will become the responsibility of the MAT directors (unless delegated down to the individual school) and this may have an impact on the composition of the local governing body. As mentioned in a previous weekly e-mail, the Diocesan Department for Education has a PowerPoint presentation which addresses governance issues.

Next Steps

We would like to gauge the likely scope of conversions (roughly how many at any given time) and particularly to know which of our schools are actively contemplating applying for permission to convert soon. So we would be grateful if you could complete the attached form. It is only an expression of your current thinking and will not commit you to any course of action.

We will be engaging with Browne Jacobson LLP to draw up all the various documentation that will be required as the process unfolds. We will also develop a pattern of meetings for the Academy Conversion Committee so that we are able to consider applications in a timely manner to fit with the meetings of the Diocesan Trustees (who must give the ultimate permission for each school to convert).

We are giving serious thought to how best we might expand the capacity of the Diocesan Department for Education to cope with the additional advisory and administrative tasks relating to this academy programme, including how that additional capacity might be funded.

We are looking at having a dedicated portal on the diocesan website where you will be able to find all the necessary information relating to academy conversion in the one place.

Ongoing Support

Just to re-iterate what was stated in the initial information document, the Diocesan Department for Education will continue to provide all the current levels and types of service to all of our schools both throughout the conversion period and beyond. We would also like to note that the MAT structure will not do away with the need for, or the support given, by the Primary and Secondary Partnerships. We will continue to be one family of schools across the diocese (which will be the sponsoring body for each of the MATs).

Finally, to help allay any fears about our future legal status (in changing from VA to academy), we would draw your attention to the *Memorandum of Understanding* which the CES has sent directly to all our schools.

Rev Canon Michael Cooke VG