

Academy Briefing for Primary Heads and Chairs, Diocese of Manchester

Notes of the briefing held on Friday 02 October 2015, 13.30

Trinity CE High School, Higher Cambridge Street, Hulme, Manchester Location

First speaker: Canon Maurice Smith, CB – Director of Education, Manchester Diocese

The meeting began with a presentation from the Manchester Diocese's Director of Education, Canon Maurice Smith. He began by putting current policies into context with the history of the academy movement, before going on to discuss the future of academy development.

With the diminishment of local authorities and the reduction in funding from central governments, schools are looking to the academy model as a way of sustaining their education provision. Other schools, perhaps coasting or vulnerable, are looking at academisation as an alternative approach to school improvement. This might be through sponsorship or by collaboration with a stronger school.

Previously, academies were meant for secondary schools, but primary schools have also converted and the Board of Education has seen an increase in interest among these headteachers.

Although the Diocese remains neutral to schools becoming academies, it does maintain that there is to be a hierarchy of CE schools when multi academy trusts (MATs) are established. For example, VA schools can host any other VA schools, VC or community schools. VC schools can only host other VC schools and community schools. Finally, a community school cannot host any CE school. This is to ensure the balance of foundation governors on a MAT Board is not compromised and that a Christian ethos is at the heart of the collaboration.

Due to this policy, two former VC schools have amended their Articles of Association, to become VA-model academies, and can now accept any school into their MAT. Without this stipulation, they would only be permitted to allow VC and community schools.

There are currently four MATs within the Diocese's boundaries. The first to be established was the St Simon and St Jude Multi Academy Trust, which contains St Simon and St Jude CE Primary School, Knowsley Lane Primary School and St James' CE Primary School, Gorton. St Paul's CE Primary School, Astley Bridge established a MAT in 2014, which includes Gorsefield Primary School in Bury. In September 2014, Didsbury CE Primary School requested to consent to apply for an Academy Order, in order to create a MAT which a new free school could access, West Didsbury CE Primary School. The new school opened in September 2015, when Didsbury CE Primary School became an academy and the St James' and Emmanuel Trust was formed. Finally, in July 2015, The Blue Coat School created the Cranmer Education Trust, which also hosts East Crompton St George's CE Primary School and Mayfield Primary School.

Due to a renewed interest in academy conversion, perhaps propelled by the recent election outcome, the Diocese has recognised it must play a more proactive role in the development of MATs among its schools. A Board of Education and Schools Committee seminar was recently held, in which it was decided a Mapping Group would be formed. This would outline the boundaries that might make up effective MATs. However, there may be some resistance to this method of creating trusts. For example, parishes and schools may be reluctant to collaborate with each other, or they may be opposed to academisation, in principal. There may also be opposition from schools that already work in partnership with other schools, or from local authorities and parents.

Due to the strong leadership that our church schools have, one question that would be asked if MATs were to become the norm in Manchester Diocese would be: Who would be Executive Head?

Second Speaker: Mr Paul Smith – Regional Schools Commissioner, DfE

Paul Smith began by questioning what was best for the children when it comes to academies. The performance of the schools and the Diocese should be of the utmost importance to governing bodies when contemplating the conversion to academy status. He also echoed Maurice's sentiments about "shell" MATs when he informed colleagues that a school hoping to convert in order to sponsor a school had been refused permission, due to a lack of clear leadership. Instead, the schools became partners and formed a collaborative MAT.

MATs are institutes which share services and experiences. The most pressing issue when facing conversion or sponsorship is finances and how to do more with less funding. One area which is easy to cut is Continuing Professional Development (CPD), but this would have the biggest consequence for the children, as it would affect best practice.

Another challenge is the lack of leaders, and the pressure headteachers face to enter the system. Manchester Diocese has a different problem, in that there is a potential abundance of headteachers wanting to lead MATs, but in other areas, the loneliness and pressure to succeed that comes with the post, means there is difficulty in appointing and retaining senior leaders.

Sponsored MATs mean the lead school take on the legal responsibility of the failing or vulnerable school. This means the need for capacity within these types of MATs. However, this model takes work at all levels and colleagues must be reminded that a head of school is not the headteacher, but the leader of the teaching and learning with good support and guidance. Furthermore, an executive headteacher needs to be a good business person, in charge of the premises, HR, finances, and so on.

There are still too many underperforming schools, particularly in a system which aims to lift children from where they came. Admittedly, some sponsors are better than others, but common missions and values help enormously.

Although a "coasting" school is as yet undefined, 85% schools have results that average to 60% or less at Level 4 and above. However, any work that the DfE does with coasting schools will be a conversation about the journey of the school, rather than an intervention on school improvements. While any school in an Ofsted category will automatically become an academy, a coasting school will receive guidance from a

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teaching school. However, the conversation surrounding academisation and sponsorship must be revisited on a regular basis (preferably annually), in order to determine any changes which might have occurred in the previous terms.

The setting up of free schools is encouraged, as it increases places in the catchment areas and may support underperforming schools around it.

There are currently just over 5,000 academies in the UK. 70% of secondary schools and 14% primary schools are academies. These figures show that academisation is more successful than it was first anticipated in 2009/10, and the reason for this is the quality of teaching that academisation can bring, the freedom to choose its own curriculum and the collaboration that it can invite between schools, rather than the isolation that was first envisaged. Furthermore, choosing to convert is accepted with the assurance of a £25,000 bonus in a school's budget, in order to aid the transition. There is also £75,000 if an academy is to be sponsored, in order to fund the infrastructure and the systems needed to run it. It was also reported that three small primary schools were given an additional £110,000 to help them face the challenges of establishing academies in rural areas.

Questions and answers

A question was asked about the conversion grants, and how long they would be available for. Paul replied that there would be no change as they are protected from the current austerity measures. In fact, despite the current Government of austerity, primary schools can receive £330,000 and secondaries can be awarded £440,000 without needing to refurbish or rebuild part of the school. There have been/were 500 free schools opened in this/the last Parliament.

Another question was asked about the protection of staff terms and conditions, in a sponsored school. This would be up to the sponsor. However, with the TUPE regulations, there could be some challenge if terms and conditions were altered to a great extent. Some conditions do change, particularly in the salaries of staff. It would be up to the staff or the Union to challenge these decisions. However, most staff have found that pay conditions are better and that bonuses are based on a performance structure.

It was rumoured that academies carried that any deficit that local authorities had left behind when it came to pension funds. While there are experts to guide colleagues through this process, who would be able to give fuller answers than himself, Paul said that the LGPF said liability stands against the books, and that is not considered a "real" debt.

A question was asked about a small 1FE primary school entering a MAT, and the possibility overshadowing its other partner schools. Paul commented that it would strengthen the school as it would benefit from its partners capacity and skills. The Director of Education said despite previous refusals to allow "shell" MATs – those academies who wish to establish MATs, without having a school to join it – this might change, and the DBE is currently taking legal advice in order to tweak its arrangements. One reason why schools are discouraged from start a MAT without a partner school is if there is the consent to establish a MAT, followed by a separate procedure to allow a school to enter, two sets of legal fees would be incurred, rather than fulfilling two

objectives within one set of legal fees. However, there is no time limit between establishing a MAT, and finding a school to join it.

Another question was asked about the staffing structure of a MAT, and whether senior leaders need teaching experience and if schools can join MATs with other vulnerable schools, and a Good or Outstanding schools as the leader. Firstly, an example was given of the Ark MAT, which has a CEO that has never been a teacher. However, staffing is ultimately up to the Board of Directors. Secondly, with regards to the mix of Ofsted graded schools with a MAT, this would be on a case-by-case basis and may affect the decision made by the DfE.

A question was asked about the optimum number of schools within a MAT, in order to make it effective, without it being so full as to not carry the capacity it needs. This depends on the grandness of the plans that the sponsor or lead school might have in mind. If a MAT were to grow to be quite large, it would need a Financial Director, rather than a bursar; a Director of Premises to oversee the procurement and so on. Most MATs are four or five schools, but very small local MATs can be equally as successful.

With regards to the leadership issues that had been mentioned, a question was asked if there were any solutions to this. In a small MAT, it is possible for headteachers to share the leadership roles. However, in sponsorship collaborations, there has to be a definitive leader. It is possible to begin with two or three headteachers sharing the role and for this number to be phased out, until there is one definitive leader, but this would require a lot of patience on the part of the heads involved.

One school that was considering academisation said it had just received £2million from the Local Authority for a new building. However, it was the right time to convert to academy status in terms of teaching and learning, and there were concerns that the LA would have the right to take the money back. It was acknowledged that local authorities are frustrated by schools that accept funding but then go on to become academies. In the case of VA schools that convert, the governors are not responsible for finding the 10% of the funding required. However, there is an Academy Capital Maintenance Fund* which renews every February or March, and is open to smaller pools than the national funding that schools receive.

With regards to funding, a question was asked about the opportunities open to academies. As well as the £25,000 conversion grant that had been previously mentioned, there was also the £60,000 for primaries and £90,000 for secondaries that are given to the sponsors. In terms of deficits, these are not carried forward after the conversion.

Finally, a question was asked about where a governing body of a sponsored academy, would sit in the structure of a MAT. The Diocese, LA and Secretary of State would create the Interim Executive Body, to replace the Governing Body. Following this, a discussion would take place between the sponsors and the previous Governors, to determine what will be in place after the removal of the IEB. Most sponsors would choose to add to the Governing Body, rather than remove it.



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*The Academy Capital Maintenance Fund has now been replaced by the Condition Improvement Fund. More information can be found here:

<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/condition-improvement-fund>