Diocese of Norwich
St Benet's
Multi Academy Trust

St Benet's Multi Academy Trust
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STAFF AND PARENT CONSULTATION

Frequently Asked Questions

Q. What is an academy? An Academy is a state school that is run by an Academy Trust. The Academy Trust enters into an agreement with the Secretary of State for Education that sets out its responsibilities and accountabilities for the effective running of the Academy. The Academy is funded directly by the Government not through the Local Authority (in our case Norfolk). The Trust is given charitable exemption, which means it must operate much like a charity.

Q. How many academies are there in England? Currently there are around 11,000 academies in the UK.

Q. Is it true that all schools must be academies by a certain date? In its White Paper, Educational Excellence Everywhere, the Government stated that every school should be an academy or part of a Multi Academy Trust (MAT) by 2022 and planned to introduce the legislation it needed to make this happen. However, following opposition, this proposal was dropped by the Government on 6 May 2016 and there are now no plans to take forward legislation on this matter although there is strong encouragement for schools to become academies. The Diocese of Norwich's Education Strategy states that, "*It should be noted that the DBE's policy is that church schools must join a Diocesan MAT*." (https://www.dioceseofnorwich.org/schools/education-strategy/)

Q. What is the difference between academies and maintained schools, between academies and free schools and between stand-alone academies and Multi Academy Trusts (MATs)? Academies are publicly funded independent schools that are able to set their own pay and conditions for staff and have freedom to determine their own curriculum. Academies exist in several forms including free schools, studio schools, university technical colleges and sixth form colleges. An academy can either be a stand-alone school or part of a MAT.

Q. What is a Multi Academy Trust (MAT)? Schools can convert together as part of a Multi-Academy Trust (MAT). Once a MAT has been established by the founding schools, other schools can join. Within a MAT, all schools are governed by one Academy Trust. The MAT has a board of directors which is accountable for all the academies in the trust. In effect they run like mini Local Authorities providing support services and driving forward school improvement in those schools. Each academy in the trust has its own Local Governance Committee (LGC).

Q. Who runs an academy? The academy is run by an "Academy Trust" which oversees a governing body. The Academy Trust is a legal body which operates a charitable organisation and a company limited by guarantee. The Trust has a formal agreement with the Department for Education (DfE) to provide educational services to its pupils.

Q. How is an academy funded? Academies are funded directly by the Education Funding Agency (part of the Department of Education). This means that academies receive 100% of their grant (rather than a proportion of these funds being diverted to the Local Authority) and are free to choose how to spend it, as long as it is spent on improving the education of its pupils.

Q. Which types of school can become an academy? All schools are eligible to become academies.

Q. Is there a requirement for staff or parents at a school to be consulted prior to academy conversion? There is no statutory requirement at all for consultation with either parents or staff. However, it is good practice (and it is recommended by the DfE) for parents and staff to be consulted before an application is made for academy conversion. If a school is converting to become an academy, although staff do not have a right to be consulted on the principle of becoming an academy, staff do have a separate right to be consulted on the impact of any change in the status of school under the Transfer of Undertakings Protection of Employment (TUPE) Regulations relating to their conditions of service.

Q. How can parents make their views known about the school becoming an academy? Parents who wish to make their views known should attend the parent/carer consultation meeting. Views/questions can also be sent to the school. Details will be made available shortly.

Q. Can a Headteacher make the decision to convert a school to academy status? No. A Headteacher has no individual power to determine whether a school becomes an academy and so cannot make the final decision. The decision rests with the governing body and if the school is a Voluntary Aided or Controlled school, with the relevant religious authorities.

Q. Do schools need to have a sponsor to become an academy? If a school or academy is underperforming and needs an intervention strategy, then to become an academy it will require a sponsor. Sponsors require approval from the Department for Education to support an academy or group of academies. If on conversion the school intends to start a MAT to support other schools, then it will have to have a sponsor.

Q. What is the benefit of joining a MAT? As mentioned earlier, it is government policy to encourage and support all schools to become academies, and for schools to organise themselves within groups. At the same time, Local Authorities are reducing the services that they have available to schools as their budgets are reduced. Against this background, the governors have been considering our options for some time. Joining St Benet's MAT will bring benefits to teaching and learning which will contribute to children's achievement.

Q. What happens to the role of the Local Authority? If a school becomes an academy, the Local Authority will retain certain statutory roles in the school. Some academy schools choose to maintain a relationship with the Local Authority and, for example, continue to buy certain services. However, the role of Local Authorities has changed considerably since 2010 and the introduction of the Academies Act and the process of academisation across England. This has impacted on the services and support that are available from Local Authorities, particularly as academisation has also coincided with cuts to Local Authority funding.

Q. How quickly can a school become an academy? There are certain steps that must be taken when a school converts into an academy. These include TUPE consultation on the transfer of staff terms and conditions and agreements with the local authority. Consultation has to take place on the land arrangements and there may be consultation with stakeholders.

All of this takes time and the length of time can vary, depending on the complexity of the issues in individual cases. The time required for a conversion to occur therefore varies from school to school. When an application is made, it is a minimum of two weeks before the Department for Education grants an academy order. It can take longer. Once the order is granted, timescales vary from two months to much longer for the conversion to take effect.

Q. Does the Local Authority have to be consulted on an application by a school for conversion to become an academy? Governing bodies do not have to consult with the Local Authority on applying for conversion to academy status.

Q. As an academy, will schools have more freedom? Schools, regardless of their status, already enjoy considerable autonomy over their affairs, whilst remaining accountable for their use of public money. All schools are subject to the same inspection regime. All schools are subject to the same test and examination performance measures. All schools are subject to primary legislation, including employment law, health and safety, and equalities legislation.

Q. How are academies funded? Academies are funded in almost the same way as maintained schools; maintained schools have part of their budgets kept back by their Local Authorities and academies pay part of their budget to their trust to make provision to replicate the range of services (finance, personnel, legal, insurances, etc) previously provided by the Local Authority.

Q. Will schools that convert to academy status get a new building? There is no automatic additional money to support new buildings or refurbishment to existing buildings for schools that become an academy, but as an academy we would be able to apply for capital funding that isn't currently available to us.

Q. Who owns the land when an academy converts? This will depend on the type of school and the current ownership of the land.

- Community schools – generally the land is owned by the Local Authority. The Academy Trust will occupy the school site by way of a 125-year lease and the Local Authority will become the landlord of the Academy Trust.
- Voluntary Aided schools – land ownership is often split between the Local Authority and the Diocese. For any land owned by the Local Authority, the academy will occupy that part of the school site through a 125-year lease.
- Trust schools – the freehold of the land will be transferred from the current foundation to the Academy Trust, so that the Academy Trust will be the outright owner of the land.

Q. Do academies have greater curriculum freedoms? Academies are not required to adhere to the National Curriculum, but all schools have freedom to decide how they implement curriculum provision.

Q. Who has oversight of academies? In part, this depends upon the nature of the academies themselves. For example, academies that are part of a MAT will have a layer of oversight from the Academy Trust. All academies are overseen by the Secretary of State for Education, through a National Schools Commissioner and a network of Regional Directors. Ofsted is responsible for inspection of individual academies, as is the case for all other state-funded schools.

Q. What is the role of Regional Directors? Regional Directors (RDs) play a key role in securing an academised school system, under new powers resulting from the Education and Adoption Act 2016. RDs are responsible for securing new academies and intervening in underperforming academies in their areas.

Q. How will academy conversion affect the educational provision pupils receive? Structural change does not of itself raise standards. There are outstanding academies and outstanding Community and Foundation schools. Academies have freedom to vary the curriculum and there are concerns that this has led to the narrowing of the curriculum in some schools and the loss of subjects, particularly creative subjects and the arts. Some academies have made decisions about costs of school uniform and equipment and educational opportunities offered by the school which have become cost-prohibitive for some families.

Q. Do pupils achieve better in academies? There is no evidence that structural change such as academy conversion will result in better educational standards or outcomes for children. There are high-performing academies and there are academies that have been judged 'inadequate' by Ofsted. It is not what a school is called but how it supports high-quality teaching and learning that is critical to success.

Q. Will there be any changes to admissions? Academies are their own admissions authority and, therefore, set their own admission policies. They are required to abide by the fair admissions code. The Local Authority retains oversight of the admissions process.

Q. Will parents have more influence with academy schools? The influence that parents will have with academy schools will entirely depend on the school. Some academy schools have sought to involve parents further in the school following conversion.

Q. Once a school becomes an academy, what can parents do if they are not happy with any decisions made? In the first instance, as now, parents can complain to the school. The academy will continue to have a clear complaints procedure. Future processes for making a complaint will be very similar to the present policy, but there will be an additional escalation process managed by the MAT.

Q. What happens if an academy experiences difficulties? This will largely depend on the nature of the difficulties. Matters concerning perceived underperformance would fall within the remit of the Trust initially. Where there is a concern that issues are not being deal with appropriately by the Trust Board, parents, carers and other stakeholders may refer their concern to the Members of the Trust to whom the Trust Board is accountable. Ultimately concerns may be taken up by Ofsted or the DfE Regional Director who has wide-ranging powers to intervene and may choose to move an academy into a MAT or move the academy into another trust if it is already a member of one. Financial problems/irregularities will be dealt with by the Trust and then the Education Funding Agency or the Department for Education, depending on the nature and severity of the difficulty faced.

Q. Will the ethos of the school change? No.

Q. Will there be a change of teachers? No, the teaching and non-teaching staff will remain the same, except for normal changes in natural staff turnover.

Q. Will staff have to apply for their jobs? Will there be redundancies? No. Staff who are currently employed by the Governing Body and who work for the school transfer automatically to the MAT's employment the moment the school becomes an academy. These are known as TUPE arrangements (Transfer of Undertakings Protection of Employment).

Q. How will pay and conditions of current staff be affected? If the school becomes an academy, staff will cease to be employed by the Governing Body and will instead by employed directly by the MAT.

Q. How will becoming an academy affect term dates and the working day? There are no plans to deviate from currently agreed term dates or the hours of the working day. Any changes to term dates or the working day would be subject to a separate consultation process.

Q. Will the uniform change? The Governing Body is responsible for determining the School Uniform Policy. There are no plans to change the uniform.

Q. Will the name of the school change? Yes. In line with St Benet's policy all schools joining the Trust are expected to change their name to 'Academy' instead of 'School' and will lose any VA/VC/Endowed status.

Q. Can we withdraw from the conversion process? Schools are able to withdraw right up until the point that they sign the funding agreement. Once this is signed there is a legally binding agreement between the Secretary of State and the academy, and the termination would require a long notice period (7 years).

Q. Will anything else change? What will children and staff notice? Very little will change. The Headteacher and Senior Leadership team will continue to run the school, although under a MAT the Headteacher will also be accountable to the Board of Trustees. Our Governing Body will retain a critical role in the school as a Local Governance Committee. Our school leaders will continue to determine our curriculum, staff structures, school day and school terms.

Q. Will the school day or term change? Although Academy status would mean the school would have complete autonomy on these decisions, there are no plans to change. Any proposed changes would be consulted on.

Q. Will the schools' responsibilities in relation to Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) change? No, responsibilities as an Academy in relation to SEND will be just the same as they are now.

Q. Can a child with a statement/Education Health Care Plan nominate an Academy as his or her first choice school? Yes, schools converting to Academy status can retain the admissions criteria they currently use. We have no plans to change this. These arrangements and related processes must always comply with the Schools Admissions Code.

Q. Will children with special needs get the same level of support in school than they get now? Yes, at least as good a level of support as they receive now.

Q. Will class sizes go up? Not as a direct result of becoming an Academy. Other factors such as increase in catchment area population may cause class sizes to rise, but being an Academy will enable the schools to plan their own response to this issue.

Q. Will the same subjects be on offer? Yes. Being an Academy means that the governing body can choose its own curriculum, rather than being dictated to. There will therefore be greater flexibility for subject area development.

Q. Will you change the entry criteria? Will you become selective in choosing pupils? Will you change the catchment area? All Academies are required to adopt clear and fair admission arrangements in line with the admissions law and the School Admissions Code. When a school converts to become an Academy, it will be the admission authority and is responsible for its own admission arrangements. This means the Academy will need to manage its own admission process. It will involve periodic consultation and regularly publishing the Academy's admission arrangements. Applications for school places will still be made to the Local Authority, who will notify the Academy of the application.

Q. If there are more academies, how do local parents have a fair choice of school? Local Authorities continue to have overall responsibility for ensuring that there are sufficient places to meet demand locally and all academies are required to participate in the local coordination of admissions. Applications for school places are made to the Local Authority, who will notify the Academy of the application.

Q. Will parents have to start paying for clubs etc? There will be no additional charges other than what we already charge for now.

Q. Will you change the age range? There are no plans at this time to change the range of provision.

Q. Will the school have enough money to pay for the services it needs? Yes. The bottom line is that we will not be financially disadvantaged by a move to Academy status. Academies receive the same level of per-pupil funding as they would receive from the Local Authority, plus additional money to cover the services that no longer provided for them by the Local Authority. The Government is clear that becoming an Academy should not bring financial advantage or disadvantage to a school. However, Academies have greater freedom on how they use their budgets, alongside the other freedoms that they enjoy.

Q. Will the uniform change? No. The only change to the uniform will be the change to the school's name. Pupils will still be able to wear the current uniform until parents would normally buy new uniform. Any new items purchased would then contain the new school name/logo.