

Extension of Academies and Free Schools Programme

1. Purpose

This briefing paper considers the implications for the co-operative schools sector arising from the Government's policy announcements on academies, free schools and similar variants of school provision.

2. Background

Recent policy announcements by the Secretary of State for Education and the publication of the Schools White Paper – *The Importance of Teaching* – point to a significant acceleration in the Government's plans for the extension of the academies model including the free schools variant. The White Paper states:

“... there is great scope for us to extend autonomy and freedom for schools in England. It is our ambition that Academy status should be the norm for all state schools, with schools enjoying direct funding and full independence from central and local bureaucracy.”

and

“We expect schools to use their increased autonomy to explore new ways of working together – but collaboration in the future will be driven by school leaders and teachers – not bureaucrats.”

3. School-initiated academy conversions

The DfE has announced that applications will now be considered for academy orders from maintained schools where one of the following applies:

- The school's Ofsted rating is good with outstanding features.
- The school formally agrees to work in partnership with a high-performing school (or schools) that will help drive improvement.
- The school is a maintained special school rated outstanding by Ofsted.

4. Addressing under-performance

The previous Government's policy of using the academies programme as an intervention tool for what is seen as school underperformance will be continued and the criteria for intervention will be strengthened. The intention is to continue to do this by working with local authorities (LA) to bring about the conversion (closure and replacement) of existing schools.

The definition of 'under-performing' is to be widened to include those schools where there are concerns about capacity to improve or to sustain attainment.

5. Widening the reach of the academies model

The Government's current strategies to extend the reach of the academies model into additional areas of provision are:

- Spreading the experience of academies into the primary sector.
- Developing academies through clusters (chains) of schools within a local geographical area or as part of a national brand.
- Encouraging new provision in the form of free schools in areas where there is a demand for additional places or where parents are dissatisfied with what is currently available.

6. Academy chains

It is clear that the Government wishes to use the skills and experience of existing academy providers to widen the programme. Specifically, placing less well-performing schools under the wing of either established providers or within new collaborative groups. The White Paper says that schools working together leads to better results.

Some sponsors already oversee several academies in a geographical group, or in chains across the country. Chains are seen as a means for schools to improve more rapidly – by providing a common approach to professional development, sharing good practice, and providing shared 'back-office' support.

Academy chains, therefore, are a key development aim for the Government and the implications of this for the Co-operative sector is considered below.

7. Free schools

The Government says there is "convincing international evidence of the galvanising effect on the whole school system of allowing new entrants in areas where parents are dissatisfied with what is available". Drawing comparisons with the charter schools in the USA, the White Paper declares support for teachers, charities, parent groups, faith organisations and others who have the vision, drive and skills to set up a new school.

The legal status of a free school would be that of an academy.

8. Specialist 14-19 provision

Studio Schools and University Technical Colleges are forms of school organisation that are also likely to use the academies model in future.

Studio Schools are a continuation of an initiative begun under the previous Government. Building on two existing pathfinders, the model seeks to fill a gap between for the learning and skills development of some students that are not fully catered for in the current schools system. The curriculum involves learning through enterprise projects and work experiences.

University Technical Colleges (UTC) are a commitment of the Coalition Agreement. The aim will be to offer full time, technically-oriented learning for 14-19 students, with progression to higher education.

Both forms of provision are expected to be relatively small in size and are therefore potentially useful members of academy chains or other forms of collaborative provision. This is not to say that providers (nor their neighbouring institutions) will necessarily share this collaborative outlook.

9. Trust schools

The Government has indicated that there are no plans to close off the option for community and foundation schools to convert to trust schools, where they would remain within the LA maintained sector. Nevertheless, the Government's preferred direction of travel is clear. Specific grant funding is available to maintained schools wishing to fund the cost of converting to an academy. In contrast the (significantly smaller) specific grant for trust acquisition was ended as part of the Comprehensive Spending Review.

The White Paper makes only one passing mention of trust schools (in relation to local collaborative arrangements). It is clear that the Government's view is that academies (the term can be taken to include free schools and other minor variants) should be the default form of state school provision in England.

10. Number of academy orders and trends

According to the Local Government Information Unit (LGIU), the rate of applications for Academy Orders has decreased recently. Up to 31 August 2010 there were 139 applications. A further 85 were made to 5 November 2010. The number of **completed** conversions in this period was 23.

Of the 35 applications (for 37 schools) made between 7 October and 5 November, there were 9 for primary schools and 26 for secondary schools.

It seems the list of schools registering an interest in Academy status has not been updated since 16 July 2010.

Recent Government announcements, most significantly the White Paper, are clearly intended to reinvigorate the programme. Enquiries to the Co-operative College and soundings of LAs indicates a sea change in the level of interest in academy conversion is now likely.

11. Implications for the co-operative schools programme

The number of co-operative trust schools continues to grow, with a significant number of new proposals coming forward for implementation in 2011.

Conversations with a number of the less advanced prospective adopters indicate, however, a growing desire to establish a good position in relation to the forthcoming Education Bill. The recent changes in intervention policy and the further legislative

changes envisioned in the White Paper both increase significantly the scope for acceleration of the academies programme at the expense of the trust schools sector.

There is also the growing possibility of intervention affecting existing co-operative trust schools, resulting in their loss from the co-operative sector unless a co-operative academy model is made available.

Many forward-thinking LAs are beginning to plan for a wholesale introduction of a commissioner-provider relationship with schools. There is current interest in both extending the use of the trust school model and also in seeing the development of a co-operative alternative in the academies sector; usually favouring collaborative clusters. A number of LAs are also interested in how some of the existing services they provide might be delivered collaboratively by schools.

Furthermore; there are strong indications that the Government intends use the current increasing demand for primary school places as a tool to drive both the academies and free schools sectors. Where a local authority requires DfE capital funding to meet an increased need for school places, it is likely that there will be a requirement to first consider either the expansion of an existing academy (currently the primary phase offers little choice in this regard) or the establishment of a new free school.

The development of our position on academies needs, therefore, to consider the organisational structures that the Government appears to be considering for the academies sector. In particular we should consider the development, through pilot projects, models of provision to support the following:

- A single community school with appropriate OFSTED grade wishing to convert to a co-operative academy.
- A single co-operative trust school with appropriate OFSTED grade wishing to convert to a co-operative academy.
- A cluster of community schools with appropriate OFSTED grades wishing to acquire a shared co-operative academy structure.
- An existing co-operative shared trust with all schools with appropriate OFSTED grades wishing to explore becoming a co-operative academy.
- A school that has already acquired academy status, but wishes to convert to a co-operative model.

There will be other scenarios (for example where there is a mix of co-operative and community schools wishing to collaborate), but the above would provide a basic kit of parts that, together with the retention of the trust schools option, will allow for the development of a flexible range of co-operative provision capable of meeting the needs of schools, local authorities and the DfE.

An initial examination of the current organisational models suggested by the Government for academy chains indicates that it ought to be possible to formulate appropriate that incorporate the co-operative ethos, membership and member engagement in the governance arrangements.

The DfE has indicated a willingness to support the development of co-operative solutions as outlined above and a number of existing co-operative schools have expressed a desire to be involved in pilot developments.

12. Recommendation:

That the College policy position on academies be further developed to reflect the Government's proposals for national academy chains and geographically-based collaboratives by ensuring co-operative academy models are available.