

Families of Schools – Where are we with the DfE Messaging?

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14 December 2021

It seems a long while since the heady days of 2016 and Nicky Morgan's ill-fated statement that all schools would be academies by 2022. In the intervening years we have had heard a variety of messages circulated by the Department for Education (DfE) but no firm policy on the advancement of the academy programme has been forthcoming. The actual number of schools converting to academy status over the past few years has gone up and down in a succession of waves which seem to more or less follow wider political events such as general elections, Brexit and of course the Covid pandemic.

So where does this leave us now at the end of 2021 and midway through the term of this Parliament? Notwithstanding his recent departure, Gavin Williamson's address to the Confederation of School Trust conference back in April seems to provide us with the best idea of current Government policy on the issue. Whilst the speech did not drop any bombshells it did underscore the Government's vision that all schools should be 'part of a strong multi academy trust (MAT)'. It did not however provide any timeline or other mechanism for forcing maintained schools or single academies to join multi academy trusts. The main takeaway points from the speech were the consultation on the triple Requires Improvement test and the roll out of the 'try before you buy' mechanism for interested maintained schools. The former (being a proposal that any school judged as Requires Improvement on three consecutive occasions would be forced to join a MAT) remains in the consultation phase and the latter, whilst accepted by many trusts to be an interesting idea, does not seem to have flown off the shelves.

The financial incentives for schools looking to convert or trusts looking to expand remain fairly static and do not in themselves seem to have acted as a lever to persuade schools to take the plunge.

In the absence of either stick or carrot many schools, councils and academy trusts have been left wondering what the future holds with regards to the roll out of the universal academisation programme. Some councils (notably Swindon) have taken the Government's softly-softly approach as a reason to row back on their previously stated intention of asking all remaining maintained schools in their borough to convert to academy status. In contrast other organisations, notably a number of Church of England and Catholic dioceses, have accelerated their academy programmes.

Given the recent research exercise conducted by the DfE on the perceived benefit and obstacles in schools joining MATs, the Department are clearly looking at the root causes preventing single academies and maintained schools from joining MATs. There seem to be a number of issues at play, but the overwhelming message is that schools are worried about a lack of autonomy. This is a tricky issue for the DfE to unpick, as autonomy means very different things to different people. It might be that this identified trend leads to revisions to MAT governance though perhaps more likely the 'try before you buy' scheme will be pushed harder to allow schools to experience in real time what it feels like to be in MAT.

The fact that we are still dealing in suppositions at this stage is probably indicative of where the academy programme is at the current time. However, we are well overdue a White Paper from the DfE and the recent change in Secretary of State and some of the more junior ministerial positions may well bring fresh eyes to the programme. Watch this space!

This article was first published by LASBM in their [December 2021 newsletter](#)

Contact



Tom Briant-Evans

Senior Associate

Tom.Briant-Evans@brownejacobson.com

+44 (0)330 045 2888

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