

Academies - Frequently Asked Questions

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Q. What is an academy?

Academies are Government-funded schools that are independent of local authority control.

Q. What extra freedoms do academies have?

An academy is free from local authority control as it is funded directly from central government. This means that academies have more freedom than other state schools over school decision-making, use of suppliers and the opportunity to adapt the curriculum to the specific needs of their pupils.

Q. How many academies are there?

The number of academies has grown dramatically under the coalition government, from 203 in May 2010 to 1,419 academies open in England as of 1 November 2011.

Q. Why has the number of academies increased?

The Academies Act of July 2010 enabled all 'Outstanding' schools – both primary and secondary – to apply to become an Academy. Initially the take up was slow but has now gained pace with, from April 2011, the Government expanding the conversion programme to all schools that were "performing well" (i.e. with stable or improving results above or moving towards the national average and judged by Ofsted to have the capacity to improve). All other schools can also apply to become academies, as long as they apply in formal partnership with a school that is performing well.

Q. In the past, failing schools have closed down and re-opened as an Academy. Why are 'outstanding' schools now being offered this? What is the difference in Academy status?

Originally, Academies were set up by the Labour Government to turn failing schools (mostly in areas of social deprivation) into Academies. These were fresh start schools that had to have a sponsor, either from business or a university. The sponsors of these Academies help to run the schools in a very direct way. The way the Academy scheme has developed now allows good and outstanding schools more freedom to manage their activities. They are not required to have sponsors as the school management is deemed to be very strong already.

Q. Has there been any consultation with schools that decided against Academy conversion? If so, what were the arguments against?

The Governors have spoken to schools that are going through the conversion process or have recently become Academies, although we have not spoken to any that have ultimately decided against conversion, most are still assessing the possibility. There is certainly extra effort in the application process for the school, however this has been deemed worthwhile in the long run. It is a definite change for the school and there are concerns by some that Academy schools will not in the future work with Local Authorities. We are a Foundation School and do already have certain freedoms from the LA, but we are clear that, whether we become an Academy or not, we would continue to maintain links with other schools and the Local Authority as we are part of a wider network of schools in the local community.

Q. What are the disadvantages of becoming an academy?

Obviously a new system will provide new challenges and certainly the initial activities involved in the conversion process may place more workload within the school and the Full Governing Body over the application stage. For example, this would include additional contract management to be carried out by the school business manager and finance officer and the school's senior management team, plus additional regulatory requirements, such as preparing audited accounts and meeting Companies House registration rules. However, in the long run,

we would anticipate potentially less bureaucracy in activities that are connected to the management of services.

Q. What benefit do the Governors see for the children of the school?

The main benefits are around the increased freedom across the curriculum and the improved financial management opportunities for the school.

Q. Exactly what changes are planned that would not be possible as we are now?

We don't have detailed plans in any areas, as consultation and planning is still at a very early stage. However, we would expect that during the application process we would be looking at services procured by the school, and although there are no plans at the moment on changes to the curriculum some discussion may be initiated, as there are always opportunities to improve. In general, we need to continuously challenge what we do and how we do it, and this will result in change. These changes might originate from the School Council, the teaching staff, the support staff, the parents, the governors or the local community. Becoming an Academy is all about being able to respond to changing requirements; being able to pick up on good ideas and run with them; and delivering the best for the children.

BECOMING AN ACADEMY

Q. How long does it take for a school to become an Academy?

It is expected that most schools are able to convert to academy status in around three to four months (it may take longer if there are complicated issues). If the decision is taken to become an academy, the school would aim to convert on 1 April 2012

Q. Do schools need to consult before converting?

Yes. All schools are required to carry out a consultation and we are determined to conduct open and honest discussions with all stakeholders involved. There is no legally specified length of time for the consultation and schools have flexibility in how it is conducted. The school will be consulting with parents, staff, local schools and the local community. We may conduct information sessions for pupils, but this may be more relevant if we were a secondary school.

Q. How will the school consulting with stakeholders?

We have consulted with the governors and held a training day at a practicing Academy, they made the decision to investigate moving towards Academy status. We will be starting the consultation process with staff on the 13th December and shortly after we will invite all stakeholders to register their views in writing to the school until the end of the consultation period on 31/01/2012, which is just over eight weeks. The Full Governing Body will take a final vote on Academy status sometime very early in the New Year after a full investigation and evaluation. In the meantime we will continue to communicate and consult through a variety of methods to ensure that everyone is kept up-to-date and all views are considered.

Q. What does the conversion process involve?

The key steps the school must take are to:

- Establish a new academy trust as a company by registering with Companies House;
- Establish a new bank account for the trust to ensure that the academy will be able to receive funding;

- Transfer, renew or procure new contracts, service level agreements and licences and purchase insurance as appropriate;
- Transfer under TUPE all contract arrangements for staff. This is a formal legal consultation process which is separate from the consultation with all stakeholders. This would not start until after the vote by the governing body to apply for academy status.

Q. Can a school convert without the support of the Governing Body?

No. Anyone can register an interest in their school becoming an academy, but the Governing Body has to approve the application to become an academy.

Q. Can we withdraw from the conversion process?

Yes, we can withdraw right up until the point that we sign the funding agreement. Once this is signed there will be a legally binding agreement between the Secretary of State and the academy.

Q. Would the school have to support another school?

Yes, although we already work with a number of other schools. For schools that are performing well, an essential part of converting to academy status is agreeing to support another school to raise standards. Headteachers and governors are given the flexibility to decide the exact nature of this support as they will know what is best for their school and local area.

Q. Does the school have to change its name or uniform?

No. The name of the school does not have to change and the uniform requirements do not have to change either. If we do decide to convert to academy status, we will consult on any changes to the school name or uniform in due course. This is an area where we would like as much input from the pupils as possible, since allowing them to participate in the school's change is a great way to ensure that all pupils understand and are part of the process.

Q. If conversion goes ahead, are the Governors considering rebranding with a new logo etc.?

Thoughts on a new logo or name for the school haven't been thought through in detail at the moment. The experience of other schools shows that this is an area that has had a lot of staff, parent and, particularly, pupil involvement. A new logo would require a lot of thought and it may be that the school may not change anything or may simply add to the existing logo rather than a complete change. Any thoughts on this area would be welcome as the current name and logo is an important part of the history of the school.

Q. If conversion goes ahead, would the website need re-doing?

We are not sure at the moment that we would need to invest in a new website; it may be that we add or change some elements of the existing one to reflect the new status. This type of activity would be reviewed as we get further into the process.

Q. Can a school apply to convert to academy status as part of a chain?

Any school can apply to join an existing academy trust. In addition, any group of schools, regardless of their individual Ofsted ratings, can apply in partnership to join the academy programme as long as at least one of the member schools is performing well. The schools do not have to already be in a federation before applying. Each application will be considered on its merits, and the Secretary of State will only approve those where he is satisfied the schools

have the capacity to enjoy academy freedoms and there are appropriate accountability mechanisms in place to support weaker schools to improve.

Q. What is the process for converting groups?

The process will be similar to the current application process. All schools wanting to convert in a group need to submit an application form to the Department and list the other schools that they are converting with. Each governing body must pass a resolution before application.

TEACHING AND THE CURRICULUM

Q. Will the school be able to set its own curriculum?

Yes. Academies are able to offer a more flexible curriculum, but they are obligated to provide a 'balanced and broadly based curriculum'. This will allow the school to design and implement a curriculum that will meet the needs of its pupils as they face ever-changing demands and requirements.

Q. What would happen to SEN provision?

The school would continue to provide the same support for pupils with a statement of special educational needs. The various statutory duties, obligations and procedures remain in place when a school converts to academy status.

Q. With Academy freedoms to modify the curriculum, would the curriculum remain supportive in preparing children to move to Grammar and Secondary school?

Yes. We would hope that curriculum freedom, combined with supporting other settings and building greater networks, would provide the school with even more opportunity to prepare for the next stage of the pupils education. We already work closely with many secondary schools, with Science and Design Technology at Highcrest and many are very keen to come to our information evening for parents. Many visit pupils in school to prepare our children for secondary school meeting secondary school pupils and teachers, and inviting children to events. We would hope that Academy status would enable us to develop this further.

Q. Would parents be consulted on changes to the curriculum?

Through parents' evenings and normal access to the school, we would hope that parents have many opportunities to discuss the curriculum with the teaching staff. The curriculum and learning objectives for the school are set annually and this would continue to achieve the outcomes for children.

Q. Are there currently any specific plans, or even ideas, regarding changes to the curriculum?

The consultation process is still at a very early stage. The school has no specific plans to modify the curriculum at this point in time. If we decide to become an Academy, we would anticipate that over the next year, the school would be focused on delivering the current curriculum as effectively as possible. Spare resources would be devoted to achieving Academy status and bedding in the new processes required to effectively manage the school. Once we have achieved this, we will then be able to see if the additional resources and control we have as an Academy, together with the ability to change the curriculum, can be channelled into delivering more in the classroom. Any significant changes to the curriculum will be well thought through and visible.

Q. What specifically could be adapted within the curriculum?

One of the key points of becoming an Academy is the idea that defining and setting the curriculum is much more flexible and based on the views of internal teaching staff. As long as external teaching standards are met, the actual curriculum can be tailored more to the specific needs of our children. This is a key area that would be led from within the school and one that the Full Governing Body would hope is a major opportunity and advantage of becoming an Academy.

STAFF/PERSONNEL

Q. Can the school alter teachers' pay and conditions?

When a school converts from a local authority maintained school to a new academy, staff are entitled to transfer under the same employment terms and conditions. Immediate changes to the staff structure and operation are not anticipated. However, once open, the academy trust may consult with staff and their union representatives on changes to these terms and conditions, for example to enable the academy to operate over different term times or change the length of the school day. It is important to note that as a Foundation School the staff are currently not employed by the local authority, but by the governing body, ~~so this does not apply.~~

Although there is a legal process to go through, which is called TUPE, the Full Governing Body wishes to maintain all links and good working atmosphere within the team at the school. Through the transfer process, the Full Governing Body is obliged to honour the contract of employment of all employees, which means that they must maintain existing pay, conditions and length of service. Any alterations can only be made ~~as they would have been by the Council~~ with full consultation as is the case now. This position will continue unless and until the contract of employment is varied with the agreement of the employee. It's important to note that the school's Full Governing Body has no plans to alter the pay and conditions of staff.

Q. What is the statutory consultation period on TUPE?

There isn't any definite period prescribed by statute for consultation under TUPE, but with a view to seeking agreement the period must be sufficient ~~to give time for an agreement to be reached to consult~~ with the staff. How long this will take will vary from school to school and case to case.

Q. How will the TUPE process work and what specific responsibilities does the school have?

- The school needs to tell the LA of its intention to convert.
- The employer is responsible for informing and consulting staff.
- The employer does due diligence and passes staff details to the academy trust.
- The employer gives indemnity for the period staff worked for them, normally as part of the asset transfer agreement.

The academy trust must inform the current employer in writing of any measures which it envisages taking in relation to staff after the transfer (such as changes to working conditions), and the employer must also pass this information on to employee representatives.

Q. Who can provide schools with advice on the TUPE process?

All schools converting to academy status should take their own specialist legal advice on TUPE process.

Q. If we become an academy, do we have to take responsibility for pension arrangements of teachers instead of the LA?

Teachers working in an academy fall within the scope of the Teachers' Pension Scheme (TPS), just as they are at the moment employed by the Governing Body. Staff will continue their membership of the Scheme. As the employer, the academy would be responsible for remitting contributions to the TPS and for all other administrative responsibilities that fall to employers who employ teachers who are subject to the teachers' pensions regulations.

Q. What about pension arrangements for support staff?

Non-teaching staff at schools fall within the Local Government Pension Scheme (LGPS). As the employer, the academy would be responsible for meeting the employer contribution. This practice continues in the same way as the current arrangements.

Q. How will we get HR and payroll services?

As an academy, we will continue to be responsible for HR and payroll as we are now as a Foundation School.

Q. Can Academies recruit unqualified teachers so that the school can pay less?

No. As an academy, the school would be required to only employ qualified teachers. The school is proud of the recent improvement in quality of teaching and the many achievements of both the team and the pupils in striving for the highest levels of standards. This continues to be at the very core of our school and will remain so.

Q. Does the school have enough support staff to cope with the change to an Academy?

The school's has capacity within existing staffing to establish the Academy Trust. However, the Governing Body would keep this under constant review.

Q. How will union membership (NUT, NASUWT, Unison, etc.)-work?

Union recognition would remain as it currently stands; all employees are entitled to be part of a union.

ADMISSIONS, SCHOOL PLACES AND WORKING WITH OTHERS

Q. What are the admission requirements for schools converting to become academies?

Schools that are performing well and are converting to academy status will be able to retain the admission criteria they currently use. These arrangements and related processes should at all times comply with the School Admissions Code. When a school becomes an academy, the academy trust will become the admissions authority and will need to manage its own admissions process. This will involve periodic consultation, and regularly publishing the academy's admission arrangements. As a Foundation school we currently undertake this role, so there will be no change.

Q. Will local authorities still have the responsibility for planning for additional places when there is a growth in student numbers within an area?

Local authorities still have overall responsibility for ensuring that there are sufficient places to meet local demand. Academy funding agreements require them to be within local co-ordination. That means that although the school will apply its admission arrangements, the local authority will send out offers. This is no different to current arrangements as a Foundation School. This does not affect the academy's right to determine which applicants have priority for admission. Where individual academies make a request to the Secretary of State to expand their pupil numbers and/or age range, this will only be done following local

consultation. The decision taken will be informed by the views of the LA, as the commissioner of pupil places.

Q. Who is responsible for setting any catchment areas when a school converts to become an academy?

If a school has a catchment area on conversion, it retains that catchment until it decides to change it. At the current time, the school would have no intention to change the existing catchment area.

Q. If the school became an Academy, would there be changes to the admissions criteria?

There would be no changes to the school's current ability to set its admissions criteria. The admissions criteria is always reviewed annually by the Full Governing Body in line with regulations and this will continue. Any changes would be open, as they are now.

Q. Would pupils from an Academy be disadvantaged when finding places for Grammar or secondary transfer?

No. Academies remain in the same position as schools regarding the co-ordinated admissions scheme and the 11 plus process would remain in place.

Q. What happens to existing admissions appeals when we convert?

These will still need to be heard by an independent appeals panel. The LA continues to arrange this process immediately after the school converts to academy status to hear outstanding appeals whilst the academy trust is establishing its own independent panel. The school currently buys in to the LA panel arrangements and there is no reason to change this arrangement.

Q. Would academies be part of coordinated admissions with the LA?

Yes, all academies continue to be within coordination i.e. the process for allocating school places to children. This means that parents/carers only need to complete one application form (but they can name several schools on it). Parents/carers will be given an offer of a single school place.

Q. Can new academies decide to bring in academic selection?

No. Schools becoming academies cannot decide to become newly selective schools.

Q. Will our responsibilities in relation to SEN and exclusions change?

Your responsibilities as an academy in relation to SEN and exclusions will be just the same as they are now.

Q. Does becoming an academy change the relationship with local schools and the community?

No, academy funding agreements state that they must ensure that the school will be at the heart of its community, collaborating and sharing facilities and expertise with other schools and the wider community.

FUNDING AND SERVICES

Q. How are academies funded?

Academies receive the same level of per-pupil funding as they would receive from the LA as a maintained school, plus additions to cover the services that are no longer provided for them by the LA. However, academies have greater freedom over how they use their budgets to best benefit their pupils. As a Foundation school we already have a larger share of pupil funding than a maintained school, so we would have to look carefully at additional funding and how we could use it in the most effective way for the pupils.

Q. Does the school have to cover the full cost to convert to an academy?

No. The Department for Education will pay a flat-rate grant of £25,000 to the school's bank account. We would expect this to cover the majority of our legal and contractual costs and any additional cost would be covered by the current school budget.

Q. With new freedoms to manage funds, what safeguards are in place to ensure that funds are not mismanaged?

The management of the school would continue to use the available funds for the greatest benefit to the pupils, benefiting from more freedom to allocate funds where they are most appropriate within the Academy. The Financial Accounts would be externally audited annually by external auditors, providing transparency, as they are at the moment.

Q. What funding is available for extra costs incurred in running an academy above that normally incurred in running a school?

Academies can be supported with additional grants from the YPLA. VAT and insurance costs are refundable.

Q. Will there be a capital fund or a specific grant for insurance to cover for emergencies in academies?

Academies are required to cover insurance at specified minimum levels of cover. We would also be eligible to seek an Earmarked Annual Grant for emergencies similar to the way that the LA can support schools with emergency contingent payments. As a Foundation school we do currently have a high level of personal insurance to cover such circumstances.

Q. How will insurance be arranged for the school?

As a Foundation school we already have insurance which we evaluate on a regular basis to ensure value for money.

Q. Who would own the land and buildings?

The land and buildings would transfer to the Academy Trust. As a Foundation school we already own the land and therefore much of this work in transferring deeds will not be necessary.

Q. Academy funding would not be 'ring-fenced' for specific purposes, giving the school freedom to choose how money is spent. Does this pose a risk to areas such as SEN that would previously have had funding allocated to it by the LA? As an Academy, would it be possible for SEN to receive no investment at all?

Children with a statement of special educational needs will continue to receive specific funding from the LA, which is separate to Academy funding. The school would maintain its commitment to support all children in the school, including children with a statement of special

needs and children with non-statemented special needs. In fact, as an Academy, the school would be better placed to plan and manage investment in SEN more effectively.

Q. When supporting another school, is the funding shared between the two?

No. If we become an Academy and would officially support another school or Academy, the finances of the two establishments would remain entirely separate.

Q. What does supporting another school actually mean? Could the supported school be a drain on the school's resources?

There are no hard and fast rules regarding the nature of support provided by an Academy to another school or Academy, which can be very light-touch. Support would most likely be provided in the form of resource, knowledge and the sharing of good-practice, which the school already does unofficially with a number of local schools, and also the LA and Reading University through staff professional development.

Q. As an Academy, would the school have to support another Academy or could it be a school?

It would be possible for the school to support either a school or another Academy. The school or Academy would be selected with a view to building a beneficial relationship for both settings.

Q. Will there be consultation with parents regarding which school will be supported?

There won't be discreet consultation just on this, but the current consultation period is to encourage discussion on all areas of Academy conversion. The Governing Body of the school is committed to genuine consultation and will consider all suggestions.

Q. How much extra money does the Governing Body estimate we could have per year, as the LA would not be taking the percentage they take now?

We are starting to look at the financial plans at the moment, so it is too early to give a concrete view. We will not convert to Academy status if we are going to be worse off financially in the long run. We need to keep a keen eye on additional costs, such as accounts preparation and procuring our own IT systems. We are also checking that the costs of services currently contract managed by the council will not increase. After discussing with other schools that have already made the move, it appears that in the first year the financial savings are not enormous as they have been changing many contracts mid-way through. That said, it appears service levels have improved and they are therefore getting better value for the same money. Further investigation is to be completed before a reliable estimate can be made.

Q. Would it be possible to look in-house for services such as catering?

The Academy would be free to procure the best services at the best value wherever they are available. If in-house services are able to deliver on quality and cost, they will be considered. As a Foundation school we are currently in a position that we can do this, however we will always continue to strive for best value. We should state that some maintained schools procure services, such as catering in-house, so this is not a specific change for Academies. If the contract is through the LA we would have to seek a new contract even with the existing supplier of catering services.

Q. Will there be an insurance top-up grant? Approximately how much is this?

There is no top up grant. Insurance costs are currently reimbursed by the YPLA in full.

Q. Are there limits to running a deficit as an academy? Is there a legal limit to this?

Academies are not allowed to run a deficit without remedial action. Any academies that open with a transferred deficit will need to have an agreed plan with YPLA to repay it from their grant instalments. Any which develop a deficit after opening will have to agree a restructuring plan with the YPLA.

Q. Can academies access LA centrally negotiated contracts, e.g. energy/ banking/ insurance?

If they wish to do so, academies are quite free to buy services and supplies from the LA, although some LAs may not feel able to offer some services. LAs may not feel able to offer insurance.

Q. Academies need to produce accounts that comply with the Companies Act. How are these different from current DfE returns through their LA?

The accounts are completely different from school's consistent financial reporting (CFR) returns and need to follow charities and company law requirements. The accounts are normally for an accounting period ending at 31 August. They can be completed by the school finance team, but the school may need to buy in expertise if there is insufficient experience of doing such accounts. Academies' accounts have to be audited by an external auditor appointed and paid for by the academy; this audit takes place in the autumn term each year. I feel that with current staffing, we have the capacity to manage this change in house.

Q. The school already has its own bank account. Do we need to set up a new one?

Yes. The funds in the current bank account belong to the LA, even though there will be provision to pay over the surplus. The academy trust needs to set up its own new bank account to receive YPLA grant payments.

Q. How much extra funding would an academy expect to receive from money that would normally go to the LA?

The funding will be based on the level of LA funding already calculated for the school, plus additions for central services that would normally be provided by the LA. Grant payments to academies to replace LA services depend on the level of central spend in the LA, and can vary considerably from area to area. As a Foundation school we already receive most of this money rather than it being managed by the LA. We will therefore know more when we receive a model for the funding agreement from the DfE.

Q. Will my school get a VAT grant?

No. From September 2011 academies' non-business VAT costs will be reimbursed by Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs (HMRC) through a refund scheme similar to the scheme that applies to LA maintained schools.

Q. Will schools be worse off financially if they convert to academies?

The general principle is that schools are no worse off as academies than they would have been as maintained schools. Academies are funded on a like-for-like basis with LA maintained schools, with the addition of funding for services that the LA provides free of charge to its schools. We already receive most of this funding and procure our own services and would therefore need to analyse the benefits for our school.

Q. If there is a shortfall in teachers' pensions in the future, who will provide the money to plug this gap?

The Teachers' Pension Scheme (TPS) is not insurance based, but a statutory defined benefit scheme, which is unfunded. Scheme benefits, including index linking under the Pensions

(Increase) Acts, are paid out of monies provided by Parliament and contributions and other income are credited to the Exchequer.

The Scheme Actuary undertakes a formal review not less than every four years to set the contribution rate (currently 20.5 per cent). The contribution is shared between employers and scheme members. The TPS is a group scheme and every TPS employer pays the same share of the contribution (14.1 per cent) - and every scheme member pays the same contribution (6.4 per cent). When a school ceases to be maintained by the LA and becomes an academy there is no 'transfer of accrued liability'. However, there is a change of responsibility whereby the academy becomes responsible for all matters relating to the TPS, including payment of the employer contribution which must be remitted, with the employee contribution, to the TPS.

GOVERNANCE

Q. What are the changes to the Governance of the school?

A Charitable Trust will need to be set up to hold responsibility of the school site, be the conduit for funding and to appoint the Governing Body of the school. The current Governing Body will be dissolved on the date the school becomes an academy, however, it is anticipated that most of our current governors would move across to become governors of the academy.

Q. Becoming an academy will require a strong and effective Governing Body. Does the present Governing Body have the necessary skills, experience and time to make the most of this?

Our current Governing Body includes people with a wide range of skills and experience. Governors are fully committed to the school. We have assessed the skills of current governors and do not believe there are any gaps in expertise. If gaps emerge, we will recruit additional governors who can fill such gaps. A project team has already been established to start moving forward the Academy discussions and the members of this group cover all the key capabilities required at this stage. Being able to commit sufficient time will be key requirement of governors moving forward.

Q. Are Academies inspected by Ofsted? What would happen if the Academy's Ofsted rating drops?

Yes. Academies are inspected in the same way as LA schools and the same outcomes apply. A lower Ofsted rating would not threaten Academy status. In the event of an 'inadequate' rating, an Academy can be placed into 'special measures' by the Secretary of State.

Q. If Governors have more responsibility in running an Academy, what safeguards will be in place to ensure the Governors remain effective?

The Academy is required to submit annual accounts to Companies House and will be audited on an annual basis. The schools' current structure for Governance will continue with sub-groups reporting to the Full Governing Body on issues such as Finance, Buildings, Curriculum Admissions, which helps to ensure a healthy level of monitoring and challenge.