

Friday 15 April 2016

The Headteacher/Principal & Chair of Governors
All Primary, Secondary & Special Schools

Dear Colleagues

Academisation National Agenda

The subject of academisation has come up frequently during the past few months, including throughout the workshops we held to support the identification of the Sheffield Priorities. Since we asked Marc Rowland, from the National Education Trust, to write a short article to put the debate into the national context, the issue has become headline news via the recent White Paper.

It is certainly a subject creating much discussion at present, and we believe that this is appropriate. The choice has become about the type of academy rather than whether to become one or not. In short, the discussion has become less about educational beliefs and more about taking a strategic and pragmatic approach to maximising the positives and minimising the negatives, in whichever options are preferred by each school.

Learn Sheffield does not have an ideological position on academisation but is in a good position to identify the opportunities and risks in the current situation. On this basis we are proposing to do three things:

1. Provide Information about existing MATs which schools could join.
2. Provide Information about new MATs which schools could create.
3. Consider the logistical challenges and seek to limit the impact of any process on school leaders being able to focus on teaching and learning.

These activities are intended to dovetail with the research that different groups of schools are already undertaking. We hope that, when schools and groups of schools arrange other events, they will share the learning with colleagues from across the city. If we can help with this then please get in touch with Learn Sheffield, as well as getting involved in the activities below.

1. Provide Information about existing MATs which schools could join.

Some schools will ultimately decide to join a multi-academy trust which already exists. The options here include both existing Sheffield MATs and National MATs, which may have schools within the city but are based outside. We are acutely aware of the challenges for schools leaders and governors in making meaningful comparisons between MATs and so intend to offer each MAT the opportunity to complete a questionnaire. Whilst we would, of course, recommend direct contact as part of the due diligence process with any chosen MAT we believe that comparison of different MATs using a common set of questions will be a useful way for schools to narrow this choice down and develop a clearer view of its own priorities.

2. Provide Information about new MATs which schools could create.

There is a great deal of speculation about what features a new MAT would need to have in order to win approval from the Regional Schools Commissioner and Department for Education. Certainly, without approval no plan can become reality which makes the perspective of the RSC a crucial one as we move into the future. Learn Sheffield, alongside Sheffield City Council, will raise these questions at our regular meetings with Jenny Bexon-Smith (RSC for our region), and have also invited her to come to Sheffield and speak to school leaders. The date for this event will be available shortly and it will also include an opportunity for leaders to discuss the information they are given in a workshop, which will follow the presentation.

3. Consider the logistical challenges and seek to limit the impact of any process on school leaders being able to focus on teaching and learning.

The impact of the academisation process on the ability of school leaders to focus on teaching and learning is a concern for Learn Sheffield. We are also acutely aware of the amount of money that this process of conversion will involve. For both of these reasons we will explore the potential to find savings, of both time and money, for Sheffield school leaders. Naturally, this could not be at the price of having the right expertise available to our schools, but it is certainly worth exploring.

By sharing the think-piece by Marc Rowland and following the three elements described above we are hoping to support Sheffield schools in exploring their options and making well considered strategic decisions. Whilst we do believe that schools need to be strategic and actively consider their options, we don't believe that schools need to panic or rush into decisions. For the majority of schools the current reality is that, whilst they don't have free choice to take an approach that doesn't find favour with the Regional Schools Commissioner, they also are not about to be directed to adopt a specific solution.

It is our hope that we can, as a collection of Sheffield schools working closely with Sheffield City Council, act strategically to grapple with the reality we have been given in the best interests of Sheffield children and families.

Yours sincerely



Stephen Betts
Interim Chief Executive of Learn Sheffield