



Frequently Asked Questions – July 2023

1) Why is our school considering becoming an academy and joining MECMAT?

The Bishop of Lancaster has stated that it is his wish that all Catholic schools in the Diocese of Lancaster move to become academies as part of Multi Academy Trusts by 2026. He believes that by doing so, this will protect, preserve and promote Catholic education across the Diocese. All Catholic schools will make this move over the next five years. For more details on the Bishop's plan and his letter explaining this, please see the school website.

2) What is an academy?

Academies are state schools, funded directly from central government, no longer under the control of the Local Authority. Academy status gives schools more freedom to be innovative and creative with the curriculum, timetabling, staffing and governance.

The school will still be a Catholic school under the authority of the Bishop of Lancaster and its religious designation will not change.

All academies continue to be inspected by Ofsted and comply with the same rules as other schools on special educational needs, exclusions and admissions.

An academy is part of a charitable trust run by a board of trustees. Academies are rightly expected to work with and support other schools, including lower-performing schools. Should you wish to know more about the Government's policy, the Department for Education has its own academies bookmark on <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/convert-to-an-academy-information-for-schools>

3) What is a Multi Academy Trust (MAT)?

A Multi Academy Trust is a charitable company and is responsible for overseeing the running of a number of schools. It has three layers of governance: the members (the Bishop of Lancaster, the Episcopal Vicar for Education and the Diocesan Board of Trustees); the Trustees; the local governing bodies.

A MAT is formed when two or more academies legally come together in partnership. Each school keeps its own name and it is possible for other academies to join the Trust in the future. The partnership ensures that the schools can share skills and best practice and make optimum use of resources ensuring best value for money for each school.

We believe that there is greater scrutiny of academies now than for voluntary aided schools and the Diocese is confident that this will have a positive impact on standards and enable the school to continue to fully engage with its community.

However, we are aware of some difference in opinion as to the effectiveness of Multi Academy Trusts. We would encourage you to consider the arguments for and against and check the accuracy of assertions that are being made before submitting your feedback.

4) What are the main differences between academies and maintained schools?

The religious nature of the school remains the same, but the model of governance and funding change. A Catholic MAT is a group of Catholic schools coming together as a Trust, Only Catholic schools will be members of the Mater

Ecclesiae Catholic Multi Academy Trust. Academies have a funding agreement with the Education Skills Funding Agency (ESFA) and receive funding directly from them instead of the Local Authority (LA). Standards are monitored by the governance and leadership of the Trust instead of the LA. Standards are reported to the Regional Schools' Commissioner (RSC) on behalf of the Department for Education. Academies have more freedoms and do not have to follow the national curriculum but they do have to take part in national assessments such as (SATs and GCSEs) and Ofsted will still monitor them.

5) Will the uniform at the school change?

No. It is important that each school continues to have its own unique identity in the Trust.

6) Will the school day or holiday dates change?

No. These will still be determined by the Governing Body of the school and the Headteacher.

7) Will the name of the school change?

There is no requirement for the school to have the word academy in its title, although it can if it wishes.

8) Will staff change or have to move to other schools?

No. Staff terms and conditions are protected by law. Nobody will be told to move to another school. Occasionally, there may be job opportunities in other schools and staff could apply for those, as they could if they weren't in a Trust.

9) What are the advantages for pupils of becoming part of MECMAT?

Schools joining the Trust will be given greater opportunities for collaboration and the sharing of good practice. The expectation is that this will have a positive impact on teaching and learning, although immediately there is no expectation that the move will have any significant impact on students and families. Each school will still be led and managed by the headteacher and governors. The Trust structure will provide greater opportunities for curricular and extra-curricular activities and possibly transition. Also, some jobs will be done by the central team of the Trust, leaving the Headteacher to focus on teaching, learning and pupils' spiritual development.

10) What are the advantages in general of becoming an academy in a MAT?

The Multi Academy Trust model allows us to preserve, protect and develop our schools and secure Catholic education in the long term. It will better support the long-term goal of developing our future leaders of education in the Diocese. Improvements in school standards can be secured by developing and resourcing a strategic vision for leadership development, through pooling expertise and knowledge on standards and buying in specialist support as well as facilitate school to school support. Greater control over the curriculum allows flexibility in terms of the balance and mix of subjects. A curriculum tailored to the needs of a Catholic school could be more fully developed. Stronger collaboration between schools in the Trust is beneficial, but this is not expected to be at the expense of retaining and supporting the development of strong local collaborations which will provide a long term future for the schools as Catholic academies.

11) What are the main benefits for schools within the Mater Ecclesiae Catholic Multi Academy Trust ?

The benefits of joining a Catholic Multi Academy Trust are many and varied. As the Bishop of Lancaster states, Catholic MATs are a secure way to protect, preserve and improve Catholic education across the Diocese.

There are many advantages of being part of an academy trust, from working together to preserve and improve Catholic education in the area, to educational, financial and spiritual benefits. Essentially, a group of schools working together in a single body can do lots of things that are harder for stand-alone schools to do. Teachers work and learn together to improve the way they teach and schools can share practices that make a difference to the quality of

teaching. Teachers and leaders can work together on the things that matter – like curriculum and assessment. In addition, schools can challenge and support each other to continually improve.

Being a member of MECMAT means all of the schools in the Trust working together to provide a first-class Catholic education, valuing staff and pupils, investing in their future, working in true collaboration and partnership with others.

Working in partnership, all of the schools in the Trust work closely together to create a sustainable model of high-quality education for all pupils. We believe that sharing ideas that work, learning from each other and

allowing leaders and staff to focus on the core purpose of education enables us to move forward as a family of schools. As a Trust, with shared central services, schools can also benefit from economies of scale when purchasing and commissioning external contracts. The work of the central team at the Trust will free up leaders to focus on school improvement and enhancing the academic and spiritual lives of pupils. The Trust can provide great opportunities for staff recruitment, retention and professional development

12) Why change if things are working well with everyone?

This is the Bishop's plan for the future of education in the Diocese of Lancaster. Partnership working is strong in the Diocese, but not every school collaborates well with others. We know that being in a Trust will enable schools to grow even stronger as we learn from the strengths of other schools. We will create improvement projects together and further strengthen our Catholic family.

13) Will schools lose their identity and will there be big changes?

No. Each school will become an academy in its own right and will be part of the Trust. The scheme of delegation protects the uniqueness of each school. The Governing Body's role is to ensure that the Catholic ethos is strong and the unique identity of the school is maintained. There are no significant changes which will affect pupils on a day-to-day basis. Uniforms, school day, free school meals, school name and holidays will not change.

14) What will the direct impact be on families if our school joins a Trust?

The move will not have a negative impact on families. The school will still be led and managed by the Headteacher and a Governing Body.

15) Is Lancaster the only Diocese changing in this way?

Many other Dioceses are also developing structures to further preserve, protect and develop Catholic education, for example, in Nottingham, Leeds and Newcastle Dioceses, all of the Catholic schools are academies in MATs.

16) What are the legal responsibilities towards children with Special Educational Needs and/or Disabilities (SEND)?

Pope Benedict reminds us, "Each of us is the result of a thought of God. Each of us is willed, each of us is loved, each of us is necessary". In a Catholic school and academy, our responsibilities to all children extend beyond curriculum standards so that children flourish. Academies must follow the SEND Code of Practice and work closely with the Local Authority, just like other schools.

17) What about safeguarding?

The same expectations for schools about safeguarding would be in place in the Trust.

18) How does the school convert to an Academy?

Firstly, all of the schools will be recognised equally in the Trust, The cost of the process to become an academy is met by a grant of £25,000 per school. Subject to approval by governors, the timeline for the school to convert is approximately 9 months. The current Governing Body will become the Local Governing Body (LGB) under the Trustees and Members of the Trust.

19) What is the role of parents?

All schools that convert to academies must ensure that parents are consulted. Parents are important in the work of a Catholic school and schools looking to become part of a MAT must seek to work in partnership with the families who entrust their children to their care. MECMAT will become the Admissions Authority although each school will have their own admission policy which they will follow. There will be no change in policy or pupil admission numbers. Our catchment area and our partner schools will remain unchanged too. Admissions will still be administered by the Local Authority. The MAT board is responsible for arranging for an admissions appeal if there are families who wish to appeal for a place in a Trust school.

20) What is the leadership structure in the Trust?

There will be a Chief Executive Officer and a Chief Financial Officer. Each school will have its Headteacher as it does now. These roles will not be diminished. The Trust and the Local Governing Body will be involved in the appointment of Headteachers if and when vacancies arise. Each school is an equal partner in the Trust so that there is no school more important than another. Each school will retain and manage its own budget but will contribute for key roles and projects within the Trust. This is not an additional financial strain on the school but it will come from the money formerly top-sliced by the Local Authority.

21) How will governance work?

There will be three layers of governance. The Members will be the Bishop of Lancaster, the Episcopal Vicar for Education and Formation and the Diocesan Board of Trustees. Then there is a Trust board made up of at least five Trustees/Directors, who are not paid and the majority of them are practising Catholics. Each school will have its own Headteacher and Local Governing Body. The powers and responsibilities of each of these groups will be outlined in the scheme of delegation. The LGB will carry out many of the functions they presently do. For instance, the LGB will ensure that the standards in the school are as good as they can be and that the school is delivering the improvements needed. This will be supported and monitored by the CEO and the Board of Trustees.

22) What services will the Trust provide?

The Trust will establish a core central team. The core team will offer support for schools around standards, finance, school improvement and the operational running of schools. They will continue to work with the Catholic Education Service to offer strong support in developing each school's Catholic life. The Trust will be required to purchase services that are of the best value and the best quality. Local Authorities retain their statutory responsibilities for areas such as safeguarding and SEND. The Trust can make savings by economies of scale. This money can then be used for the education of children.

23) Who owns the buildings and how are they maintained?

The ownership of sites used as Catholic schools is held by the Diocese. This arrangement will not change when the schools become academies. The Church's ownership of the land is acknowledged in the Church Supplemental Agreement which is signed by the Diocese and the Secretary of State for Education. The schools and in turn the Trust will continue to be responsible for the day to day management and maintenance of the sites and the Trust will have access to a standard capital allocation to enable significant works to be carried out when needed. In some cases, the playing fields used by the school will be owned by the Local Authority. They will be expected to grant a 125 year lease of the playing fields to the Trust.

24) What happens with finances and resources?

The Trust Board will be responsible for presenting the consolidated accounts for the Trust as a whole. The Trust will provide opportunities for centralising contracts and service delivery that we hope will yield considerable savings for school budgets. The Local Governing Body will be responsible for managing the delegated school budget, with oversight from the central team. The Trust is responsible for the central service fund and for strategic planning across the whole Trust. The LGB is responsible for staffing structures. As now, they will need to ensure that the structure is sustainable within the delegated budget. The central Trust team will support in this area if needed.

25) What will happen to the existing school reserves or deficits? Any transfer of assets?

All assets and existing reserves or deficits will be retained by the school on conversion, having been contractually transferred by the governing body to the Trust pursuant to the terms of a Commercial Transfer Agreement. The Local Authority is obliged by statutory regulation to transfer any school surpluses to the academy within 4 months of conversion, though typically it happens more quickly than that.

26) What happens with teachers and support staff employment?

Teachers and support staff employed by the Governing Body at the point of the transfer will transfer to MECMAT on their existing Terms and Conditions, There is no expectation that staff would work in different schools. However, future posts might be designed to do this.

27) How long are staff guaranteed the same terms and conditions that they are currently on? (e.g. maternity pay, sick pay, continuity of service).

Staff Terms and Conditions are protected by the TUPE process, these protections do not have an 'expiry' date. Any proposed changes to current terms and conditions must be declared as part of the TUPE process and can't be altered in the future unless a full negotiation process has been undertaken.

Questions received from Sacred Heart Consultations

Will there be any amendment to T&Cs?

No, during the TUPE process all T&Cs are transferred over. No plan to ever offer worse T&Cs. The MAT values people particularly as a Catholic MAT.

Would this be in writing?

Yes, as part of the TUPE process.

Does the new CEO share the same philosophy?

Yes, as part of the interview process this was identified and insisted on.

There is currently a funding crisis in schools. How does this affect the MATs plans?

There are no plans for redundancies in the MAT. As the MAT progresses, schools will continue to be responsible for their own budgets and make their own decisions. For schools in financial difficulties the finance team at the Trust would support the school in making savings - as the LCC finance team would currently do.

Urge staff to vote in union ballots to have their say.

Do years of service transfer?

Yes as part of TUPE.

Does the MAT use the current pay scale?

Yes, all pay scales are the same.

What about part-time staff?

All their T&Cs remain the same as part of TUPE.

What changes on a day to day basis?

For most staff very little changes. There is the benefit of working with other schools, not in isolation. Children know that they are part of a larger family. Access to support is greater. Logistical things such as use of minibuses are easier to arrange. As time goes by the MAT will benefit from economies of scale.

Is it going to happen anyway?

This is a consultation. The Bishop has asked for schools to convert to academies. Even if the government changes direction on academisation the Bishop's vision is clear for his schools.

Is the MAT not run as a business?

Our CEO is a teacher and the children are his focus, during the CFO interviews they toured a school and were showed that all business decisions are about the children.

Does the trust use Catholic policies?

Majority of policies are still LCC,. Employment policies are Catholic Education Service policies as is the Contract of Employment. In terms of CEO involvement in recruitment of Head and Deputy Headteachers they will have similar role to current Diocesan advisors. The choice of between suitable candidates will still be the LBG's.

Will roles like the School Business Manager become centralised?

No, the CFO works with all schools and bank reconciliation is done centrally due to the MAT having one bank account. SBMs are important members of school staff and will remain as such. Future appointments as the MAT grows may involve centralised roles. NO plans for roles such as Executive Headteachers across multiple schools.

One concern/query I have is around our terms and conditions, I know they go through the TUPE process as the same as now but how long is that guaranteed for? Could there be a change of terms and conditions after a year? Also if the terms and conditions were going to change what will the consultation process look like?

TUPE regulations give protection to terms and conditions for an indefinite period of time. In order to change terms and conditions in the future then there would need to be an economical, technical or organisational (ETO) reason for the change. This is same process the school would have to follow now. For example, if a staffing restructure was required for budgetary reasons then the normal consultation process would take place. If redundancies were required in order to make essential savings then the school would follow the same process as they would do if it were required pre conversion.

What is the top slice for schools in the Academy Trust?

The cost of the Top slice is 3% of the General Annual Grant. Nothing is taken from grants such as Pupil Premium, sports premium etc.

Schools will no longer be required to pay for the following:

Finance management systems, LCC finance officers, Facilities time, schools in financial difficulties. As procurement is underway some other SLAs will fall under central team budget. We are already seeing some benefits of economy of scale for provision/services that lie within the school budget.

As Sacred Heart is currently in an RI category, the Trust will apply for additional funding as a Sponsorship Academy that would be used directly to support Sacred Heart. The funding will far out way the 3% of top slice. Leaders and managers will be involved in determining how this funding is used to support the school. Therefore, the spending on the children will be increased.

Concerns about assurances of the Interim CEO not being continued by the new CEO.

Will they definitely be maintained by the incoming CEO?

Meeting arranged with the incoming CEO to provide assurance. Mater Ecclesiae celebrates uniqueness and individuality of each school.

Staff felt concerned about a rush to convert, that a new government may well halt the process of academisation after the next General Election. Will the Academy Strategy be dropped if the government halt it?

We are responding to the Bishop's call and not to the politician's call. We are a Catholic school and will continue with the Diocesan Academy Strategy.

Staff concerns that once taken, the academisation process cannot be reversed and that their school will never be able to return to Local Authority Control.

This is very true - but we are very much still a part of Lancashire County and still work with them. The schools will no longer be controlled by the Local Authority.

Academisation is driving down staff pay, terms and conditions . Is this going to happen?

This is not going to happen in Mater Ecclesiae - we are a Catholic academy and want the best for our children and our staff. How would we retain and recruit staff if we offered lower pay, terms and conditions? We will continue in line with Burgundy and Green Book.

There is no requirement for MATs to include parent representatives on the 'local' governing bodies of each academy, in fact some MATs have even abolished local bodies altogether. Will there be parent representatives on the LGB? Will LGBs be retained?

In all our Local governing Bodies, we have a parent governor . LGBs have not been abolished and are an important part of our Trust In our scheme of delegation - we also have regular meetings with chairs of LGB.s and CEO and Directors.

Pupils in academies are more likely to be taught by an unqualified teacher. Will our children be taught by unqualified teacher?

We want the best for our staff and children - we will have qualified teachers in our classrooms. There is also the other side to this - is it morally right to employ someone as an unqualified teacher and expect them to do the same job and be paid less without having appropriate training. We will be employing qualified teachers.

Joining a local MAT now does not mean your school won't end up as part of a national chain or larger MAT. The trend is towards consolidation into bigger MATs and the Government has said that it expects MATs to consist of at least ten schools or 7,500 pupils. Will this happen with Sacred Heart?

By joining our Catholic MAT we are protecting ourselves from being forced to join any other MAT. As part of the Catholic MAT we remain Mater Ecclesiae and not be transferred to a different MAT

Becoming an academy risks losing vital support. Academies lose automatic support from the LA. Special educational needs, school improvement, and speech and language therapy services could all be lost, with no guarantee a MAT could offer the same support. Will we lose this support?

We currently still pay into most of these services as we always did. As we move forward the LA will be invited to tender for services. If they provide the best value, we will absolutely continue to still access the support provided by LCC.