

Briefing Note to Family and Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Directorate:	Children's Services – Education and Skills
Subject:	Potential Multi Academy Trust opportunity
Date:	June 8th 2022

Purpose of Briefing Note

To provide The Executive and Informal Cabinet and FACS committee members with the available details of the opportunity to develop a model for a Schools Multi Academy Trust in Northumberland.

Background

In 2017/18 one of the Cabinet Member for Children's Priorities was to establish a Multi Academy Trust for Northumberland. At this time there was no legislation or policy that supported a model and was vehemently opposed by the Department for Education. A model plan was developed at that time but could not be developed or enacted as there was no legislation to do so. This was not sold well to schools at the time of the development and did not gain any interest or traction.

In March 2022 'Opportunity for all: strong schools with great teachers for your child', a schools White Paper was published. A policy statement had also been issued that all schools would be part of a Multi Academy Trust by 2030 and the White Paper [link here](#) included a number of paragraphs specifically linked to this opportunity.

Following this publication and a discussion with the regional DFE representatives, The Director of Education and Skills wrote to schools [link here](#) to say that Northumberland would be keen to be part of any 'Test and Learn' phase (supported by Lead Member). This letter mirrored discussions with the DFE. The letter also asked schools to register an interest to have an initial discussion with regard to joining any LA Multi Academy Trust. Over 30 schools in Northumberland showed interest and requested a meet, in addition more schools had informal discussions.

It would be fair and reasonable to say that whilst the White Paper was published the 'thinking' and any system infrastructure was not in place when there were many initial enquiries, our own conversation with DFE left many questions unanswered.

As of May 2022 DFE have now published an application process [link here](#) and have limited the expectation for around 10 LA Trusts to develop across England.

There are a number of school combinations that could be considered in Northumberland;

- Rural schools
- Partnerships ie Alnwick, Berwick, Coquet or Seaton Valley
- Special Schools

The next phase for Northumberland is to have an initial discussion with DFE as to our considered groups of schools. We are limited to 10 schools, maximum 7500 pupils in any proposal.

This meet will give us an indication as to whether any of our proposed groupings will be looked upon favourably. If this is the case then we expect to move forward to the 2500 word submission required by July 31st as a first gateway, following support from The Executive and Informal Cabinet.

There are two key aspects for The Executive and Informal Cabinet to be aware of;

- ❖ First of all an application can be withdrawn at any point and to note the initial submission is a register of interest.
- ❖ If the ROI is positive we will then develop a whole outline business case to submit through our formal governance processes for approval with a full financial overview and risk management.

Recommendations

The Executive and Informal Cabinet support the register of interest process for Northumberland should the DFE favourably consider the proposal of school combination.

Northumberland would propose to include the Diocese of Newcastle and Durham in planning, a number of rural schools are faith schools and ensuring access for all schools into the MAT is essential.

An updated briefing comes back to Executive/ IC following the meeting/ submission with a timeline (currently not available beyond July 31st 2022) and contains more detailed MAT requirements and frameworks for a wider understanding.

A full outline business case is developed if the 'register of interest' is positively considered to move forward including full financial planning and risk management development. The OBC would also propose Members and Trustees. It is intended this would be agreed prior to any further DFE submission.

Key Issues

The opportunity for Local Authorities to develop Multi Academy Trusts is now open to register for interest.

It is expected that there will only be ten LA Multi Academy Trusts in England supported in the first phase.

Northumberland should consider 'niche' aspects to support the White Paper definitions (rural schools are mentioned)

There is no guarantee that any proposed models will be accepted, it is anticipated that all Regional Schools Directors will be 'bidding' to have their proposals as part of the initial 10 with DFE.

The Education Improvement Areas (of which Northumberland is not identified as in need of improvement) may be considered favourably to rapidly improve performance; the team will be arguing favourably that we have a track record of rapid improvement in a more timely and cost effective manner.

Northumberland already has a number of Multi Academy Trusts working in the county. The White Paper sets out developing stronger collaborative arrangements and NCC team will work with DFE to take a lead role in bringing this collaboration together.

There will need to be very clear and transparent processes for the MAT whereby there are clearly separate and appropriate working arrangements with the Local Authority. The statutory role NCC post holders undertake remains as our key function.

A MAT may provide the opportunity to develop procured arrangements with our School Improvement Service, School Governance (just highlighted as outstanding practice in an Academy external audit- first the audit company has seen)

Members and Trustees will need to be considered to take forward the strategic direction and vision as well as holding to account post holders and Head teachers for performance. Proposals with rationales will be brought forward for consideration once the ten schools are identified as it is crucial to have correct expertise within the core membership of both governance groups.

Report Author

Name: Audrey Kingham

Contact email: Audrey.kingham@northumberland.gov.uk

Contact number: 07814 298047

Background Papers- linked in the text of the report

White Paper – Opportunities for All: strong schools with great teachers for your child.
Letter to Head Teachers from Director of Education
DFE Local Authorities MAT Register of Interest