Division(s):All

CABINET– 20 OCTOBER 2015

Academies Programme 2015 – 20: Strategic Groupings of Schools
Report by Director for Children's Services
Introduction

1. In July 2012 the Council set out a policy position in relation to the national academies programme in Oxfordshire. Since that point it has continued to implement its policy on academies through an Academies Programme Project as part of its overarching Education Strategy. There are three main strands of activity within the project:

- Encouraging and supporting groups of schools to convert
- Ensuring that underperforming schools become Academies with an appropriate sponsor
- Developing new Academies and Free Schools in response to demographic need or parental demand

2. The position as at 1st June and as programmed for 1st December 2015 are set out below.

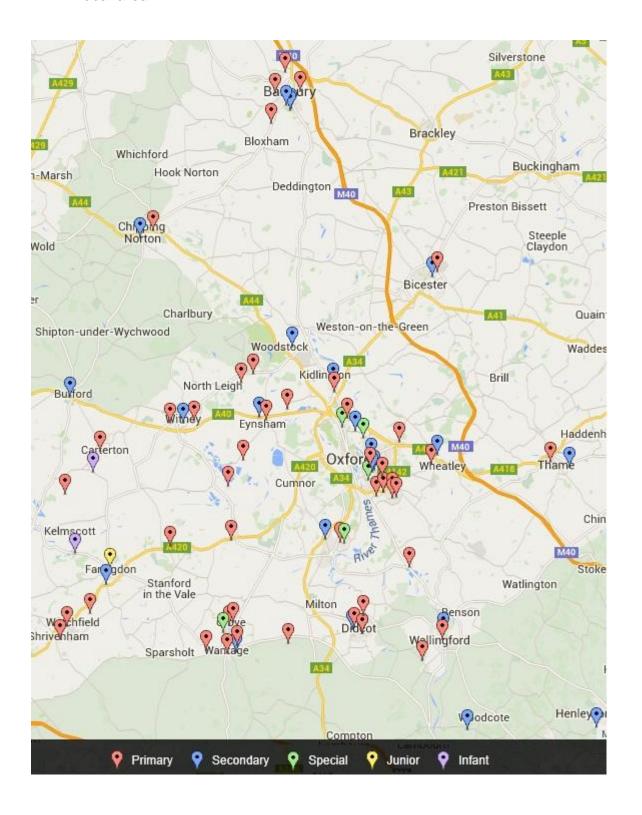| At 1st June 2015	By 1st December (programmed conversions)
25 (74%) Secondary academies (3 sponsored)	28 (82%) Secondary academies (4 sponsored)
49 (21%) Primary academies (8 sponsored)	61 (26%) Primary academies (8 sponsored)
5 (38 %) Special academies (1 sponsored)	5 (38 %) Special academies (1 sponsored)
3 Free schools (one 4-18, two 4-11)	3 Free schools (one 4-18, two 4-11)
1 Studio School (14-19)	1 Studio School (14-19)
	1 University Technical College (14-19)

3. There are currently 15 Multi Academy Trusts (MATs) with 61 academies between them and 7 more schools programmed to join by December in the county. An additional two MATs covering different geographic areas will be in place by the end of the year.

4. Eight new build academies have proposed opening dates in the next 3 years and are in the detailed planning stage. Over 20 more could be delivered in this parliamentary term. Details of MATs and new school proposals and agreed sponsors are set out at Annex 1.

5. Most schools that converted to academy status in 2014 did so as members of groups.

6. Half the pupils in publicly funded education in Oxfordshire are now taught in academies.

7. There are marked differences in volume of academy conversions between locality areas.

8. The Council will always be consulted on any proposal from an external bidder to set up a new academy in Oxfordshire as the responsible body for strategic pupil place planning.

9. The Regional Schools Commissioner (RSC) was appointed in September 2014 and has decision making powers and responsibilities in respect of academies in the county. Positive working relations continue to be developed with officers with regard to the Oxfordshire Academies Programme.

10. Following the election of a new Government in May a new legislative programme has been set out. The Education and Adoption Bill 2015 sets out a continued commitment to the academies programme, further use of powers of compulsion to convert where schools are underperforming, delegation of school improvement powers to Regional Schools Commissioners and a commitment to provide 500 more Free Schools in this electoral term has been published. It is clear that the academies programme will continue and that more publicly maintained education places in Oxfordshire will be provided in this way.

Background

11. The Council has already recognised that as provision in the publicly funded education sector becomes more diverse it offers a unique chance to improve outcomes and opportunities for all young people in Oxfordshire through a common vision and collaborative working practices. It is in a strong position from which to influence the future pattern of education provision in the county. Two key initiatives in this regard have already been subject to full consultation with stakeholders.

   a) A new protocol for positive working practices between the Council and academies in the county has been agreed and is currently being disseminated.

   b) A new Local Strategic Schools Partnership is being formed to involve all the different providers of education in the County in agreeing a common vision for education standards in the county and the combined operational means to deliver this.

12. The Council has strong relationships with existing schools and has been engaged in building up relationships with new providers in the county. There are a number of smaller schools in the county which may find it a challenge to engage in discussions about future academy status effectively and may feel isolated or threatened by potential new partners in provision. This has been highlighted in annual reports on the programme published in 2013 and 2014.

13. The map below shows the distribution of academies in the county. Provision is concentrated in specific areas reflecting the trend of schools converting as groups of academies and the continued influence of geographical links and traditional partnerships. The new schools in Didcot, Banbury and Bicester will all be managed by new providers to Oxfordshire with excellent track records in education provision. One school is to be sponsored by a 'locally grown' trust. One other 'locally grown trust' is promoting a new Free School in its local area.

14. Whilst the majority of secondary schools are now academies the majority of primary and special schools are not.

15. The new legislation proposes to widen the powers of the Secretary of State to compel schools of concern to convert to academy status and to shorten the time in which that must be achieved. It is inevitable that more Oxfordshire schools will be considered for conversion under this statute.

16. At present there is a good working relationship with DfE officials when looking for sponsorship solutions. It is also likely that more Free School bids will be made in the county. For example, one bid has recently been approved to open a secondary Free School in Oxford in 2017.

17. There are now examples of differing academy group solutions across the county and a local and national message that schools, particularly primary schools, should convert to academy status as part of groups. To date the Council has offered support with the conversion process and, for schools requiring sponsorship solutions, advice in choosing a sponsor. It has not sought to influence the decisions taken by individual governing bodies but preferred to see suitable group solutions 'emerge'.

18. It is anticipated that a drive to increase the number of schools converting to academy status will result from the enactment of the Education and Adoption Bill. There are now MATs with good track records in education provision operative in the county.

19. The number of local academies gaining approved sponsor status is low but slowly increasing and further academies would meet current criteria were they to apply.

20. The Council has a respected position with the RSC, who will be responsible to the Secretary of State for the implementation of this policy in the County, and excellent local knowledge to offer in identifying sustainable solutions.

Strategic implications for Academies Programme in Oxfordshire

21. To build on the above position for the benefit of pupils in Oxfordshire it is proposed that a more assertive policy be adopted in identifying appropriate sponsors for schools likely to face compulsory conversion to academy status.

22. To promote appropriate groupings to form new and to build on successful existing Multi Academy Trusts based in the county.

23. To further develop and promote the collaborative company model, both to incorporate more schools in these but also to extend the scope of their pooling of resources (including staff) and responsibility. These companies offer a wider opportunity for schools as a potential 'stepping stone' to MATs or an alternative model of working in groups, save for where schools become eligible for compulsory conversion. They represent a potential mechanism for

providing Church of England Aided schools with an alternative to the very limited options currently permissible by their Board of Education. A guide for schools considering this option is reproduced as Annex 2.

24. Principles to be observed in developing the new approach at paragraphs 21 - 23 above include the following.

   a) No school 'left behind' by virtue of ethos or size.
   b) Consideration of geographical proximity of schools.
   c) Recognition of active formal partnership links.
   d) Robust consideration of potential of Multi Academy Trusts to promote good and better standards of education and effective working with the Council in carrying out its statutory duties such as place planning.
   e) Recognition that a strategic plan for school groupings is required to maintain standards and accountability amongst education providers in the county.
   f) Recognition that too many different trust arrangements will potentially dilute the local effectiveness of schools and adversely affect the Council in fulfilling its statutory duties, for example, to provide sufficient good quality pupil places.
   g) Seek dialogue about expansion opportunities in the county sought by trusts located in the county.
   h) Engage with academies in all phases that meet the criteria to be approved as a sponsor with a view to encouraging them to seek such status and offer local solutions in education provision.
   i) Work with RSC to hold non performing trusts to account.
   j) Work with RSC to promote expansion of good performing trusts in county.
   k) Free School bids from suitable approved sponsors to be encouraged in areas where no basic need solutions are available from current resources and to promote diversity of choice for parents throughout the county.
   l) Recognition of the formal position of the three Dioceses represented in Oxfordshire schools regarding consent for those schools to convert to academy status.
   m) Engagement at county level about appropriate academy solutions for C of E schools with ODST. (Schools are currently advised to pursue individual solutions direct with the Oxford Diocesan Board of Education).

25. The above approach to be shared with the RSC with a view to agreeing a joint approach 'in principle' to identifying academy solutions in the county.

Financial and Staff Implications

26. For new schools sought by the Council to meet basic need there is an estimated cost of £200 - £250k cost per primary school or special school for pre-opening costs and to meet diseconomies of scale anticipated in the period from school opening until classes are open to cover the whole age range of the school. This rises to £400k for a secondary school.
27. The indicative Portfolio Growth Fund set aside by Schools Forum to meet these costs will need to be closely monitored in relation to additional Free Schools should they be approved to meet Basic Need requirements.

28.   Staff resources have been identified until September 2016 to deliver the Academies Programme. Further consideration will need to be given to resources required to support provision of new schools and an accelerated conversions programme, should it be required, after that date.

Equalities Implications

29.   There are no direct implications for equality and diversity included in this paper.

RECOMMENDATION

30.   The Cabinet is RECOMMENDED to
Adopt the principles set out at paragraph 24 of the 'Strategic Implications for Academies Programme' section above.

(a)   Adopt a more assertive policy in identifying appropriate sponsors for schools required to convert to academy status.

(b)   Promote appropriate groupings to form new Multi Academy Trusts and encourage the growth of existing Multi Academy Trusts based in the county.

(c)   Further develop and promote the collaborative company model, both to incorporate more schools in these and to extend the scope of their pooling of resources and responsibility and

(d)   Use collaborative companies as a 'stepping stone' to the formation of Multi Academy Trusts.

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Background papers:

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                              September, 2015