Converting to an academy and joining an academy trust: Guidance for an effective stakeholder consultation

What guidance is available to support the governing board in holding a stakeholder consultation and what does it say?

In its guidance ‘Convert to an academy: guide for schools’ (2021), the DfE states that when a maintained school decides to apply to become an academy there is a statutory requirement to hold a stakeholder consultation. The DfE’s guidance on a statutory consultation states:

“Your governing body must consult formally about your school’s plans to convert to an academy with anyone who they think will have an interest in your school changing its status. This will include staff members and parents, but you should also involve pupils and the wider local community.

The law doesn’t specify how long the consultation should last, but it is important that you can show that interested groups, individuals and organisations have had a reasonable opportunity to respond.

You must complete the formal consultation process before you sign your academy funding agreement, so we suggest you begin the consultation now to allow time for everyone with an interest to respond.”

How will this guidance document help our governing board?

In this guidance we will answer some the questions you r gove rning board may have regarding the consultation process. If your question isn’t answered here, please contact the Diocesan Education Team at education@glosdioc.org.uk

What is the purpose of a stakeholder consultation?

Any decision made by the governing board to make a significant change in a school should seek to consider the views and opinions of those the decision and change may impact. A stakeholder consultation process is an opportunity to clearly explain the governing boards’ proposal and the reasons the decision is being considered and to gain the views and opinions from a range of stakeholders. It is also an opportunity to build trust in the proposal and reassure stakeholders.

The Advisory Board who considers the school’s application to convert to an academy and join an academy trust, and the Diocesan Academy Consent Request Committee will expect to review the governing board’s stakeholder consultation and explore how governors responded to the feedback received – both will expect that a robust and transparent process has been undertaken.

How long should the consultation period last?

There is no statutory consultation period, but governors should give all stakeholders a reasonable opportunity to respond to the consultation and provide regular reminders throughout to encourage stakeholders to engage with the consultation and share their views. 6 weeks is a reasonable timescale for a consultation process, and school holidays should be considered when planning the consultation timeframe.

How do we identify who are key stakeholders are?
When considering whether your school should convert to an academy and join an academy trust, your key stakeholders are those individuals, groups, and organisations who the change may impact or those who may have an interest or view on your school’s proposal to join an academy trust. It is important that the governing board discusses and identifies with school leaders who governors should engage with during the consultation process.

As a minimum, we recommend the consultation be sent to:

- All school parents
- For Primary schools, all local nursery providers, feeder nurseries and Secondary schools
- For Secondary schools, all local Primary or Junior schools
- Senior level personnel at the local authority
- Other local education providers e.g., FE colleges, 6th forms, special schools, alternative provision
- All staff
- All governors
- Parochial Church Council
- Town Council
- The school’s Bishop’s visitor
- Diocese – this is achieved through the process of seeking conditional consent to convert to an academy and join an academy trust

What should our consultation strategy include?

The governing board needs to develop a clear and transparent consultation strategy, which includes:

- How information about the consultation will be shared, by who, and when
- How hard to reach stakeholders will be encouraged to engage with the consultation
- A plan for how the feedback gained during the consultation will be considered and a plan for responding

An effective consultation will be a combination of different approaches.

How information about the consultation will be shared by who, and when

When to begin the consultation process is a decision for the governing board but it is recommended that governors consider beginning the consultation process when the decision to register interest to convert to an academy and before seeking conditional consent from the Diocesan Academy Request Consent Committee.

The decision to convert to an academy and join an academy trust is the governing boards to make, and therefore the consultation process should be directed and communicated by the governing board. It is usual and acceptable for information be shared with stakeholders by the Chair of Governors on behalf of the governing board.

Publishing consultation information on the school website can be a useful and cost-effective way to share information about the consultation. Some schools choose to create a separate page for the consultation information and add a signpost on the website welcome page.
The governing board should consider sending information about the consultation and how to engage with it to parents via the school’s usual communication platforms. To ensure an inclusive consultation process, provide the opportunity for the consultation documents to be made available in large print, Braille or audiotape.

The governing board may choose to ask other local schools to publicise the consultation in their newsletters or on a news page on their own website – a short explanation and signpost to your website would be adequate.

The governing board should consider hosting an open consultation meeting, with representatives from the academy trust the school is proposing to join invited. This meeting should be led by the governing board, who should explain the proposal and the reasons for it and be prepared to answer any questions. The academy trust representatives should answer any questions specific to the Trust. Governors should arrange for someone to take notes of the questions asked at the consultation meeting and responses provided and collate for governors to consider.

**How hard-to-reach stakeholders will be encouraged to engage with the consultation**

Discuss with school leaders how they seek to engage with hard-to-reach groups and explore if these strategies can be replicated. Consider if consultation documents in any language other than English should be made available or if interpreters are required at meetings.

Governors may wish to attend planned school events to be available to speak to parents about the consultation or attend the end of a staff meeting or INSET to speak with staff.

**A plan for how the feedback gained during the consultation will be considered and a plan for responding**

Governors should plan to consider the feedback and views gained during a meeting of the governing board and ensure this meeting and the discussion is minuted as per usual governance arrangements.

The governing board may wish to consider publishing a summary of the consultation responses and a response to any themes or concerns raised. Governors should aim to provide a response to stakeholders that gives reassurance or further information to any concerns raised.

**What should we include in our consultation documents?**

The consultation document should include:

- An explanation of the proposal – what change does the governing board want to make?
- Why the proposal is being made – why is the governing board seeking to make this change? What will the impact be and for who?
- What the proposal means for pupils and staff – what changes will they benefit from and how?
- How views can be expressed – consider offering the opportunity for stakeholders to submit their views in different ways, e.g., a paper-based response and an online response form
- A range of FAQs with responses – consider what your stakeholders key questions may be and try to answer these in advance. This could include:
  - What is a multi-academy trust?
- What is the role of the Diocese in making this decision?
- How can I find out more about the academy trust?
- Who will make decisions about the school once it joins the academy trust?
- What changes will staff notice?
- Will my child be taught by different teachers?
- What changes will my child notice?
- Will the school’s Christian distinctiveness be protected?
- Will I have to buy my child a new uniform?
- Will the school’s name or logo change?
- Will money raised by the PTA be absorbed by the academy trust?
- Will the school make or lose money by joining the academy trust?

Where can the governing board find further support when planning a stakeholder consultation?

If the governing board would like to further discuss the implementation of an effective stakeholder consultation process, please contact the Diocesan Education Team at education@glosdioc.org.uk