



**MINUTES OF THE EXTRAORDINARY MEETING OF THE
GOVERNING BODY AND PARENTS OF
ST MARY'S CATHOLIC PRIMARY SCHOOL HELD ONLINE/'ZOOM'
ON MONDAY, 22nd MAY 2023 AT 8:00pm**

PRESENT: Mr S Taylor (Chair, Foundation); Canon J Bathula (Foundation); Mrs N Henderson-Andrade (Foundation); Mr M Doherty (L.A.); Mr G Refalo (Elected Parent); Mrs P Akin-Olugbade (Elected Parent)

Parents

Canon John's introduction

CJ explained that it has been 140 years since our school was started. It started with 12 children, and has moved from Piggy Lane to the current location. In 1883 the total amount spent on building the school was under £400. The diocese has always wanted the education to be developed under the guidance of a Catholic ethos. That was the intention then and still is.

Parents' questions about academisation

Where are we in terms of the process?

ST explained that at the September 2022 Full Governing Board (FGB) meeting an indicative timeline was agreed and sent to the Diocese. This is what will often be referred to as the 'road map'. This road map was requested by the Diocese.

Before this meeting, the governors had carried out investigations around the consequences of joining a MAC as well as the benefits. They had also explored the process of transition. The discussion and process had been put on hold because of various things that were happening in the school this academic year, such as the Ofsted inspection.

What are the next steps in the process?

Looking forward, the FGB will meet on Monday, 26th June to take a decision on the conversion process. Formal consultations with stakeholders (including parents and staff) are scheduled to take place in the Autumn term of 2023.

What are the benefits of academisation?

ST outlined example benefits of joining Pope Francis MAC. (See slide 8 in slide deck)

What will the MAC do for our children?

A parent wanted to know what the benefits of the MAC were to children, beyond the financial elements. They felt that this MAC hadn't proved itself to be a successful MAC in the ten years since the academisation process has been in discussion, and were curious as to why the decision was being made now when answers to these questions had not been provided. They wanted to know what the MAC would give our children that they were not getting already.

ST explained that St Johns in Banbury was given an inadequate rating before being brought into the PFMAC, but has just received an Ofsted inspection, and there will be some positives that will come out of it. This was therefore an example of the MAC supporting schools that are struggling, and an example

of the MAC promoting school improvement which would improve the outcomes for children. ST also pointed to the positive impact on Carterton school.

Parent pointed out that St Joseph's in Banbury had received a downgraded Ofsted rating despite being a part of the MAC and stated that it was difficult to see tangible benefits in terms of what St Mary's had already.

ST agreed that St Mary's had done really well and that perhaps the benefits for St Mary's in the immediate term would not be as profound as some of the examples given. He explained however that by joining that family of schools, we would have that support in place should anything bad happen. We can count on MAC in a way that LA would struggle to provide because of the challenge in providing resources.

What about governors that resigned?

A parent asked if 5 governors had actually resigned over the academisation issue, in addition to the HT and DHT.

ST explained that we have had 2 governors whose terms of office had finished and who decided not to remain. We did have one governor resign.

What about the FGB vote against academisation?

A parent wanted to know what had changed since 7 governors had voted against academisation (while 5 had been in favour).

ST gave an example, explaining that the Oxfordshire LEA used to get half a million pounds for School Improvement. St Mary's used to get a visit from school improvement partners. This is no longer the case and we will now have to pay for that. There is less support out there.

Is this decision a decree from the diocese?

A parent pointed out that it felt as if we were skirting around the issue that the decision was a decree from the Archdiocese.

ST confirmed that it was partially right that it was. He explained that the diocese is one of the stakeholders in this process and they have developed a strategy and have a vision that all its schools should be part of academies. The road map was a requirement to provide to the diocese.

ST however clarified that governors were not just taking this step because we were being told to. In the report completed between July 2020 and May 2021, it showed that there were benefits to be had from becoming an academy. He conceded that there would, of course be some challenges, as would be expected for a change like this. An example of the challenges would be the contribution of around £35,000 that needs to be made. He emphasised that the priority would be ensuring that we are getting value for money.

What other benefits would the academy bring to St Mary's (apart from Ofsted ratings)?

ST explained that some of the HTs in the academy trust provide support to schools in the run up to an Ofsted or to an RE inspection. There is also the opportunity of sharing knowledge of people across a group of primary schools. Also, schools can get together to share best practice and do visits.

A parent commented that this would mean people coming to St Mary's to see what we do well rather than St Mary's going to another school.

CJ corrected this notion by pointing out that one of the PFMAC schools (Holy Trinity Catholic School in Chipping Norton) has always been an outstanding school and so we have an opportunity to learn.

Is the MAC just an insurance company then?

A parent wanted to know whether the funding means that the academy acts simply as an insurance company or whether they provide financial support.

ST explained that they would provide two types of support:

- Support in situations such as staff on long term sick leave or if the school is struggling to backfill or to find a supply teacher.

- Support with finances. The MAC can support schools that have temporary financial problems, however, that would come with a certain level of scrutiny from the MAC.

ST pointed out that because the academy wants to make sure that school is spending within its means, so while they would provide financial support in an emergency (boiler breaks etc), they would want to look into it if the school is over spending its budget.

Will the money will be used for other schools?

ST explained that when we join an academy, the reserves remain with the school. There is a policy to loan some of our reserves to another school if they need it.

How will we afford to pay out of our budget into the central MAC?

ST explained that when we get into the more detailed process of becoming an academy, we would get the MAC's finance department to sit with our finance department to find opportunities make efficiency improvements, especially with regards to the central services provided by the MAC. He conceded that it was not certain that there would be loads of easy ones, but explained that the MAC has experience of bringing schools in and therefore going through this process.

Does all our money go to the MAC?

ST explained that the school's money doesn't all go to the MAC. PFMAC uses the same formula as the government. So, St Mary's gets the same money it would get from the government but that contribution for shared services gets paid back. Some MACs take all money centrally but PFMAC doesn't do that and have no plans at the moment to change that.

How many times will we pay the MAC?

One parent said that their understanding is that on top of the annual fee, there were other central functions we would need to contribute to—a sort of registration fee.

ST clarified that we would not be paying twice. We would be contributing to central services and it would be one combined contribution. He added that with centralised systems, we would have people with the right expertise to deal with these things so that teachers can focus on what they do best.

What about the process of transitioning?

ST clarified that the process doesn't take 2-5 years, and that the plan is for it to be all completed by September 2024.

Transition details will be shared from Autumn, and consultations with staff and parents will happen in a more detailed format¹.

What is the impact of joining the academy on the activities the pupils do currently?

One parent was keen to know if there would be new activities introduced.

ST explained that he could not give details at that point, but that we would be looking for the MAC to provide value for money so we would be looking for benefits.

In response to the parent's request for examples from other schools that became academies, ST explained that within the MAC there are a couple of HTs looking for how to roll out Maths Mastery as best practice and how can we implement that into schools where that way of teaching would be a benefit.

Another parent pointed out that the teachers in the school were already sharing good practice through different partnerships and therefore did not need the MAC to direct that. They concluded that they did not think that it would justify the amount of money being spent.

ST conceded that those partnerships already existed but pointed out that there was no reason they could not continue to exist alongside others we would gain from being in the MAC. He explained that he would expect it to be an additive and that it did not have to be an either/or situation.

¹ The May meeting sessions were not intended to serve as the statutory parent consultations but to help communicate about the staffing situation and plans for academisation.

What about the religious ethos?

A parent wanted to know if the religious ethos of the school would change. They asked if there would be anything introduced that doesn't follow the religious ethos of the school.

ST explained that from the religious ethos side, the school would be joining a family of Catholic schools and that the ethos would not change. The requirement to follow curriculum of the diocese and the RE expectations of diocese will not change.

NHA added that the Catholic ethos at St Mary's is very precious and the MAC has no intention to change that. It is their number one priority and there is no need to worry about that. In terms of activities, all the wonderful activities will remain.

NHA went on to confirm (in response to a direct question about it) that all the senior leadership at the MAC were Catholics and very inspiring people.

Why are we not getting more detailed information now?

A few parents expressed frustration with the lack of detail they were being given at this stage, and wondered why governors could not say more about what the specific outcomes of making this decision would be. They wondered why governors were unable to provide meaningful measurements to convince parents that this is the right decision.

ST explained that it was not the only time where we would meet with parents to talk about the process of academisation, and that as the school starts to go through the transition process, we will all understand a lot more details.

PA added that we were not at the stage where we would have access to some of the details parents were asking for.

Why are we making this decision now if we do not have access to all the details yet?

NHA explained that the future of Catholic education is under threat. She explained that are fears that in the future the school will not be a going concern anymore, pointing out that our numbers (in terms of intake) have been going down. She stated that our main concern is the children, and that governors think this is the best option regardless of it being the diocese strategy. She pleaded with parents to not be concerned by governors not having all the answers to the questions immediately and reiterated that it was because we were not at that stage of the process yet. She finished by clarifying that one of the reasons we were having these conversations was because governors were committed to being more transparent.

Can St. Mary's choose to join a different MAC?

ST responded saying that it cannot.

Can we get a clear cost/benefit analysis of academisation?

A parent suggested that it would be good for governors to put together a detailed analysis of what St Mary's is currently and what it could be once it is an academy, and to communicate this to the parents. They pointed out that rather than the current vague stories about what St Mary's could be, parents should receive a detailed report based on what St Mary's is now and what it would be if it joined the MAC—broken down by specific gains or losses. They recognised that it would be a heavy burden on governors and suggested that it might be something to pay a consultant to do, or that perhaps the MAC could pay for the analysis seeing as they would be gaining a lot from St Mary's joining.

ST and NHA agreed that it was a good idea and said that we would look into it.

ST added that it would also be useful for the governors to invite Fraser Long from PFMAC and people from the diocese and other heads in the MAC to share with parents their enthusiasm and their passion for Catholic education as well as the benefits of the academy. He pointed out that it was possible that the message might sometimes be lost when the governors try to communicate with parents because we are not education professionals. He stated that it was frustrating to not be able to communicate the passion he hears and feels from the MAC leaders and reiterated the benefit of bringing them in to communicate that.

Can you clarify what you mean about academisation being government policy?

(Refer to slide deck for full text of question)

ST explained that notes were based on an answer to a written parliamentary question. He stated that while it was right that the government would not be pushing all schools to become MACs by 2030 there was still a strong presumption of academies in government policy. He finished by pointing out that the important point was the impact of academisation being the policy of government.

Why were the minutes not made available earlier?

(Refer to slide deck for full text of question)

ST explained that while it may have looked like FGB wasn't trying to do things quickly, there were steps to be in the place. He explained that between the meeting on the 4th of May 2023 where it was agreed that governors would publish all meeting minutes and the current meeting, a lot of work had gone into ensuring that the minutes were in the right shape to be published. He explained that identifying information about pupils and families had to be removed and that as a courtesy, previous governors were contacted to be informed that they would be identifiable in the minutes.

A parent argued that the minutes should have been on the website in the first instance as they were public documents and that there should not have been any need to contact previous governors as their names should be included².

What about headteacher recruitment?

(See slide deck for full text of question)

ST explained that the focus for the governing body in the immediate term was the recruitment of the HT and filling teacher vacancies. He informed parents that there were teacher interviews happening the following day.

ST explained that there had not been an application for the role of the HT but that governors had been in discussion with PFMAC and had obtained commitment from them to provide an interim HT until a permanent one is recruited.

Why has there been no succession planning?

A parent felt that the governors has let a "fantastic HT" go without having a succession plan in place. They expressed their concerns that governors had made this decision with the knowledge that the HT and the DHT would leave because of it. They also expressed their reluctance to keep their child in the school because of the fear that more teachers would leave. Other parents echoed this sentiment, and asked about the morale of the staff, and highlighted the concern about the departure of key staff, the reduced capacity in SLT and the potential burden on remaining staff.

CJ emphasised the need to focus on the recruitment process.

ST explained that in the discussions with PFMAC and Diocese they were exploring the option of having an existing HT of a primary school come and spend time physically to support teachers and be visible to teachers. He pointed out that they would not be present all of the 5 days, but mentioned that another part of the solution was the option of providing support from the MAC's central team alongside the interim HT.

Are there any other resignations?

Parents were keen to know if there were any other resignations from teachers besides the ones they already knew.

ST explained that teachers had until the 31st of May to submit resignations, and that at the time he was personally not aware of any others.

² It should be noted that while it is considered the most efficient way, there is no legal requirement to publish governor minutes online. They must be made "available for inspection by any interested persons" "as soon as reasonably practicable" For more detail, see <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukxi/2013/1624/made>. Similarly, while it is best practice to do so, it is up to individual schools whether to include governor names in minutes.

Will we be informed about who is staying?

Parents wanted to know if governors would commit to providing some clarity around any teachers handing in their resignations earlier than the usual time at the end of term.

ST said that he would discuss that request with the HT but accepted that it was only fair. CJ agreed and stated that he was fairly certain that it was a commitment governors could fulfil.

Final words

CJ reminded all present that governors give their time because we love the school and because we love the children. He encouraged all to disagree with great respect and to recognise that we are together as one family to make sure that we go from strength to strength. He stated that the strengths St Mary's already has, we would carry along with us, and where we need to develop, we would develop. He was keen for parents to know what we are with them and understand their feelings and that we love the school.

ST thanked everyone for dialling in and assured all that there would be further opportunities to have more discussions.

Action points

Academisation

Consider creating a detailed analysis of costs and benefits of St Mary's joining PFMAC

Staff recruitment

Share details of any more teacher resignations and provide an update on vacancies near the start of last half term.

Useful information

Acronyms

FBG: Full governing board

MAC: Multi Academy Company

PFMAC: Pope Francis Multi Academy Company

HT: Headteacher

DHT: Deputy headteacher

SLT: Senior Leadership Team

EYFS: Early Years Foundation Stage

KS1: Key Stage 1

KS2: Key Stage 2

RE: Religious Education

Links

To learn more about PFMAC: <https://www.pfmac.org.uk/>

To learn more about governors' role: <https://www.oxfordshire.gov.uk/residents/schools/our-work-schools/school-governors/school-governance>

To learn more about academisation process: <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/convert-to-an-academy-information-for-schools>

To view the St Mary's governors' page: <https://st-marys-bicester.oxon.sch.uk/our-school-3/governors/>

To read historical FGB minutes: <https://st-marys-bicester.oxon.sch.uk/full-governing-body-minutes/>

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