

The latest news and announcements from Derbyshire UNISON

## Hallam diocese MATs

Legal action threatened over schools being forced into multi-academy trusts



## Academy orders issued to schools in Hallam Diocese ‘unlawfully’

**Unions representing staff in schools across the Catholic Diocese of Hallam have written to the Secretary of State for Education to begin legal action over letters they received informing them that they would be forced to join Multi-Academy Trusts.**

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The letters, issued by the Regional Schools Commissioner - who works directly for the Education Secretary - were issued on the 15th December 2021, and sent to all Voluntary Aided schools in the Catholic Diocese of Hallam. The Diocese - which has schools in Yorkshire and the North Midlands - propose to convert or transfer all schools, including existing stand-alone

academies and existing trusts, into two newly formed Catholic Multi-Academy Trusts.

The only way schools can be forced to become academies is if they are eligible for intervention and none of the schools in Hallam are currently in this category. The Secretary of State can only issue an academy order on the application of the governing body of the school.

But the governing bodies for nineteen schools in the area say this never happened and they did not agree to begin the process of academisation.

Unions representing these schools – including school leaders' union NAHT, the National Education Union, the Association of School and College Leaders, and UNISON – say that the letters were therefore issued unlawfully, and, unless they are withdrawn by the Education Secretary, further legal action will be taken.

In their letter to the Education Secretary, the unions state:

We understand that the governing bodies of these schools have not applied to the Secretary of State for academy orders. The Academy Orders appear to have been made on the application of and/or at the behest of the Diocese.

The Secretary of State is invited to confirm in writing that the Academy Orders are void and of no effect, and to notify the Diocese, the Schools and the local authorities responsible for maintaining the Schools that the Academy Orders are void and of no legal effect.

**Paul Whiteman, General Secretary of school leaders' union NAHT**, said: "To realise an ambition to have more schools in Multi-Academy Trusts, the Secretary of State and the Diocese must present a compelling case to schools. That is very different from a case of compulsion.

"Becoming an academy can be a positive step for some schools. But it is only the governing body and leaders of a school that can truly understand if joining a Multi-Academy Trust will bring benefit to pupils. The Education Secretary has said that he supports a system with a variety of different school types. This must be upheld for all schools in the Diocese of Hallam.

"Actions that lack transparency and have been viewed as underhand will fail to win the hearts and minds of educators who truly do have the interests of the young people in their care at the forefront of their deliberations. When the legislation and processes that exist to ensure reasonable treatment are ignored or abused,

unions have no choice but to challenge those actions through the courts."

**Geoff Barton, General Secretary of the Association of School and College Leaders**,

said: "We are deeply concerned by what appears to be an abuse of the process of schools becoming academies. It is perfectly clear that the decision must come from governing bodies and yet this appears to have been flagrantly ignored. Education Secretary Nadhim Zahawi must intervene and put a stop to this sorry episode."

**Kevin Courtney, Joint General Secretary of the National Education Union**, said:

"Becoming an academy and joining a large Multi-Academy Trust is a one-way street. It is essential that governors and school leaders make these decisions and include the staff and wider school community in the discussion. These decisions are too important to be imposed on schools by the Diocese."

**UNISON head of education Mike Short** said:

"Trying to force through mass changes to academy status is not only wrong-headed, it's a complete distraction at a time like this. School staff have been working wonders to keep schools open throughout the pandemic and are continuing to do so despite dangerously high Covid rates. These dedicated employees can well do without this extra stress after putting their own health, and that of their families, at risk for the past two years."