The Local Authority and Primary Academies.

The government strategy is based on the concept that Schools were under the control of the local authority whereas in Buckinghamshire the relationship between the Authority and primary schools could be described as good in parts. On the whole the relationship with the education department was based on the provision of support but with the occasional dictat where the system was seen as requiring direction. The support from the rest of the organisation tended to be more troublesome with the Authority perceiving the schools as necessary but innocents abroad

With the arrival of academies, this relationship will need to change. The Academy is now the provider of an education service to a commissioner of education within the county. The new relationship is therefore 3 fold.

1. The Authority retains the responsibility for commissioning academies to provide a service to the community:
2. The Academy is a customer of the educational support service
3. The academy is a customer for a range of other services that have historically been provided by the authority.

The Authority as a Commissioner of Services

The authority needs to establish a System Leadership Group not dissimilar to the School Place Planning Group and its predecessor the School Organisation Committee, but with a total system responsibility.

This group should be responsible for co-ordinating the provision of those services for which the Council retains responsibility and overseeing the delivery of the Commissioned Contracts.

Its work should be subject to the scrutiny of the Overview and Scrutiny Commissioning Committee.

The Academy is a customer of the educational support service

The proposed Trust will be a commercial organisation with all the difficulties that this condition will require. It will need to approach academies as its customers and think in commercial terms and focus on Customer Relationship Management.

On practice, whilst Academies could buy the Education Support Services from commercial organisations that are setting themselves up to provide such services, there is a level of "comfort" in using the services that are known that will probably encourage the use of the Trust Offerings in the short term. However, this "locked-in" arrangement is unlikely to be sufficient in the longer term and therefore any arrangements to maintain the relationship will need focus on customer retention. The concept of User Groups as exist within the IT and other "technical" industries would be a useful model to consider.

Such User groups are always voluntary but are generally well attended providing the supplier makes concerted efforts to make them interesting and informative.

It is generally unwise to try to mix two bodies that may appear to have similar interests but whose focus may be different and there is always the danger that the "Big Players" outweigh the smaller organisations. Therefore the Fair Access Groups being developed by the Secondary Academies, whilst may be appropriate for Primary Academies to be included in the short term, they are unlikely to satisfy the requirements of Primary Academies in the longer term.

What is required is a number of smaller bodies linked to established structures. The most probable grouping would be to base them on the areas covered by the Local Boards of the Children and Young People's Trusts which would provide opportunities to link to other services being provided to children at a local level.

The academy is a customer for a range of other services that have historically been provided by the authority.

In this category, there is already much competition from commercial organisations although the quality of some of the services being offered has not yet been tested to any great extent.

However the attitude of some BCC Staff toward Primary Academies has not developed in line with the changes in the relationship and so far, our experience has not been positive.

This will be a developing Commercial Relationship which the other parts of the Authority will need to consider if the efforts of the Bucks Learning Trust in the education arena are not to be undermined.

Summary

There are currently three Primary Academies and if the general UK trend is followed, the increase in this number will be slow and may well be conditioned by the numbers who are prepared to collaborate with each other in some form or another.

There are NNN primary schools in the County and it is extremely unlikely that it will be possible to get them into a single grouping unless the timing was very specifically targeted at achieving this effect. Even then it is unlikely to succeed.

There is unlikely to be a simple solution and to the issues facing the Authority in dealing with Primary Academies but as a guiding principle, it would be wiser to establish some form of grouping of the existing Primary Academies and to facilitate the development of User Groups to meet the needs of those Academies as they develop.