Thank you for the opportunity to submit evidence to this Academies Commission. Information I am choosing to submit below relates specifically to an Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) funded research project I am in the process of completing with colleagues on public attitudes towards school choice and diversity (RES-0022-3989). This research project has involved a module of 30 questions about school choice being asked on the methodologically rigorous 2010 British Social Attitudes (BSA) survey. Here I have drawn on data from the project and also some similar data from the 2007 BSA survey, outlining findings I believe to be relevant for answering two out of the Commission’s five key questions.

Research suggests that academies are not yet using their full freedoms. Why is this? And what are the likely implications when academies start to use these to their full extent?

Reluctance on the part of schools to diversify by using full academy freedoms (for example enhanced curricular freedom) may partly be explained by schools responding to a lack of desire for diversity among the British public and indeed some ambivalence towards market-style reforms in education. Data from the 2007 BSA survey showed that more than seven in ten people in Britain believe ‘secondaries should provide the same kind of education for every child’. Only 19 per cent support the idea of ‘schools varying so that parents can choose what’s best’.

Data from the 2010 BSA survey further showed that although two thirds of people in Britain believe parents ought to have a ‘basic right to choose’ when it comes to schooling, most also indicate reluctance to embrace ‘consumerist’ identities with more than six in ten saying parents should simply send their child to the nearest state school (a further 22 per cent saying they would agree with this if educational quality and social mixes of pupils between schools were more equal). Half of all BSA survey respondents in 2010 were opposed to the idea of ‘voucher’ reform (compared with just 25 per cent in support) whereby parents choose schools and schools only receive funding for the number of pupils they succeed in attracting.

For further information and findings see: www.natcen.ac.uk/BSA28 (Chapter Four on school choice). 2,216 respondents answered questions about school choice on the 2010 BSA survey.

Data presented refers to attitudes across Britain overall for both parents and non-parents. People in Scotland are less likely than those in England to support a ‘basic right to choose’ but otherwise attitudes are similar in England and Scotland. Parents are more likely than non-parents to support a basic right to choose, but otherwise attitudes are similar between parents and non-parents.
In such a context, it is possible that academies may not use designated freedoms to their full extent. Schools may be concerned with not diversifying too greatly, in order to ensure that their institution continues to meet the needs and desires of all potential service users. Where families are not seeking school diversity, merely a ‘good local school’ which meets their needs whatever those might be, schools will be unlikely to ‘rock the boat’ and risk losing parental support. Past research on grant-maintained schools in England carried out by Fitz et al (1997) and also work by Adnett and Davies (2000) has highlighted the way in which competition between schools in educational marketplaces can in fact lead to greater conformity rather than diversity of provision, with limited incentives to innovate. Scope for schools to be creative is therefore unlikely to be produced purely by liberating institutions from constraints such as the National Curriculum.

What are the key issues concerning governance, accountability and due diligence within an academised system?

One potential challenge arising regarding governance, accountability and due diligence in a widely ‘academised’ system is a possible lack of public confidence in schools having greater autonomy over their own admissions. BSA data in 2010 showed that, where a school is oversubscribed, just 14 per cent of people in Britain believe ‘allowing the school to choose which children to admit’ is the best way to allocate places, compared with 67 per cent who prefer straightforward distance criteria (giving priority to those who live closest) and 8 per cent who prefer lotteries for allocating school places. Findings here do not rule out the possibility that people may support academies making ‘autonomous’ decisions to use specifically distance criteria in their school place allocations. However, findings do suggest that there is limited support for academies deciding autonomously on admissions policies which go beyond such criteria.

Data from the 2007 BSA survey also indicated that only one third of people in Britain agree that charities ought to be able to run schools (just two in ten believe that private companies ought to be able to run schools). Such findings present a challenge for government regarding public confidence in a system where academies and free schools are run as charitable trusts – many with private or third sector sponsors. Although it is difficult to speculate on reasons why people may not support either the idea of schools setting their own admissions policies or the idea of schools being run by non-state actors, these reasons may well relate to media publicised concerns about a lack of accountability or due diligence in schools exercising greater autonomy. West et al (2006) drew attention to more extensive selective and exclusionary practices (or ‘cream skimming’) in schools operating outside local authority control in England. Research by Pugh et al (2006) has further highlighted problems of ‘quality shading’ in schools governed by contract and run outside the state by those in the private or third sectors.

References