



DBE Policy for the Growth and Sustainability of Church of England Schools in the Diocese of Bristol

1. Purpose

1.0 This policy is written to provide schools with an understanding of how the Diocesan Board of Education, schools and churches work together to sustain the family of church schools and grow this family where appropriate. This is an explicitly collaborative endeavour. The aim is to enable the maximum number of pupils, students and staff in schools across the diocese to thrive in their education, work and wider lives; that is, to experience 'life in all its fullness' (John10:10).

1.1 The Church of England has a strong legacy of providing education over hundreds of years. In this diocese, 'we' (DBE and all in schools and churches aiming towards this vision of human flourishing) are involved in education because we believe that each child is special to God and made in the image of God: 'imago dei'. God's love is in all and for all. We endorse and give thanks for our Christian heritage and legacy and desire to see God's love expressed in our ongoing and growing service to children and young people.

1.2 We aim to ensure that all children can experience 'life in all its fullness' (John10:10) through high quality provision that enables them to flourish in all that they are and all that they do. This is an education that is academically robust, distinctive in its care and inclusion of all, underpinned by Christian values that promote the development of character and spirituality. In such a system, school leaders and their staff will be well supported through the work that we do.

1.3 We acknowledge our commitment to ongoing culture change within the national Church so that every aspect of mission and ministry is seen through the lens of what it means for schools, churches and households so all grow in faith together.

1.4 We advocate for positive relationships with all schools, regardless of CE, community, trust or independent status.

2. Diocese of Bristol Context

2.1 The diocese has 71 Church of England schools with two new schools in development across the four local authority areas of Bristol, South Gloucestershire, Swindon and Wiltshire. It is a very diverse diocese as seen in, for example, levels of poverty and wealth, ethnicity, family background, community cohesion and religious affiliation. While a few diocesan schools legally use church based criteria in cases of oversubscription, schools are highly inclusive and pupils of all faiths and none are welcomed.

2.2 There are currently 68 primary and 3 secondary schools. These vary in context comprising urban, suburban and rural; small and large pupil numbers(from 40 – 1800); buildings from the 1700s to the current day; diverse governance and management with LA

voluntary controlled and voluntary aided, single and multi academy trusts and foundation arrangements.

2.3 The proportion of schools with 'Good or Better' Ofsted and SIAMs ratings is well above the national average. Foundation governor and substantive head appointment levels are also high, but there is always work to do for all children and young people to receive an excellent education and experience that 'life in all its fullness'.

2.4 There is no 'heirarchy' of schools in the Diocese of Bristol. All schools are valued for their unique contribution to education in the diocese. No school has more or less voice, or rights with the DBE or Education Team. All have a responsibility to support others in the family of schools regardless of size, leadership model, collaboration or visibility, according to need and ability at any time. (e.g. Mark 12:31; Phil 2:4; 1 John 3:17 – 18).

3. Current Diocesan Structure and associated Policy

3.1 Every diocese, including Bristol, has a statutory **Diocesan Board of Education (DBE)** and Director of Education with a range of advisory and statutory powers with regard to schools:

Essentially, the functions of a DBE in the current **DBE Measure** (1991) include:

- (a) to promote or assist in the promotion of education in the diocese, being education which is consistent with the faith and practice of the Church of England;
- (b) to promote or assist in the promotion of religious education and religious worship in schools in the diocese;
- (c) to promote or assist in the promotion of church schools in the diocese and to advise the governors of such schools and trustees of church educational endowments and any other body or person concerned on any matter affecting church schools in the diocese;
- (d) to promote co-operation between the Board and bodies or persons concerned in any respect with education in the diocese.

3.2 Every diocese must make provision to support its academy schools. In Bristol, a separate company, the **Diocese of Bristol Academies Company (DoBAC)** carries out this specific work to a remit from the DBE.

3.3 The **National Memorandum of Understanding** between the National Society (NS), (the company name of the Church of England Education Office, (CEEEO)) and Department for Education (DFE), April 2016 therefore lays out principles for DBEs and schools considering academisation, stating:

"It is recognised by The Department of Education that any judgements as to the religious character of church schools and the sufficiency of any protection of that character are solely for the DBE..."

The expectation is that model documentation (articles of association, the church supplemental agreement and the special clauses for the funding agreement and supplemental funding agreement) agreed between the National Society and the department (DFE) will be used....

It is the expectation of the Secretary of State and the National Society that the RSC and their staff, DFE officials, EFA officers, DBEs and their staff will comply fully with the terms of this memorandum. (MOU p5 Key principles).

- a) *The department respects the statutory right and requirement for the consent of various diocesan bodies to allow a church school to become an academy.*
- b) *Our shared expectation is that, in the vast majority of cases, church schools that wish to convert will do so as part of a MAT with governance arrangements that reflect, at member and director level, no dilution of the level of church governance and involvement as it was immediately prior to conversion.*
- c) *Subject to (b) above our shared expectation is that consent will only be withheld in exceptional circumstances, for example where both the DBE and RSC agree that the relevant church school lacks capacity to operate as a stand-alone academy and there is at the time no suitable multi-academy trust available; or should the DBE have serious concerns about the school's capacity or intention to sustain its religious character.*
- d) *In all other cases, and subject to, (i) the satisfaction of any conditions that may be required by the DBE in the letter of conditional consent, including those that relate to ensuring that the religious character and foundation of the school is maintained; and (ii) consistency with the DBE's strategy for development of MATs and academies, we expect the DBE's final consent to be quickly forthcoming."*

3.4 The **Diocese of Bristol Memorandum of Understanding**, last edition June 2018, comprises a Members' Agreement, Memorandum of Understanding between the DBE and Church-led MATs in the Diocese of Bristol, and Essential Guidance for Church of England schools moving to Academy Status in the Diocese of Bristol.

These documents speak of continued partnership between schools and the DBE and laid out some fundamental relationship expectations around governance and the mix of schools. However, where there is variance in any statements in these three June 2018 documents listed above and this policy, this policy supersedes these. Updated guidance will be sent to accompany this policy.

4. Principles for all Church of England schools in this diocese

4.1 Christian distinctiveness

Church of England schools are 'distinctively christian' in their strategy and operation. This is written into all CE school trust deeds in one form or another and forms the foundation of church school education. It is a defining characteristic of the CE family. Schools and their staff must be utterly rooted in an understanding of the *C of E Vision for Education, 2016* which enlarges this understanding for our age. The vision promotes an ecology of four strands; that in all we do we are 'Deeply Christian: Serving the Common Good' and, working with CE and non-CE schools alike, we are

- **Educating for Wisdom, Knowledge and Skills;**
- **Educating for Hope and Aspiration;**
- **Educating for Community and Living Well Together; and**
- **Educating for Dignity and Respect.**

It invites all schools to be released to develop and enjoy an education where all human beings - children, young people, staff and families have opportunities to thrive; taking responsibility for this in community together, regardless of school structure or leadership model.

4.2 Furthermore, Education leaders at diocesan, school and trust level, need to be **'Called'** to inspirational vocational leadership; **'Connected'** to each other to enable the flourishing of children, adults, teams and communities; and **'Committed'** to sustaining long term engagement in realising this vision for education. *'Called, Connected, Committed' Feb 2020 Church of England Foundation for Educational Leadership*

4.3 Diocesan schools must adhere to statutory government education policy and support the diocesan vision to 'Create Connections – with God, with Others and with Communities'; thus strengthening links between schools, churches and households, as seen in Growing Faith /Faith at home resources, promoting staff wellbeing and good mental health; and engaging thoroughly with the declared diocesan 'Climate Emergency' to limit environmental negligence and build new practices for care of creation.

4.4 Church communities should be encouraged into partnerships with church and non-church schools. Churches should seek to 'engage younger generations' forming relationships with and between all their local schools, with pupils, students, families and the wider community, with a particular focus with those who are vulnerable.

4.5 Christian distinctiveness for church schools must always be protected through its foundation governance at every level, ensuring foundation governor appointments are filled bringing skills and expertise to the Governing Body. For academies this includes trustees (directors), members and any local governing bodies with or without delegated powers. This must align with the conditions in the national Memorandum of Understanding between DfE and the National Society (part quoted above). In mixed MAT arrangements, non-church schools must also have their non-church school status protected.

5. Partnerships between schools

5.1 Dialogue with individual and groups of schools should be open, bespoke and encouraged at all times. Positive relationships between the Diocesan Board of Education, church leaders, school leaders and governors are vital.

5.2 This policy widens current options for church schools; it encourages diverse ways of working with partner schools in formal and informal arrangements. The quality as education remains paramount. School leaders will be supported by the diocese alongside the LA/trust to understand the necessity of partnership for sustainability of the family of church schools. Each school and its pupils has a unique context that will lie at the heart of what happens in school. The DBE celebrate the diversity of schools in this diocese and their individual identity. The DBE do not seek a 'one size fits all' solution to sustainability of the church school family but recognise the need for a coherent solution across the region to maximise the value of church school education to children and families. The DBE recognise the professional autonomy of those working in schools and their understanding of local factors and seek to build this coherence through the decisions that they make.

5.3 The quality of education in a church school is judged by a number of measures including the upholding of its Christian distinctiveness, Ofsted, SIAMS judgements, school performance and curriculum, financial security over time, ability to attract high quality staff, how the schools supports its most vulnerable pupils and support to less secure schools in the local area. The DBE aims that all schools in all contexts are 'excellent' places for children to flourish; academically, spiritually, pastorally and so on with prudent leadership and management of resources.

5.4 The current DfE '*direction of travel*' continues to '*encourage strongly but not at all costs*' schools getting into and developing healthy MATs, through new MAT formation in 'cold' spots (where fewer MATs exist); the joining together of smaller and weaker MATs to make strong MATs, and SATs joining or becoming MATs to promote a more joined up landscape '*over the next ten years*'. (DfE at RSC meeting, Feb 2020). DfE grants are now available for work to promote these options. The Bristol DBE policy respects this 'direction of travel' and seeks to work alongside the DfE in encouraging an integrated landscape of groups of schools collaborating effectively. This must promote healthy christian distinctiveness and inclusion in all CE schools and align with the principles of the National Memorandum of Understanding between DfE and the National Society, for example with respect to governance, values and ways of working.

5.5 Research and feedback in the local area shows that effective collaborations with limited travel requirements between schools are usually the best basis for formal partnerships rather than aggressive or unexpected 'takeover'. Collaboration may start with shared staffing arrangements and/or joint practice development (such as in special educational needs provision or curriculum development). The DBE strongly encourages the exploration and nurturing of robust collaboration by all schools before formalised partnership agreements such as federation or formal academisation is considered, wherever possible.

5.6 While collaborations often begin quite rightly where like minded individuals develop a culture of trust and cooperation, the DBE cautions against partnerships driven strongly by leader personality or a desire for aggrandisement and encourage schools to think through the conditions for succession in leadership and cross the partnership.

5.7 Partnerships, formal or informal, should respond to local demographics, acknowledging and harvesting the benefits of close geography, through meaningful hub and digital working where possible to minimise detrimental environmental, time and mental health impacts from travel.

5.8 Informal school partnerships without MAT/ SAT Articles are expected to develop partnership agreements and/ or Service Level Agreements with their partner schools (and perhaps churches) to ensure a clear rationale and robust responsibility, timescales and accountability for developing the partnership further.

5.9 All church schools are equal in the eyes of the DBE whether academy, VC or VA. All schools that are not already in long term partnerships are encouraged to explore bespoke solutions that respect their geography and existing links. This includes exploration of formal partnerships between church and non church schools,

5.10 If moving into formal MAT arrangements, there is no requirement for Church schools to be in the majority, and/or the percentage of church school pupils to be in a majority in a

MAT. However, the principles of the National Memorandum must be upheld, such as a strong governance framework that brings church governance in the recognised proportions and encourages church and non church schools to work productively together without compromising strong Christian distinctiveness in the CE schools.

5.11 A consideration of the effect of a formal partnership offering service and mission to the wider community and the opportunities that may arise for creating connections should always be made and should ensure that those who will be outside the partnership but potentially affected by it are included.

5.12 There is current national financial crisis and impending deficit positions for a number of schools, particularly but not exclusively, rural and small schools. The DBE also recognises and values the role of small schools in community cohesion. This tension is captured well in national documentation. Nevertheless, for all schools, where forward plans are weak and viability issues have not been addressed, it must be recognised there is the potential for school failure and even closure if robust partnership arrangements bringing economies of scale and/or school improvement have not been addressed.

6. Next steps

6.1 Consider the contents of this policy with school leaders and governors.

- Be absolutely clear of your school vision and values going forward.
- Hold fast to your Christian distinctiveness while embracing that change is a constant and the education world never stands still.
- Analyse the security of the current leadership, governance, succession planning, enhancing education quality of education, admissions and financial models etc for at least the next three years. Be creative in imagining the future asking 'What if..?' and 'Just say we considered...'
- Involve the DBE/DDE/LA trust at the earliest stage of any planning.
- Check out your thinking with local schools, partnerships, using the wisdom of those not involved emotionally in your specific situation.
- Use accompanying documents below and DBE Self review guidance (largely taken from 'Embracing Change') to support your thinking.

This policy should be ready in conjunction with:

Appendix A: Self-review questions for Governing Bodies to accompany this Policy

<https://www.bristol.anglican.org/content/pages/documents/1593442475.docx>

Church of England Vision for Education: Deeply Christian, Serving the Common Good 2016

<https://www.churchofengland.org/more/education-and-schools/vision-education>

Memorandum of Understanding between the National Society and DfE

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/church-schools-and-academies-memoranda-of-understanding>

Called, Connected, Committed 2020 <https://www.cefel.org.uk/ccc/>

Embracing Change: Rural and Small schools 2018

<https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2018-03/Rural%20Schools%20-%20Embracing%20Change%20WEB%20FINAL.pdf>

Bristol Diocese Vision <https://www.bristol.anglican.org/>

Glossary

DBE	Diocesan Board of Education
DoBAC	Diocese of Bristol Academies Trust
CST	Cathedral Schools Trust
DBAT	Diocese of Bristol Academies Trust
MAT	Multi- Academy Trust
SAT	Single – Academy Trust
LA	Local Authority
VA	Voluntary Aided
VC	Voluntary Controlled

This policy is to be reviewed by the DBE before Sept 2023.