

# The Diocesan Board of Education's Policy with regard to academy conversion and the establishment of Free Schools

March 2016

**Our vision is to facilitate a landscape of multi academy trusts across the diocese that stands the test of time: preserving, protecting and enhancing church school distinctiveness and effectiveness**



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## Introduction

Our diocese dates back to AD 705; the SDBE was formed in 1830 and is nationally one of the oldest formal diocesan bodies. Many of the church schools were founded before that date, and the Board, or Council as it was called then, was formed to support their work and to promote new schools. The SDBE must honour, cherish and protect this history.

It is the intention of the Salisbury Diocesan Board of Education (SDBE) to provide strategic leadership which interprets the demands of national educational policy and shapes the church school estate to meet the needs of the future. We will champion structural innovation and robust, sustainable system leadership.

The SDBE actively supports church schools to explore Multi Academy Trust (MAT) status which may include schools from a range of designations: Voluntary Aided, Voluntary Controlled, standalone academies, and community schools. Our commitment is to work with schools and their local communities to build a Multi Academy Trust landscape across the diocese that is logical, that meets the needs of all children and which utterly protects church school status and Christian character.

The SDBE has established its own MAT, the Diocese of Salisbury Academy Trust (DSAT), offering an innovative local hub model and high quality central services. The SDBE expects that governors consider carefully the benefits of belonging to the diocesan multi academy trust when considering their school's options. DSAT offers a stimulating and exciting home to church and non-church schools across the Diocese, living out its vision of going 'beyond expectations for all of God's children', walking alongside them during and beyond conversion.

The SDBE promise, whether a church school joins DSAT, forms a MAT, or seeks to join an existing MAT, is to support the school and its partners to honour and cherish the church school heritage. We aim to ensure that church schools are a vital and thriving part of this diocese and this country's education provision, in this decade and beyond.

## 1. The National Context

The Education and Adoption Act 2016 provides the legal framework for the structural transformation of the school system. It is government expectation that every school becomes an academy by 2020. The memorandum of understanding between Government and The Church of England states:

*The Secretary of State values and is committed to sustaining the formal and statutory partnership between the Church of England and the state in education, through which young people across the country continue to benefit from the combination of high quality education, religious ethos and character development provided by Church of England schools.*

*While the education system continues to evolve, the Secretary of State remains committed to securing the religious character of every church school and to preserving diocesan families of schools (subject to agreements between one DBE and another). The Secretary of State recognises the responsibility of DBEs to all the church schools within their diocese and the children in those schools whether these are maintained schools or academies (whether in ATs or MATs) The Secretary of State also acknowledges and accepts that it is for DBEs to plan strategically for the exercise of this responsibility, including in relation to school improvement and to work closely with the RSCs in doing so.*

The Education Department of the Church of England has worked with the government to ensure key principles and a legal framework for the conversion of church schools to academy status.

## **2. The Salisbury Diocesan Board of Education Vision for Academy Conversion**

The SDBE's vision for its work is of 'God working through us to inspire transformational **leadership**, in schools and parishes which, in turn, transforms **the lives** of children and young people' (**Strategic Plan 2015-2018**).

The SDBE is therefore committed to working closely with school and parish leaders to ensure they are fully supported in their exploration of the academy landscape and in their subsequent decision making. The SDBE is aware that the decision made about academy status is among the most significant a governing body will ever make; the SDBE engagement in that decision process is essential and non-negotiable.

**Our vision is to facilitate a landscape of multi academy trusts across the diocese that stands the test of time: preserving, protecting and enhancing church school distinctiveness and effectiveness**

The SDBE has a duty to develop a vision and therefore policy which reflects the reality of the educational and political landscape in which schools exist. In taking account of the political and educational landscape the SDBE will not compromise church school status; the SDBE is utterly committed to the protection in the present and for the long term future, of the trust deed and therefore church school designation of every church school.

## **3. The SDBE Core Principles and Expectations**

The SDBE believes that all schools and standalone academies should plan to become a full part of a multi academy trust.

The SDBE supports the development of a range of MAT models within the diocese, including existing and new MATs which might also include community schools.

The SDBE considers that as a part of their MAT investigations schools should consider joining the Diocese of Salisbury Academy Trust (DSAT), including groups of schools joining through a hub model. The SDBE will support conversion to membership of DSAT wherever due diligence shows this is viable

The SDBE will not support a school wishing to establish a standalone academy trust.

The SDBE is committed to working closely with school and parish leaders to ensure they are fully supported in their exploration of the academy landscape and in their subsequent decision making.

### **Championing Structural Change**

The SDBE recognises that, for some schools, conversations related to structural change will be challenging and that any change has the potential to destabilise; the SDBE holds the view that all church schools should engage proactively in conversations about new partnerships and structural change, in order to positively shape long term educational provision and ensure a continued and strong church school presence for current pupils and for pupils of the future

The educational landscape is now more clearly defined than at any time within the last 10 years and the SDBE seeks to be clear about its position with regard to academy conversion. It is the view of the SDBE that all schools should explore the potential of formal school to school partnerships to ensure their long term sustainability and to secure transformational education.

It is the view of the SDBE that multi academy trusts offer a stronger structural and accountable partnership solution than federation or umbrella trusts.

The SDBE is determined to support the development of a rational, logical, academy trust landscape which is fit for purpose now and has the flexibility to shape further as the educational landscape develops. Whilst not attempting to create a fixed blue print for the long term landscape, the SDBE has developed a set of

non-negotiable requirements for school conversion – “Multi Academy Trust Governance Proposals” – available on the website.

*www.salisbury.anglican.org- Schools - Academy Status- SDBE Model Variations of Governance for MATs*

The SDBE will work to support the development of an academy trust that has high levels of internal accountability; validated self-evaluation and commitment to system led school improvement.

### **Trust Collaboration, Partnership and Sponsorship**

The SDBE will support Trusts to establish collaborative learning solutions to support each other, enabling improvement within individual academies and between Trusts

The SDBE recognises the need for MATs to become strong enough to both sponsor schools causing concern and to open new schools.

Under the Education and Adoption Act 2016

*www.gov.uk/government/publications/coasting-schools-illustrative-regulations*

schools defined as requiring improvement, who are defined as inadequate, or who are identified as ‘coasting’ may be expected by the Department for Education to become an academy under a sponsor within a MAT.

The SDBE will work proactively with the Office of the Regional Schools Commissioner to secure a school’s membership of a trust which protects the predecessor school’s church status and trust deed, including DSAT.

The SDBE will support MATs who wish to grow for example through: sponsorship; opening new educational provision; extending the trust to include standalone academies and schools. The principle on which SDBE consent will be given will always include the long term legal preservation of every school’s Christian distinctiveness; foundation governance; foundation directorship and foundation corporate membership, which in turn protects and preserves the Christian trust deed.

### **New Schools**

Nationally, all new school provision will be in the form of Free Schools (which are academies); the SDBE will encourage the establishment of Free Schools with a Church of England designation where there is significant evidence of demand. All applications to set up a Free School must be approved by the DfE and the SDBE will ensure that any application meets a genuine need in the community, backed by evidence, has a sound financial plan and appropriate admissions criteria.

## **4. Support for Academy Conversion**

The SDBE has dedicated academy consultants and administration personnel to support schools to fully explore their academy conversion options. This support is available through the PSA at a reduced cost or at full cost where there is no PSA subscription. The SDBE does not have external funding to cover these costs; schools are able to recover DBE and their own costs from the conversion grant. Document ‘Academy Conversion – cost of support’ is available on our website:

*www.salisbury.anglican.org- Schools – Academy Status - Academy conversion support and costs*

The SDBE is committed to providing regular opportunities for schools to access current information relating to conversion to academy status and academy partnership development through the SDBE website, training opportunities and conferences.

DSAT runs regular workshops for those interested in joining the Trust and can provide support through the conversion process, funded through the conversion grant, up to and beyond the point of conversion.

## 5. Small Schools

A feature of Salisbury diocesan church schools is that currently 36% are small rural schools with less than 120 pupils on roll; this is both a strength and a challenge. There is a need for far sighted and transformational leadership within schools and from within the Board of Education. We must together face the challenges of small rural schools and turn these into opportunities for the long term good of children and young people.

The 2014 National Society document 'Working Together: The future of Church of England Schools' highlights the opportunity afforded by education policy makers, for small schools to re-imagine the education landscape, creating provision and securing the future of small school education through structural collaboration. The SDBE believes that if Governors and headteachers do not make structural plans for the future of small church schools the delivery of church school education will become more vulnerable.

The National Society through the Working Together report states: *'our vision for education goes well beyond what Ofsted may require. We aspire to offer a broad, full and rounded education that enables children to truly flourish. In order to offer this breadth of curricula and extra-curricular opportunities, small schools will increasingly need to work with other schools to benefit from larger cohorts of children (e.g. for sport, music and other extra-curricular activities) and to access subject expertise within the curriculum'*.

*'It is a commonly-held view that having a school within a village strengthens and enhances the community. The Church of England is committed to maintaining a presence in every community, but economic realities, especially during a period of austerity, are such that there has been a steady decline of the services provided to villages. Post offices, pubs, shops, libraries, police and fire stations have frequently closed; many Local Authorities recognise that they no longer have meaningful engagement with rural communities, other than through a village school. The school is one of the state's last remaining structural points of contact with rural communities'*.

### **(Working Together. The future of Church of England Schools).**

The SDBE wholeheartedly acknowledges the many positives of small school education and will support small schools but can only do so where partnership, performance, church school distinctiveness and effectiveness and financial viability is strong e.g. through models of shared headship and subject expertise. The SDBE values the desire to maintain Church schools in every community, to be central to that community and to provide facilities for the community.

The SDBE will encourage the 'Dare to be Different' model as described in the National Society document 'Working Together'; we will support and lead conversations with groups of schools who wish to partner to ensure their own, and others' futures.

## 6. SDBE Corporate Membership

### **Outstanding Trust governance**

The SDBE as a Corporate Member, provides a continual link between the SDBE, schools and the MAT board and appoints a person to represent them, being known as 'SDBE Corporate Member'; this person is usually nominated by the MAT.

The SDBE Corporate Member will attend twice yearly training and networking meetings at the Diocesan Education Centre in Wilton. The SDBE vision is to develop a group of corporate members who act as ambassadors for the SDBE and for church school distinctiveness and effectiveness. The document, 'The role of the SDBE Corporate Member within a MAT' explains SDBE expectations

*www.salisbury.anglican.org- Schools -Academy status – The role of SDBE Corporate Member within a MAT*

Our expectation is for each MAT to deliver the highest outcomes for all pupils. Church school academies within 'mixed' status MATs should be beacons of Church school distinctiveness and effectiveness, at the

same time working with community schools within a MAT ethos that totally supports the individual school's values.

MATs where membership consists only of church schools, will ensure their Trust governance secures a model of church school trust status that is a national exemplar of outstanding practice.

## **7. SDBE Due Diligence Prior to Consent to Convert**

The SDBE will only grant permission for a church school to join a MAT where due diligence shows:

- robust financial systems underpin MAT viability and sustainability; each trust will maximise trust procurement through human and other resources.
- that schools are underpinned by rigorous models of continual school improvement and effectiveness
- MAT Boards establish robust governance and leadership and engage critically in self-evaluation e.g. through the framework set out by the Regional Schools Commissioner

*www.salisbury.anglican.org – Schools – Academy Status – 9 Characteristics of Successful Multi Academy Trusts*

- that Christian distinctiveness and effectiveness is at the heart of the Trust

The SDBE recognises that significant strengths of schools are their individuality, autonomy and governance accountability processes; MAT status has significant implications for these concepts. The SDBE due diligence process will therefore seek assurance that each school within the Trust has understood the implications of joining the Trust. The SDBE expects the trust model to be set out in a comprehensive Memorandum of Understanding between all of the participating schools. Particular attention will be given by the SDBE to:

1. the accountability of governors, directors and members
2. how the trust vision and ethos will support the values of the church schools
3. how the Christian distinctiveness and effectiveness of any church school within the MAT will be protected, encouraged and enhanced
4. how they will achieve ongoing school improvement across the MAT; the identification of potential areas of weakness and how these will be dealt with by the trust
5. a sustainable financial model/business plan which details the MATs sustainability over the following five years
6. the leadership model, including the appointment of school leaders in the future
7. the provision, through the SDBE Corporate Member, of an annual statement of performance

*www.salisbury.anglican.org – Schools – Academy Status – Annual Statement of Performance*

### **Cherishing the Church School Vision**

The SDBE must be assured that by becoming part of a MAT the school will not lose its church school identity, vision and ethos. The SDBE has identified in the 2015/18 strategic plan, a vision for the child belonging to a church school. This vision is not intended as a blue print, but to support each church school as they define their vision for their church school and that which makes it distinctively Christian. The SDBE will expect any MAT to evidence to the SDBE how such Christian vision will be cherished by the Trust – whether it is a Trust of church schools or a Trust of schools from mixed predecessor designations.

The SDBE will also want to understand how a Trust will develop a common vision, shared by all schools, but will encourage individual school identity. The SDBE believes that successful partnerships are forged on

shared aspirations and honesty and that the Trust needs to establish a Memorandum of Understanding between each of the partner schools.

Consent for academy conversion is only confirmed when the consent requirements are fully met. The SDBE will consider all applications from schools to convert to an academy and join a MAT, or to establish a Free school after a robust and thorough due diligence process and will require evidence from applicants that they have in place a robust trust model, including their governance, vision, ethos, school improvement and finance model.

Following receipt and scrutiny of the due diligence documentation, the decision to allow any church school to become an academy and join a MAT will be sanctioned by the SDBE through the Diocesan Director of Education.

## 8. The Regional Context

The Schools Commissioner and regional schools commissioners work with school leaders to promote and monitor maintained schools, academies and free schools. Regional Schools Commissioners (RSCs) are responsible for approving new academies and intervening in underperforming maintained schools, academies and free schools in their area. They act on behalf of the Secretary of State for Education.

The RSCs are accountable to the Secretary of State. They are supported by a board of 6 to 8 experienced academy headteachers and other sector leaders, who make up the Headteacher Board. The South West Regional Schools Commissioner Headteacher Board currently includes Joy Tubbs, our Director of Education.

Their main responsibilities are to:

- monitor the performance of the academies in their area
- take action when an academy is underperforming
- decide on the creation of new academies
- make recommendations to ministers about free school applications
- encourage organisations to become academy sponsors
- approve changes to open academies, including:
  - changes to age ranges
  - mergers between academies
  - changes to multi-academy trust arrangements

## 9. SDBE Contact and support

Should you wish to discuss academy conversion please contact:

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*'Working for children, young people, schools and parishes'*

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