

STRATEGY FOR THE CHURCH SCHOOL SYSTEM IN THE DIOCESE OF CANTERBURY

The Canterbury Diocesan Board of Education ('CDBE', 'the Board') maintains a bold commitment to education which is rooted in a Christian vision and context, supporting Church of England (CE) schools which are authentically Christian, generous and enriching; which nurture a culture of deep reflection and compassion for God's world, encourage spiritual development and provide a rich experience and appreciation of the Christian faith, enabling all children and adults to live an abundant life.

1. INTRODUCTION AND PURPOSE

- 1.1** The CDBE's ambition is to maintain a cohesive, interdependent family of diocesan church schools, dedicated to transforming the lives of children and young people, within which schools and academies will instinctively seek advice and support from the diocesan Children, Schools and Young People team. The Board seeks to be responsive to local contexts and attentive to the political landscape for education, both regionally and nationally, whilst holding a neutral position in relation to whether schools operate within the maintained sector or convert to academy status.
- 1.2** Most importantly, the CDBE is focusing its narrative and attention on the current, systemic pressures being felt by schools in terms of finance and sustainability. Thus, this Strategy describes structures and options intended to promote system resilience; that have a clearly identifiable theological underpinning and help schools to express their Christian vision. It explains the strategic principles which inform the CDBE's planning, intentionally emphasising moral purpose, mutuality, courageous advocacy and choice, before outlining Pathways for schools to consider.

2. THEOLOGICAL UNDERPINNING

'How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity!'(Psalm 133: 1)

2.1 Mutuality, not competition: 1 Corinthians 12:12-31

Church of England (CE) schools, regardless of status, size or location, share a common identity and purpose: distinctively Christian communities of learning in which children will encounter a real experience of God's love for all humanity and receive affirmation that they are a beloved child of God. CE schools should be communities of nurture, where learning is lifelong, and children learn to be centred and held in the Christian tradition.

With vision and values rooted in the Gospel, CE schools recognise the intrinsic worth of each member of the community, aspiring for everyone to know they are welcome, completely included, valued and celebrated. Thus, we value and honour the wide variety of gifts, capabilities and ways of serving characteristic of others and instinctively know the importance of each member of the body.

This is essential across the diocesan family of church schools too: an ambition and culture of interdependence, where we see the mutual strength of belonging together, each member of the community playing a unique part, vital to the health and transformation of all.

But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? (1 Corinthians 12: 18-19)

2.2 Rootedness and extravagant sowing: Luke 8: 4-15

Drawing on the Parable of the Sower, we advocate that leaders in CE schools should be empowered by personal and theological rootedness which shapes their strategy, as well as nourished by established life-giving habits so that their personal vision and values are sustained through times of both challenge and celebration.

In addition, this parable demonstrates extravagance in sowing; an indication that Jesus' approach to mission is not about playing safe. His example gives us freedom to take risks for the sake of the gospel; to engage critically with the educational landscape, considering its appropriateness for our context and making brave decisions, and to explicitly fulfil our responsibility to prioritise the vulnerable and transform injustice.

Note that the word is sown with extravagant generosity, even in the most perilous places; but always with the confidence of Christ's promise of an abundant crop.

2.3 God chooses the small and seemingly insignificant: John 6:1-14

'In the Bible, God consistently raises up the small and places the outsider in the centre of the narrative of salvation... It is not simply that the small and humble are given equal weight as the great and mighty. The message is far stronger, God chooses the small, the little, the despised and the humble and reveals them to be more significant than the things the world praises for being great and mighty'¹

We notice that it is the small boy with loaves and fishes whose generosity is turned by Jesus into a sign of the coming Kingdom.

Similarly, we recognise the uniqueness and value of small and rural schools; a sense of 'family' and compassionate hospitality, often delivering a valuable social function and service within a specific locality. They can share unique insights into excellent leadership, developing and teaching an imaginative, tailored curriculum which suits the local community – and are fully deserving of the support they require to continue to thrive into the future.

God's grace is such that each one of our schools, including (and perhaps especially) the small, the weak and the seemingly insignificant, will take their place as part of God's purposes and the missional fabric of the Diocese.

¹ From Appendix 1, 'A theology of small' - Embracing Change: Rural and Small Schools (The Church of England Education Office, 2018)

3. PRINCIPLES

Arising from this underpinning theology, the following principles guide and inform our strategic planning:

3.1 Connectedness and wellness together

- Acting in relationship; sustaining a sense of mutuality amongst the individual, distinctive members that make up the body (1 Corinthians 12:12-31) of diocesan church schools
- Retaining a culture of collaboration, not competition; acting with compassionate hospitality to all within different expressions of community (parishes, deaneries, federations, local hubs and alliances, Academy Trusts)

3.2 Living out a specific responsibility to the vulnerable and marginalised

- Being courageous in speaking out and acting if organisations/policymakers propose or pursue unethical or inequitable practice, and addressing any failure to show care for people and communities
- Undertaking an ongoing analysis of schools' exposure to potential challenges in the emerging landscape, targeting wisely any funding and investment in time
- Making sure that specific policies are in place to secure the place and future of small, rural or isolated schools

3.3 Creating capacity and choice

- Developing a model and vision for the school system that works for schools in every context, sustaining choice as a principle for decisions on academy status or other partnerships
- Defining carefully the qualities expected from a 'strong' trust for church schools, particularly how its leadership, vision and operation reflect diocesan principles and bring richness, relationship and capacity to the system, rather than seeking benefit for itself.

4. THE ROLE OF THE DIOCESAN BOARD OF EDUCATION IN STRATEGIC PLANNING

4.1 All Diocesan Boards of Education (DBEs) and Diocesan Directors of Education (DDEs) hold an important system leadership role. Using their detailed local knowledge, they develop and promote a clear, coherent strategy (with associated local delivery and policy) for all church schools within a diocese, co-ordinating this within regional diocesan groups which relate directly to DfE Regional Directors for strategic planning across an area.

4.2 This includes: input into the ongoing process of monitoring and supporting the evolution of a resilient system, in consultation with headteachers and executive leaders in Federations and Multi-Academy Trusts (MATs); engaging constructively with proposed developments and changes to regulatory frameworks; and sustaining a deep connection with diocesan church schools, promoting the value of the local for missional opportunities.

4.3 The DBE has a clear vision of promoting distinctively Christian communities of learning that seek to be underpinned by values sourced in the Gospel narrative. This is realised through sets of treasured relationships and a posture of compassionate service, underpinned by the Board's statutory responsibilities under the DBE Measure 2021 (see Section 4.4)

4.4 The CDBE is the religious authority for 104 CE schools, its jurisdiction (functions and responsibilities) explained within the DBE Measure 2021 ('the Measure'). Primarily the aims of the Board are to:

- Promote education within the Diocese of Canterbury, according to the faith and practice of the Church of England
- Promote religious education and religious worship in schools in the Diocese
- Watch over the interests of Church schools and secure the provision of new schools
- Give advice as to matters affecting Church schools and Church educational endowments within the Diocese

Note that under the Measure, the CDBE can also require the governing body or (in the case of an academy) the proprietor of a church school to provide information to undertake its statutory functions. The process of securing accountability takes place through regular dialogue and collection of data relating to school performance (incorporating the quality of denominational education and content of religious worship), scrutiny of Board/Member meeting minutes and commentary on Trust Annual Reports.

5. LEARNING FROM CONSULTATION

5.1 All diocesan CE schools were invited to respond to a survey between June and September 2022 so that the CDBE could better understand existing risks and pressures. A draft Strategy for the Church School System was discussed by the CDBE on 20th September 2022 and the scenarios under consideration by the Board were shared at forums for headteachers and governors.

5.2 Feedback and survey analysis highlighted the following:

- Schools consistently referred to other schools within the geographical locality as their most valued partnership
- Several significant issues face some schools including: a projected in-year deficit; a falling roll or pupil numbers $\leq 80\%$ of actual capacity; the condition of buildings
- Church schools would like the CDBE to provide further meaningful support and information regarding the characteristics of arrangements such as MATs and Federations, which structural options (and restrictions) apply to church schools and the range of questions to ask during due diligence
- Some schools and governing bodies also need capacity and guidance to undertake long-term planning and research
- Fears of school leaders and governors include: funding levels, potential loss of identity in a MAT, risks to small and rural schools and the continuation of fruitful local partnerships

6. PATHWAYS

This section describes Pathways for school leaders and governors to explore, supported by diocesan officers, as they review viable options and consider new or reinvigorated partnerships within their school's context.

Note that the list of Pathways is not composed as a menu. **Nor are the Pathways linked chronologically, or in any order of preference.** The intention is to envisage how every church school within the diocese might be provided with a positive choice when making decisions about the status of their school, in the light of existing and/or potential, mutually dependent relationships.

The only exception is **Pathway A**, which is regarded as '**Base Camp**' for **maintained schools** and **Single Academy Trusts**. This Pathway anticipates an **annual review** of long-term planning, the school's status and partnerships. If this review process affirms that the school's current position and context remain appropriate and sustainable, having reflected on Pathways B-E, the CDBE still expects a continuing attitude of mutuality and collaboration.

Please be aware that in arranging dialogue with schools about any of these Pathways, or following processes for decision-making, the Board will always prioritise support for those presenting as most vulnerable or at risk. Diocesan officers presently undertake an ongoing risk analysis; this is informed by school leaders' narratives and self-review, available data and inspection or monitoring information, plus Local Authority and Academy Trust reporting (including Notes of Visit).

Pathway A Base Camp: Reflection, Review and Collaborate

With this Strategy to hand, Headteachers and Governing Bodies of all maintained schools and Single Academy Trusts must review their long-term plans annually, drawing on information including local population indicators, inspection outcomes and external reviews, performance data, school budget projections and the school's asset management plan.

The school continues with **outward-facing collaboration**. This is expected good practice but may also prove enlightening for any future first step to a more formal working relationship. It is essentially connecting with other schools on joint activities, such as subject leader networking or governor training, learning walks, peer assessment or moderation. For this Pathway, schools and academies are free to work with whoever they feel can best support the ongoing development of their individual community.

Pathway B Formal Collaboration (ref: Policy for Federations, 03/2022)

A **Formal Collaboration** is where schools retain their existing Governing Bodies but work more intentionally together under a Memorandum of Understanding, on which the CDBE and Local Authority will be signatories. It is likely that partners will agree shared and individual objectives stemming from this collaboration, such that the arrangement impacts positively on the efficiency and effectiveness of both schools with outcomes for pupils at the heart of improvements. These arrangements have no legal description, since nothing of legal consequence has changed.

Pathway C Federation (ref: Policy for Federations, 03/2022)

A **Federation** emerges usually where schools with evidence of successful formal collaboration move to a single Governing Body (and often one executive leader) responsible for their strategic operation. The CDBE has a Policy for Federations and all church schools involved **must** secure the Board's approval in its role as religious/diocesan authority.

Pathway D Joining an existing Multi-Academy Trust (ref: Academy Guidance, 12/2022)

Church MATs currently operating in the Diocese of Canterbury are:

Aquila, The Diocese of Canterbury Academies Trust	[Church Majority Articles]
Deal Education Alliance for Learning Trust	[Church Majority Articles]
Our Community Multi-Academy Trust	[Church Majority Articles]
Tenterden Schools Trust	[Church Minority Articles]
The Stour Academy Trust	[Church Minority Articles]

The CDBE will engage existing Church MATs to either consolidate their operation in specific geographical areas, or grow to encompass new local clusters where there is currently no MAT presence or limited choice. The Board may also consider working proactively through regional diocesan networks to enable schools to access Church Trusts across diocesan borders, where there is clear geographical proximity or a shared local community.

Pathway E Establishing or joining a new Multi-Academy Trust

The CDBE is open to a slight increase (1-3) in the number of Church Majority MATs approved and operating within the Diocese, reflecting the Board's attentiveness to resilience and financial sustainability within the church school system, as well as enabling groups of schools in geographical proximity to work together well, regardless of their designation as church or community schools.

Our specific preferences are to facilitate:

- a) *The creation of at least one new Church Majority MAT (based on a Single Academy Trust, or the conversion of a maintained school)*
- b) *Changes to existing, formal multi-school groups which declare an ambition to be a stepping-stone to either a new MAT or a viable cluster within a MAT.*

In both cases, a new MAT would need to demonstrate:

- *dedication to securing the place and future of small, rural or isolated schools*
- *the ability to draw capacity from partner organisations and a motivation to create one or more geographical hubs serving specific local communities.*
- *capacity for sharing high-quality practice and leading staff/curriculum development*
- *an understanding of its potential growth and improvement*

7. A STRONG CHURCH TRUST

7.1 The Department for Education (DfE) has offered guidance on building a strong academy trust. The CDBE has established expectations intended to enrich this guidance by viewing different themes through the lens of education which is rooted in a Christian vision and context.

- 7.2 All Church MATs (whether existing or new) will be expected to demonstrate a commitment to the principles outlined in Section 3 (above) alongside evidence of meeting the CDBE's expectations and definitions of being a 'Strong Church Trust' outlined below.

CDBE EXPECTATIONS OF A STRONG CHURCH TRUST

Education rooted in a Christian vision and context

All church schools can and must be places that embody compassionate hospitality, diversity, creativity and joy, in which children and young people know their ultimate worth and recognise this in others. Likewise, we believe that they remain at the centre of the Church's mission to the nation, the heart of local communities, for children of all faiths and none. Church schools promote and exemplify distinctively Christian communities of learning, underpinned by values sourced in the Gospel narrative, enriching the whole educational experience.

A strong Church Trust will embrace this vision and feel an unambiguous call to justice and righteousness, to honour those who are marginalised; devoted to transforming unjust structures of society and to restoring the equal dignity of each person as holding the image of God.

Vision

The Trust, working together with its schools and stakeholders, has developed and implemented an inclusive and distinctive Christian vision grounded in a clear theology. Leadership at all levels act with integrity and live out this vision, which is shared unapologetically, shapes policy and planning and underpins all partnerships and relationships.

The outworking of the vision also means:

- *All school communities promote social and cultural development through the practice of forgiveness and reconciliation that encourages good mental health and living well together*
- *Each school's curriculum and extra-curricular opportunities meet the learning and spiritual needs of all learners*
- *Priority is given to high-quality Religious Education and to Collective Worship that is inclusive, invitational, and inspiring*
- *School communities have a strong focus on the character and moral development of all pupils, giving them aspiration for themselves and hope for the communities of which they are a part. They are engaged in social action and children and young people are encouraged to be courageous advocates for change in their local, national, and global communities, challenging injustice*
- *Striving to be an organisation which acknowledges racism as pernicious and dehumanising; one that is committed to change and where financial, human and time resources are provided to devise planned interventions which are monitored and accounted for.*

Flourishing church/school partnerships

A strong Church Trust will also encourage a mutually beneficial relationship between church and school; a flourishing partnership based on safe, long-term, listening relationships that faithfully and lovingly serve all children, young people and families in the local community without agenda.

In practice, leaders from the Trust, schools and churches must be able to demonstrate how they:

- *Prioritise these partnerships strategically, creating a sense of mutuality and shared priorities for serving the community*
- *Consider what a 'ministry of presence' looks like in each school, establishing an offer of spiritual and pastoral care. This may include models of chaplaincy (all schools) or how to support families in exploring faith in the home (church schools)*

Governance

- The Board in a strong Church Trust maintains an efficient governance structure but can also demonstrate clearly how it delivers on its responsibility to uphold the unique Company Object of a Church Trust. Thus, through a robust and continuous self-evaluation process that involves executive leaders, governors and schools, all Directors and Trust executives will be comfortable and confident in articulating the purpose, conduct and effectiveness of church academies.
- Reflecting the Anglican stress on the local, the Trust will always provide for local governance of schools, such governance reflecting previous VC or VA status, and for maximum delegation of powers.
- A strong church trust believes that climate change is a matter of justice and that stewarding the planet and loving your neighbour are deeply linked, committing to achieving net zero emissions across all schools by 2030.

Performance and accountability

- Trust leaders work courageously in the best interests of children and young people, using ethical arguments to justify making bold, vision-driven curriculum decisions.
- Leaders ensure that vulnerable pupils are a priority and that all pupils can access and experience an exciting and relevant curriculum that enables them to make at least expected progress in their learning.

School and academy trust improvement model

In addition, a school improvement model in a strong church trust:

- Reflects the concept of 'Ubuntu' ('I am because we are'); its contribution to wider system improvement recognising the mutuality of local groups of schools in serving and transforming community
- Engages the DBE in dialogue about school improvement and the needs of church schools; drawing on potential support and acknowledging the value and importance of providing information to assist the Board in carrying out its functions under the DBE Measure 2021
- Can demonstrate how the Trust supports headteachers and executive leaders in establishing life-giving habits so that their personal vision and values are sustained through times of both challenge and celebration
- Facilitates (for CE schools) an understanding of the uniqueness of leading or working in a church school; looking to the DBE for access to (or partnership in) bespoke training and support for governors and staff, in addition to leadership development to encourage and prepare future church school leaders.

Trust financial decisions, ethical and charitable activities are deeply connected to its vision and associated values.

8. CONNECTED POLICIES/STATEMENTS

- Rural and small schools statement – March 2022
- Policy for Federations – March 2022
- Academy Guidance – December 2022

**Approved by the Board
6th December 2022**