



## Education Report to the Diocesan Synod

November 2021

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This paper reports on the last 18 months in Education in the Diocese of Bristol. It provides some context to enable those new to Synod to understand setting, activity and recent changes.

### **Church of England schools**

Schools in this diocese, just like churches, range across varied rural, urban and suburban settings presenting amongst other things, diverse ethnicity, wealth, socio economic group and size, and serving from less than 40 to over 1800 pupils.

The Diocese of Bristol has 72 Church of England schools, 69 primary and 3 secondary, serving over 15,000 pupils. 50 remain in Local Authority control, of these 44 are Voluntary Controlled (a high level of LA control including responsibility for buildings and estate, where 25% of the Governing Board are foundation governors appointed through the PCC and Diocesan Board of Education) and 6 are VA schools (lower level of LA control, a church contribution to buildings costs, and greater than 50% foundation governance). 5 schools are in single academy trusts and 17 in multi academy trusts of which there are two with Church Articles of Association in this diocese, Cathedral Schools Trust and the Diocese of Bristol Academies Trust. These schools, often known as academies, remain government funded but gain further curriculum flexibilities and trust autonomy for funding, to enable centralised functions such as policy, finance, HR and school improvement.

All CE schools receive both Ofsted (government) and SIAMS (School Inspection of Anglican and Methodist schools) inspections. Both inspection regimes have started again in full this academic year since covid stopped inspection in March 2020. In this diocese, Ofsted inspection judges 93% of these schools (or their predecessor school now academised, or the trust judgement if too new to be inspected) as Good or Better, and SIAMS 97% as Good or Better.

### **Non church schools**

There are over 200 non church schools across the diocese. Many are supported through the Education Team with Religious Education, Collective Worship, Spiritual and Moral development and Visioning. In recognition of the quality of support that can be offered from the diocesan education team to local authorities, all four LAs now have a Service Level

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Agreement with the diocese to work with their statutory Standing Advisory Councils for Religious Education (SACREs). This enables diocesan visibility and credibility within these schools.

### **Church School Governance**

The Diocesan Board of Education (DBE) advises all CE schools in the diocese. Under the DBE Measure of April 2021, the DBE has functions to promote or assist in the promotion of education in the diocese that is consistent with the faith and practice of the Church of England. This includes promotion of church schools, partnerships, Religious Education, worship, and advice and consent on various governance, property and school improvement matters. The Board is chaired by the Bishop of Swindon and comprises ordained and lay members including serving teaching staff and headteachers.

A steering group are currently considering the 'Growth and Sustainability' policy for church schools in the diocese to ensure the sustainability of small schools, coherence of groups of schools, leadership succession and the successful migration of schools into multi academy trusts over time, if government policy remains strongly in favour of this direction of travel. Through LA and diocesan input, schools are increasing their awareness of academisation. Some are keen to be main protagonists in new arrangements; others are extremely wary.

Under the new DBE Measure, there are constitutional changes to DBE that must happen before January 2023. The DBE can no longer remain in its current form. Following consideration by the current DBE, Bishops council and ongoing checks with the Registrar, in March 2022 the Bishop of Bristol will present Diocesan Synod with a new Scheme for the current DBE to become a committee of DBF. Concurrently, DoBAC, the diocesan Academies Company will either close as its powers, under the new Measure transfer with protections to DBF, or its role will be significantly less as business is transacted through the DBE Committee of DBF. Papers will come to the next synod in 2022 and following Scheme agreement, DBE will reconstitute for September 2022.

### **'Distinctive and Inclusive'**

While a church school, like any school, must always seek to deliver a high quality academic education to all the children and young people it serves, particularly serving the vulnerable and disadvantaged, it also seeks to promote opportunities for 'life in all its fullness' in every strand of its work. This includes having an impact on the children and staff, and a wider ranging effect on their families and the community in which their school exists. Furthermore the school endeavours to be a courageous advocate in the immediate locality and world; caring deeply, realising agency and being a 'voice for the voiceless'. So what does this outworking look like to be successful?

Acknowledging that academic progress is of course vital, a CE school is unashamed in also promoting character development, spiritual leadership and an overall goal of 'human flourishing'. The CE governance structure and legal foundation is set in stone, parchment, paper or electronically at opening to direct the school ethos. The individual school vision derives from this and thus is theologically literate, set in local context and ethos, values, and character development are striped through policy and practice, such as the way the behaviour and inclusion policy is written. Religious Education is a rigorous, academic, theological subject that engages with religious texts, takes account of religious and non religious world views, avoids and seeks to rebalance a westernised privileged understanding of any religion and enables students to think deeply and articulate their own views. Within RE, Christianity is taught increasingly well using a new 'Understanding Christianity' approach. Collective worship happens daily, even through covid lockdowns, and while fully

inclusive, it is inspiring and invitational in approach so that all can feel comfortable participating. New guidance has been rolled out to schools recently to affirm this.

### **SIAMS Inspection**

A national integration and centralisation programme has just completed to bring increased coherence across the country and an update of the SIAMS inspection regime. SIAMS enables schools to articulate their interpretation of the CE national vision of being 'Deeply Christian; Serving the Common Good' highlighting their individual school vision, context and curriculum. The inspection framework has been tweaked in the light of covid to ensure that at inspection, rather than using outdated or unreliable national data, schools can communicate the impact of covid and the way in which the school's vision has shaped its response and ongoing delivery of learning through the pandemic.

### **What are the recent headlines in the diocese?**

- Cathedral CE Primary School, Bristol, part of the Cathedral Schools Trust, has become a CE school and is making rapid progress in understanding its new status.
- Kingfisher CE Academy, Swindon (DBAT) has opened with Nursery and Reception children as the primary phase of the Wichelstowe Trinity learning Campus.
- The co-located secondary, Deanery CE Academy, Swindon (DBAT) is filling well and now has three year groups, Years 7 – 9.
- St Georges CEVC and St Michael on the Mount CEVC Primary schools, Bristol, have closed and a new school has reopened on the St Michael's site, Willow Park CEVC Primary School.
- Extensions to enable increased pupil admission numbers are underway at Lea and Garsden CEVC and South Marston CE.
- The new Frenchay CE Primary site in South Gloucestershire is underway. It is designed to be a 'passive house' build environmentally sustainable build.
- The new Eastern Villages primary school site, Swindon (DBAT) is likely to start build in 2023 or after.
- Conversations continue about possible church plants and new schools in new housing areas, particularly the potential for the Brabazon site, North Bristol.
- Two new primary federations are underway in South Gloucestershire (two or more schools working together under one Governing body with some shared staff and resources, usually an Executive Headteacher)
- Primary numbers continue to be a concern in some areas through lower birth rates, new housing areas proving more attractive and local housing outpricing the pockets of young families, such as that in central Bristol. Small schools are particularly vulnerable to closure as numbers and budgets decrease, hence the attraction of federations.
- The Diocese of Bristol Academies Trust is now a successful trust of 15 church schools and is developing the next stages of its growth strategy in collaboration with the DBE. The trust has undergone an extensive reorganisation to enable a centralised business function to operate out of three school sites.
- In collaboration with the Environmental officer in the diocesan support services and external consultancy, the Educational Foundations trust is redirected this year to support Energy and Sustainability audits of school buildings in the diocese, in collaboration with our LA partners. This will ensure all schools are able to forward plan their actions to becoming carbon neutral for 2030. For those that are 'in scope' with national church, we bid for all that is available for schools to develop their eco credentials.
- Admissions policies for VA and ex VA schools required legal changes due to the pandemic; these were all successfully completed.

- All Headteacher and Principal positions are filled. Only two positions changed between March 2020 to August 2021, due to retirement. This is much lower than the usual churn and we are already seeing an increase in headteachers saying they are considering a move, reduction in hours or early retirement post covid.
- Foundation Governance positions are 90% filled; this is better than national but we encourage all who wish to consider this role to get in contact. With a variety of CE schools and non church schools, LA and academies, there are plenty of diverse roles to consider and those without a church school on their doorstep are encouraged to participate further afield in the diocese.
- Some CE schools were invited to welcome Afghanistani children recently arrived in the diocese and have done so warmly.

### **The effect of covid**

The Education Team's ongoing Vision and Values work with school staff, well before and during covid, has been critical in driving schools' responses to the pandemic and curriculum. Staff have expressed how their church school vision has been at the absolute core of their decision making about policy and practice in covid. It has been an immovable marker against which to consider operating procedures. Some schools have articulated how their vision took on a new significance for all staff; enabling them to reflect on their primary purpose, and put the wellbeing of the child and adult at the heart of wise decision making.

Churches increased their giving to schools and started local initiatives such as food banks, loans and gifts of digital equipment, wellbeing packs for staff and families, funding for education resources, prayer and immense pastoral support.

While most schools returned in September 2021 to 'almost normal' timetabling such as whole school worship, singing, full class indoor lessons, swimming, parents and volunteers back in schools, and some face to face meetings, the pressures have certainly not ended. There are high levels of staff and pupil absence due to covid, isolation awaiting test results and other illness. Safety procedures including vaccination processes, teenage vaccination, altered timetables, social distancing, mask wearing and the cancellation of 'risky' events continue to cause disruption and anxiety. Despite the enormous efforts of those in school and many families, learning for some pupil and student groups has been consistently interrupted and not all are yet getting a full offer of education. There is much 'catch-up' to be done.

The efforts and expertise of staff, often very well supported by church communities to enable children, students and their families to flourish and be provided with essentials for living and learning has been inspiring and humbling. Nevertheless, as in many other fields, being an educator is attritional; the fatigue and exhaustion of staff is obvious. As an Education Team we continue to do our best to support.

Through covid, the Education Team have adapted to offer a hybrid training and work programme. This has included conferences, networks, newsletters, face to face and online 'health checks', SACRE guidance and new locally agreed syllabus conferences, ongoing engagement with LAs, training to other dioceses on Relationships, Sex and Health Education including the 'Goodness and Mercy' scheme written by one diocesan adviser; succession planning leadership programmes, new and aspiring headteacher commissioning, writing wellbeing, spiritual development, grief and loss resources, continuing Church School Partnership awards and the kindnesses that we have all tried to administer. Incumbents and ministry teams have received guidance on supporting and re-engaging with schools where usual activity has had to change. We are mindful that schools' work is time consuming but

often uplifting and enriching. The Education team and diocesan Youth Worker are here to support churches and congregations in their vocations with children and young people.

I wish to put on record again my own thanks and those of the Education Team and DBE, to all staff and volunteers such as governors in schools who have worked tirelessly and flexibly, often at some personal cost, to keep schools functioning throughout the pandemic and this term. Their sense of responsibility and commitment to young people has been immeasurable.

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