

Guidelines for Diocese of Hereford Church Schools as they plan to become part of a Multi-Academy Trust, in line with the DfE's "Opportunity for All" Education Reform Act

The DfE has set a target date of 2030 for all schools to be in a MAT or have firm plans to do so. The Act will contain various measures to protect the status and ethos of Church schools and the Church of England has been consulted by the DfE through the development of this legislation.

The Diocesan Board of Education (DBE) met in June 2022 to discuss how the church schools in the Diocese should handle their approach to this significant change, and to set the course for the way forward, ensuring we can meet our responsibility to safeguard the Christian ethos of our schools for years to come. 23 of our 78 Church schools are already Academies; 13 of these belong to the Diocesan Multi-Academy Trust (DHMAT); 2 belong to other Multi-Academy Trusts (MATs); 2 are Free Schools; 6 are Single Academy Trusts (SATs). Academies within the Diocese are members of The Diocese of Hereford Educational Trust (DHET) whose trustees are appointed by the Bishop and the DBE. The remaining 55 schools are maintained by the local authority; 27 of these are 'aided' by the local authority (VA) and 28 are 'controlled' by the local authority (VC). The Church provides governance in all Church schools, but in VC schools it provides a minority of the governors and in VA schools it provides the majority.

The DBE agreed the following parameters for Church schools as they plan to join or form MATs:

1. All VA schools must join (or form) a MAT where the company that establishes the MAT has a majority of Members derived from the Church. DHET is always a corporate member. VC (and indeed non-Church schools) are welcome to join such a MAT.
2. VC schools may only join (or form) a MAT which has *at least* a minority of Church-derived members.
3. DHMAT is the Diocese's own MAT. All Church schools are welcome to apply to join (as are non-Church schools). However, DBE members felt that it was important to offer choice to maintained schools and Single Academy Trusts as they plan to join a strong MAT, so the DBE will also consider the creation of two additional MATs where the company that forms them has a majority of members derived from the Church. These additional MATs may be fully within the Diocese of Hereford or MATs formed in partnership with neighbouring Dioceses. Any Church or non-Church school would be welcome to apply to join them. However, based on the DfE's guidelines on the scale required for a MAT to perform successfully, and the insights gained from DHMAT experience, the DBE will have a number of criteria that any school or group of schools wishing to form one of these additional MATs should meet. These are laid out more fully below.
4. The DBE must approve the creation of any MAT and any individual school's application to join an existing or new MAT. This approval is to ensure that (a) the ethos of Church schools is protected for the long term; (b) the process of all schools becoming part of a MAT is handled in a balanced and well-considered manner so that no schools are left behind.

Criteria that applications to form a new MAT must meet:

Criteria 1: Scale

The minimum effective size of a strong MAT in number of schools and number of students is not exact. It is a function of the balance between large and small schools, stronger and less strong schools, and geographical concentration or dispersal. But it is clear from DfE guidance, DHMAT experience, and the experience of existing Church and non-Church MATs across the country that small MATs will not have the scale and resources to deliver sustainable school improvement that the Act seeks to achieve.

As an example of this, DHMAT is the largest and longest-established Church MAT in the Diocese. It currently has 15 schools and around 3000 students. Its track record is strong, particularly with regard to turning around failing schools, but its leadership is aware that 3000 students is an absolute baseline to generate the central funding needed to offer the combined services that can improve schools' performance in a meaningful way.

With around 12000 students in Church schools throughout the Diocese, 2500 or so of these currently in DHMAT, it is clear that in order to achieve sensible scale we will have a maximum of 3 or 4 Church MATs in total. School leaders considering creating a new MAT for DBE approval will need to show how such a MAT will be capable of reaching c.3000 students by 2030, which schools or type of schools it has plans incorporate to achieve that number, and why such schools would want to join.

Criteria 2: Balance

One of the core objectives of the Act is to ensure that all students benefit from being in a family of schools which includes system-leading schools and teachers. It is critical that new MATs contain a sensible balance of resource-giving and resource-requiring schools, so that the stronger schools do not group together and leave the less strong schools with no robust home, or gathered together in a MAT of failing schools, which would be extremely difficult to improve in a sustainable way.

In considering applications to create a new MAT, the DBE will want to see plans that deliver scale with balance and make a commitment from the outset that strong *and* less strong schools form part of a new MAT's growth plan. This will also require gaining accreditation as a MAT capable of delivery system-leading improvement programmes. Although not a hard and fast rule, it is unlikely that good balance can be achieved in a MAT that contains *only* a large number of small, rural schools or *only* a small number of larger, urban schools.

Criteria 3: Leadership (Executive and Governance)

The DfE is clear on the need for a strong central leadership team, including a CEO and dedicated resource in school improvement, finance, estates, HR development and safeguarding. Scale is needed to deliver this leadership, and so is expertise. A MAT must have a board of directors (including Church representatives and the DHET as corporate member) who retain legal responsibility for all the schools in the MAT with powers to delegate to local governing bodies. The balance of skills and time required for these voluntary roles makes finding good directors extremely difficult. The DfE will be providing guidelines on what is expected of a good MAT and will soon begin evaluating MATs against these criteria.

The DBE will expect applications to form a new MAT to have carefully considered how executive and director (governance) positions would be filled and to have identified candidates. While a small, new MAT will not have the funds to appoint many full-time executive leaders it will need to do so over time in order to grow and achieve both scale and balance. A strong board of directors should be in place from the beginning.

Criteria 4: Geographical rationale and compelling reasons to group schools into a MAT

This is the most difficult criteria to provide guidelines for. In a rural and poorly connected diocese it would make no sense to have 3 or 4 MATs each with schools scattered its length and breadth. This is already a challenge for DHMAT. Schools on the edges of the Diocese might be better served by MATs based in a neighbouring Diocese, when the DBE can be represented at membership level. Conversely, the DBE is unlikely to accept an application from a school or schools well within the Diocesan boundaries to join a MAT not based here, given that our total number of Church school students is only enough to support a few MATs. MATs, particularly in their early days, may be best served by a leader school or schools. This might be the largest school (providing it is performing strongly) or by the senior school grouping with the primaries that feed it, though care would be needed to ensure the MAT is expert in the needs of both primary and secondary schools. The DBE will seek to understand why a proposed grouping of schools to form a new MAT makes sense, for geographical or other reasons, and will wish to balance that with its overview of how all the Church schools in the Diocese will find provision to join a strong MAT.

Next Steps

- (a) invite any and all groupings of schools that are interested in forming a MAT and who believe they can meet these criteria to apply, with the proviso that there will have to be real negotiation as suggestions emerge, if we are to meet our three key criteria
- (b) share the proforma document/presentation that covers what we would expect to see in an application to form a new MAT

Application for Conditional Consent to form a new Church of England Multi Academy Trust:

<https://www.hereford.anglican.org/content/pages/documents/app-2-application-for-conditional-consent-to-form-a-new-church-of-england-mat-sept-21.docx>

Application for Conditional Consent to Convert into a Multi Academy Trust:

<https://www.hereford.anglican.org/content/pages/documents/app-1-application-for-conditional-consent-to-convert-to-a-multi-academy-trust-sept-21.docx>