

Oxford Diocesan Board of Education - Academy Strategy – 1st January 2025

1. Context of the Oxford Diocesan Board of Education

The Diocese of Oxford has the largest number of schools (284) of any Anglican diocese in England and covers the Local Authority (LA) areas of Bracknell Forest, Buckinghamshire, Milton Keynes, Oxfordshire, Reading, Slough, West Berkshire, Windsor and Maidenhead, and Wokingham. Geographically, it is also one of the larger dioceses and comprises large areas which are rural but also many urban areas of heavy population; hence it combines the features of both the more rural and urban dioceses. Historically, two thirds of our schools were voluntary controlled and one third were voluntary aided. During the period following The Education (Change of Category of Maintained Schools) (England) Regulations 2000 approximately 25 schools converted from VC to VA status, and we welcomed the opportunity for schools to be able to choose to have closer ties with the Diocese.

As of 1 November 2024, there are 77 aided schools and 95 controlled schools in the Diocese which, along with 112 academies (in 23 MATs with church articles), serving some 60,000 pupils.

We continue to hold the initial Department for Education stance that schools should ideally convert “as is” i.e., VC schools should ideally convert into a minority church MAT and VA schools should convert into a majority church MAT. However, we do recognise the need for flexibility as the academy sector matures and we will continue to consider a flexible approach on a case-by-case basis. This is partly achieved through a governance model of “25% +1” to allow VA schools to join a former minority church MAT.

We will not agree to any church school joining a MAT without any form of church articles. We retain a very strong preference for schools to join a MAT within the diocesan boundary and will only consider these options beyond the diocese when there are compelling reasons, together with an agreed input to governance at the MAT in question. As we now involved with 23 MATs any increase in this number will need to be carefully considered by the full board.

The written consent of the ODBE is required before a school can join any MAT.

ODBE believes that there is no ‘one size fits all’ solution for academisation and each case will be considered on its circumstances and context. The DfE has published Trust Quality descriptors based on five ‘pillars’:

- high-quality and inclusive leadership
- school improvement
- workforce
- finance
- operations; governance and leadership.

These will be used largely by the Regional Directors in assessing a MAT’s ‘potential for growth’ and whether it can take in additional schools. However, these pillars will also underpin the work done by the DBE when assessing requests from schools to join a particular MAT or when considering suitable destinations for underperforming and vulnerable schools.

It is noted that the DfE have recently announced the imminent removal of the conversion grants, which may impact some school's ability to convert into an academy and perhaps is showing an agnostic position of the DfE to future conversions. It is also noted that directive academy orders for double RI schools have also been removed moving the solution more towards support rather than new structures.

The diocese contains many small, rural schools which may be unattractive to MATs. Even the largest MATs are unable to accept more than a handful of small schools due to the disproportionate nature of providing support and the lack of funds to do so. To date, there has not been a viable solution for how to ensure that such schools can join the trusts that would best suit them. However, the ODBE remain open to discussing creative solutions to find a long-term home for these schools, which provide a vital service to their communities. All MATs should consider taking at least two small schools.

Over the last 14 years since academisation has been more widely available, on average nine school per year have converted with the maximum being 16. There are still 172 maintained school which could potentially convert, so to reach a full level of academisation is likely to take at least 15 years. However, it is worth noting that as MATs get larger, they tend to have a more robust level of due diligence.

A list of MATs, with church articles, operating in the diocese are attached as annexe A at the end of this paper.

2. The role of the ODBE

The ODBE is a statutory body with responsibilities for church schools in the diocese, and for RE and Collective Worship. The DBE Measure 2021 provides the legal framework within which DBEs engage and work with church schools. MATs should familiarise themselves with this document.

<https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukcm/2021/1/contents/enacted>

The main aims of the Board are to:

- Promote education within the Diocese, according to the faith and practice of the Church of England.
- Promote religious education and religious worship in schools in the Diocese.
- Promote church schools in the diocese.
- Promote co-operation between itself and other persons concerned with education in the diocese.
- Give advice as to matters affecting church schools and Church educational endowments within the Diocese.

Various areas require the consent/advice of ODBE for all types of schools, including academies. This includes such areas as: advice to proprietors, trustees and those associated with church schools; advice on significant changes to the school; consultation on admission policies; consent for alterations and repairs to the school (see The DBE Measure for the full list). All applications must be made in writing and ODBE will endeavour to respond within 21 days.

The ODBE is represented as a corporate member in all CofE MATs in the diocese and depending upon whether it is a majority or minority church MAT through individual appointments.

The ODBE continues to make available a wide range of support, training and resources to both church schools and academy trusts as part of the family of church schools.

3. The DBE's vision

The Diocese of Oxford seeks to be a more “Christ-like Church” and calls upon us to be “Contemplative, compassionate and courageous for the sake of God's world”. The Oxford Diocesan Board of Education’s values are identical to those with the addition of a fourth value that reflects our unique position interfacing with a wide range of partners. The following weave through the outworking of our vision to promote and uphold wisdom, knowledge, and joy and express what we strive to be:

- Contemplative
- Compassionate
- Courageous
- Collaborative

The Oxford Diocesan Board of Education’s mission is rooted in the values and these values remain unchanged by local and national contexts. ODBE seeks to blend vision and pragmatism with the key to its aspiration to be ‘A flourishing organisation delivering a unique service to education by shaping and influencing the future’. In responding to the opportunities and challenges of the current times ODBE has identified and expressed its role and purpose in five specific commitments:

- Champion the whole needs of all children, young people and adults in schools, MATs and colleges.
- Advise, challenge and support leaders to enable them and their schools to flourish.
- Support schools to ensure equity, diversity, inclusion, justice, and human flourishing.
- Confront the climate emergency for the sake of God’s world.
- Advocate and support excellent distinctive Church of England school education

These commitments underpin and shape ODBE’s actions within four key workstreams. These workstreams are anchored to its ‘unique service’ and are as follows:

Flourishing and wellbeing; church school effectiveness: development and support; and. ODBE itself.

4. Aims

The ODBE strategy aims to:

- Enable all pupils in Church of England schools to achieve their full potential, putting their interests first in a safe and secure environment.
- Provide a clear and consistent framework for schools considering their future.
- Respond appropriately to the government’s policy on academies.
- Provide a choice to church schools in their MAT destination, although recognising that this will be significantly more limited if they are issued with a Directive Academy Order.
- Provide advice and support to governing bodies to make informed decisions in the best long-term interests of their pupils, ignoring short term temporary issues.
- Secure good governance for all schools for the long term, which reflects their status as C of E schools.

5. Principles

The ODBE expects MATs with church school to:

- Be committed to developing and maintaining a positive working relationship with ODBE.
- Be committed to the Church of England’s vision for education and to protecting and developing the Christian character of its schools.

- Provide effective school improvement so that all pupils flourish.
- Be sustainable and provide capacity for the long term with appropriate succession planning.
- Sponsor underperforming schools as well as Good and Outstanding schools in a sensible balance.
- Support small schools as part of the family of church schools, subject to proper due diligence.
- Use the Risk Protection Arrangements (RPA) to protect the interests of the site trustees.
- Maintain a local level of governance within its scheme of delegation, which reflects the former VA/VC status of the school, with an appropriate number of foundation governors appointed by the foundation body, using the agreed ODBE process.
- To operate in an area which geographically makes sense and enables individual schools to co-operate closely with other school in the MAT.

The ODBE continues to have a significant role with both maintained schools and academies in relation to RE, Collective Worship and SIAMS inspections and also admissions advice, to which academy trusts must have regard. It will also continue to offer a range of traded services which can be purchased.

The ODBE operates within the Memorandum of Agreement (MoU) between the Church of England and the DfE

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/517423/Memorandum_of_understanding_between_the_National_Society_and_DfE.pdf

Written consent is required in advance where alterations, capital works, expansion or repairs are proposed to maintained church schools and academies, where the estimated cost is above £50,000 – as set by the ODBE Development Committee on 11 February 2022 – this will be subject to review from time to time.

6. Model documents

MATs which include Church schools are required to use the Church of England model articles of association agreed with the DfE. These were revised in September 2023 and moved away from the two-model version (minority and majority) and now just based on the majority model. These can be found at:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/church-academies-model-documents>

However, recognising the historic breakdown of church school in this Diocese we intend to continue to adapt this model to reflect the governance pattern in minority, VC+, hybrid and majority model articles. Therefore, all changes from this single model are hereby permitted to facilitate the governance model agreed between the Diocese and the individual MAT.

Where any MAT wishes to move to a majority model, these will be very sympathetically considered.

It is noted that in a few cases the consent of the site trustees is required to make changes to the articles. On these rare occasions ODBE's cost will need to be covered by the DfE or MAT as it is likely to be a very time-consuming process (alternatively, the MAT can undertake this work themselves).

The Articles of Association include the commitment to ensure that: "Church of England schools designated as such are conducted in accordance with the principles, practices and tenets of the Church of England both generally and in particular in relation to arranging for religious education and daily acts of worship and having regard to any advice issued by the Diocesan Board of Education."

The MAT will enter into a Church of England Supplemental Agreement with the Secretary of State, the ODBE and the site trustees to protect the Church of England foundation of the school and the rights of the school to

continue to occupy the church owned land. The MAT has a Master Funding Agreement and each school within the MAT has a Supplemental Funding Agreement.

The school's occupation of the site, which continues to be held by the site trustees (which in approximately one third of cases is ODBE), is dependent on the trust ensuring that its Christian character is protected. The SIAMS inspection process is one of the measures used to judge whether the trust has been successful in discharging this responsibility. However, this is not the only measure and MATs should be able to provide a clear view on its Christian character at any point in time.

7. Policy

This academy strategy provides a framework for schools to consider options regarding academisation and to work within. It does not prescribe any individual MAT. The choice of which specific MAT a school may prefer to join is for governors and school leaders to make following a process of due diligence and by having regard to this policy.

- The ODBE respects the decision-making powers of governing bodies to make informed decisions in the best interests of their pupils, whether to remain as a maintained school, federate or become an academy. When choosing to join an academy, governors should choose a MAT which can offer high levels of support to deliver sustained improvement.
- The ODBE recognises the importance of schools working together across a reasonable geographical area, particularly when part of a MAT.
- The ODBE will issue a letter of preliminary consent to accompany the academy order application to the DfE where it meets the requirement in this policy. Full consent will be given following the completion of the MATs due diligence and agreement to the model legal documents has been reached.
- The ODBE will not permit a school to join a MAT outside of the diocesan boundary, unless all MAT options within the diocese have been fully considered but then discounted.
- We expect all MATs to have a minimum number of three church school in this diocese (or be working towards that number).
- Given the size of the diocese, the ODBE wishes to encourage the appropriate growth of the existing MATs to ensure that they are all of a sustainable size with appropriate structures and are not reliant on individuals.
- The ODBE continues to have a statutory role in both maintained schools and academies in relation especially to RE, Collective Worship and SIAMS inspections, but additionally with regard to building and trust matters together with offering a range of traded services.
- All statutory transfers of land from the LA's must be completed prior to the academy conversion and all land must be registered an HM Land Registry. Where ODBE has pre-empted land registration within the previous five years these costs will need to be reimbursed as part of the conversion grant. Statutory transfers in Buckinghamshire remain problematical as they will not follow DfE advice, so at best the process will be extended and at worst the process will be blocked.
- It is strongly recommended that MATs use solicitors who are familiar with ODBE and the property side of conversion to save costs. If ODBE has to appoint its own solicitors, the cost will usually significantly increase the usual cost for a conversion as a solicitor dealing with a solicitor significantly increases the overall cost.
- ODBE reserves the right to charge a nominal £500 (subject to revision) towards its costs for the conversion.
- Voluntary controlled (VC) schools will, in principle, be given consent to join any form of MAT with church articles. VA schools should initially consider all majority governance MAT options and only if these are not the best fit to consider VC+ or hybrid options. In all MATs, local governance will reflect

its governance structure when it was a maintained school. The ODBE will not support applications from church schools seeking to join existing multi-academy trusts without church articles of one form or another.

- In line with the MoU, schools requiring sponsorship will be sponsored by a MAT with appropriate Church of England governance and capacity. The DDE will work proactively with the Regional Director (RD) to determine the most appropriate solution which best meets the needs of the school and its community. This applies to maintained schools judged Inadequate and to maintained schools which receive a second (or further) Ofsted judgement of below Good. This may include cross-diocesan support, but only after all options within the diocese have been considered and discounted by both the DfE and ODBE.
- The expectation that academies will continue to buy into the ODBE's SLA particularly to demonstrate how they are covering the distinctive aspects of RE, Collective Worship and SAIMS preparation, but if not, they will need to demonstrate how they are securing this specific support elsewhere.
- It is an expectation that there will be regular meetings between the CEO of the MAT and a senior member of staff from the ODBE to discuss issues and improve co-operation.
- It is an expectation that members will meet two-three times per year to be kept informed of issues in the MAT.

8. Before seeking DfE consent via an Academy Order application

Before the ODBE issues a conditional letter of consent (needed for the academy order application), schools should ensure that they:

- Have sought informal advice from the Diocesan Director of Education (DDE) or Deputy Director at an early stage in the process, to ensure that their plans align with this diocesan strategy.
- Have considered thoroughly the pros and cons of becoming an academy, familiarised themselves with the process involved and researched all the information available. Useful links include the DfE website- <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/convert-to-an-academy-information-for-schools> - which includes model documentation for church schools. Schools should consider their reasons and expectations carefully.
- Sought information and assurance from the MATs being considered.
- Have passed a governing body resolution to apply for academy status, not simply discussed the matter, but resolved that it is in the best long-term interests of the school to proceed.
- Have already sought and obtained the informal consent of the site trustees and any other trustee bodies who appoint governors.
- Have consulted informally staff and parents as fully as possible (recognising that consultation can take place at different stages in relation to the academy order application).
- A copy of the school's parental consultation should be sent to ODBE, when the consultation commences.
- Applications which are straight forward and align with this policy will be decided by the DDE and DDDE and reported to the Board. Those less straight forward applications will be taken to the Board for approval.

9. The ODBE

The ODBE is very experienced in assisting schools to convert into an academy and schools should tap into this experience to help facilitate a smooth transfer. ODBE should be kept in touch with the whole process and copied into correspondence with the DfE.

10. New schools

As part of its commitment to education, the ODBE is keen to promote more opportunities for children and young people in the diocese to have access to a Church of England education and will highlight new opportunities to MATs. Where there is a need for a new school, the ODBE is committed to working with MATs to ascertain whether it will be possible to submit a bid to establish a new CofE school. We are pleased that this joint working has enabled four new Church of England Schools to open in the last few years and we would wish to seek further opportunities.

11. Miscellaneous

1. The ODBE only uses the church supplemental agreement (CSA) and not the lease option.
2. We expect all MATs to utilise the RPA arrangements for insurance and if not, to provide annually the relevant policy details to ODBE.
3. If any church schools within a MAT require any intervention, we expect to work closely with the MAT to resolve the issues.
4. We expect any discussions about church schools in this diocese by the RD office to have been discussed with ODBE before any other parties, particularly around school requiring intervention or a DAO. There will be regular termly meetings between the staff in the RD office and ODBE staff. There will be further regular meetings between the DDE and RD.
5. All required consents and MAT appointments (including members, trustees and LGB governors) will be dealt with in accordance with the DBE Measure 2021 and the individual articles of each MAT, within a reasonable timeframe.
6. Any ecumenical schools which want to become an academy will require detailed discussion between the relevant dioceses to agree a solution and are likely to be lengthy.

12. Review

The ODBE will review its strategy on an annual basis, or earlier if a significant issue becomes apparent.

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Initially Approved by the Oxford Diocesan Board of Education on 29 November 2023 and updated 27 November 2024

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Annex A

MATs operating in Oxfordshire which are suitable for Church Schools (note: the number of schools is the total of both church and community schools in each Trust as at 01/11/2024)

Oxford Diocesan Schools Trust (43 schools)
Abingdon Learning Trust (w.e.f. 1/12/24) (4 schools)
Eynsham Partnership of Academies (10 schools)
Cambrian Learning Trust (9 schools) – Due to merge with Vale Academy Trust
Ridgeway Education Trust (Didcot) (8 schools)
River Learning Trust (Oxford) (28 schools)
The Merchant Taylors Oxfordshire Academies Trust (Wallingford) (3 schools)
Vale Academy Trust (Wantage) (9 schools) – Due to merge with Cambrian Learning Trust
Warriner Academy Trust (Bloxham) (10 schools)
MILL(Witney) (3 schools)

MATs operating in Berkshire which are suitable for Church Schools (please note that in West Berkshire there is currently limited coverage of MATs as only one church school has converted, although discussions are in train which may see two new MATs formed for church schools)

Oxford Diocesan Schools Trust (focused in Windsor & Maidenhead) (43 schools – 6 in W&M; 3 in Reading)
Agape MAT (Wargrave) (2 schools)
Ashley Hill (White Waltham) (3 schools)
Bonitas (Bracknell) (2 schools)
Excalibur (Marlborough) (20 schools)
LDDB Frays (London) (7 schools)
The Keys Academy Trust (Earley) 12 schools)
SEBMAT (Slough) (7 schools)
The White Horse Federation (Swindon) (31 schools)
Windsor Learning Partnership (6 schools)

MATs operating in Buckinghamshire & Milton Keynes which are suitable for Church Schools

Oxford Diocesan Bucks Schools Trust (13 schools)
Great Learners Trust (Great Missenden) (11 schools)
Inspiring Futures Through Learning (Milton Keynes) (16 schools)
Kings Education Trust (Great Kingshill) (4 schools)
(Discussions are on-going around establishing other MATs north of Aylesbury and one in the Marlow locality)

Annex B

Number of Church of England schools and academies within each LA area as at 01/11/2024:

Local Authority	Academies	Maintained VC/VA Schools
Bracknell Forest	3	5
Buckinghamshire	20	45
Milton Keynes	2	8
Oxfordshire	54	64
Reading	3	1
Slough	2	1
West Berkshire	1	29
Windsor and Maidenhead	12	13

Wokingham	12	7
Totals	112	172

Annex C

Number of Church of England Schools Located Within the Oxford Diocese in Each MAT as at 01/11/2024

Oxford Diocesan Schools Trust – 37
 The Keys Academy Trust – 11 (1 more approved)
 Oxford Diocesan Bucks Schools Trust – 8 (1 more approved)
 Eynsham Partnership of Academies – 7
 River Learning Trust – 6
 Cambrian Learning Trust - 4
 Vale Academy Trust – 4
 Ridgeway Education Trust – 4
 Warriner – 3
 Ashley Hill - 3
 SEBMAT – 3
 Agape - 2
 Bonitas – 2
 Great Learners Trust - 2
 Inspiring Futures Through Learning – 1 (1 more approved)
 Kings Education Trust - 1
 The Merchant Taylors Oxfordshire Academies Trust - 1
 MILL - 1
 Excalibur - 1
 LDBS Frays - 1
 The White Horse Federation - 1
 Windsor Learning Partnership - 1