



Diocesan Board of Education Academy Strategy

1. The role of the DBE

The DBE 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-

<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
- give advice as to matters affecting church schools and Church educational endowments within the Diocese.

The DBE consists of members nominated by the Bishop, elected members of the Diocesan Synod, and people with experience of church schools in the diocese. It includes ordained clergy, lay people, Headteachers and education professionals from across the diocese.

The Academies Act 2010 requires church schools to obtain consent from those who appoint foundation governors before they may apply to the DfE to become academies-

<https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2010/32/contents>

This means the Bishop, the DBE and the PCC. They must also obtain consent from the site trustees of the school land.

The DBE is represented as a corporate member of all CofE MATs in the diocese through its umbrella trust.

The DBE 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 in support of Christian distinctiveness.

2. Church schools in the diocese

There are 87 church schools in the diocese, 85 of which are primary and two of which are secondary. As at 1 February 2025, 50 of these are academies, 30 are voluntary controlled (VC) and 7 are voluntary aided (VA). 94% are good or outstanding (86% and 8% respectively). The DBE seeks to ensure that there is sufficient capacity for church schools to join a church school-led MAT within the diocese.

3. The DBE's vision

The Church of England's vision for education inspires the work of the DBE with its focus on Jesus offering "life in all its fulness"-

https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2017-10/1687943692_2016-church-of-england-vision-for-education-web-final.pdf

We promote a Christian vision for schools in which all can grow and flourish, and excellence in the teaching of RE and in Collective Worship.

Our key priorities are:

1. to develop and support highly effective church schools and Headteachers
2. to equip and resource church schools to deliver high quality RE and Collective Worship
3. to support schools, governors and clergy in ensuring the Christian distinctiveness of church schools
4. to develop and strengthen effective links between churches and schools which enable faith to grow and to contribute to the Diocesan Growing in God strategy.

4. Aims

The DBE strategy aims to:

- enable all pupils in Church of England schools to achieve their full potential, putting their interests first
- provide a clear and consistent framework for schools considering their future
- respond appropriately to the government's policy on academies
- provide choice to church schools
- manage risk
- secure good governance for all schools for the long term, which reflects their status as C of E schools.

5. Principles

The DBE expects church school MATs to:

- 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 pupils flourish
- be sustainable and provide capacity for the long term
- sponsor underperforming schools as well as Good and Outstanding schools
- 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 DBE process.

The DBE continues to have a role in both maintained schools and academies in relation especially to RE, Collective Worship and SIAMS inspections and also admissions advice, to which academy trusts must have regard.

The DBE 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 schools and academies, where the estimated cost is above £2,500.

6. Model documents

Church schools are required to use the Church of England model articles of association agreed with the DfE- <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/church-academies-model-documents>. The Articles of Association include the following object to ensure that: "Where an Academy is designated with a religious character, in relation to the ethos and religious education provided at any Church Academy, the Directors shall have regard to any advice and follow any directives from the Appropriate Diocesan Authority[, and having due regard to the Diocesan Strategy].

The MAT will enter into a Church of England Supplemental Agreement with the Secretary of State, the DBE 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 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, is dependent on the trust ensuring that its Christian character is protected. The SIAMS inspection process is used to judge whether the trust has been successful in discharging this responsibility.

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.

- The DBE 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.
- The DBE recognises the importance of schools working together across a reasonable geographical area.
- The DBE will normally decide on granting consent once a MAT has completed its due diligence and agreed to accept a school.
- Given the size of the diocese, the DBE is satisfied that there are sufficient MATs for church schools in Suffolk. The existing MATs are: the Diocesan MAT, Thedwastre, Tilian, All Saints Schools Trust and Elveden Schools Trust. The Diocesan MAT is now close to capacity. The Heart of Suffolk Education Trust is in formation, based on Debenham High School.
- The DBE continues to have a role in both maintained schools and academies in relation especially to RE, Collective Worship and SIAMS inspections.
- Voluntary controlled (VC) schools will be given consent to join a majority or minority governance MAT, whereas voluntary aided (VA) schools will only be permitted to join a MAT with majority governance. This reflects the previous maintained status of the school involved and helps to safeguard its future as a Church school in line with its Trust Deed. Thedwastre is the only MAT with minority articles.
- Local governance will be secured to strengthen and protect the local relationship between the diocese and the school as part of the family of church schools.
- The DBE will not normally support applications from church schools seeking to join existing multi-academy trusts with non-church schools, other than in exceptional circumstances.

- In line with the MoJ, 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 currently applies to maintained schools judged Inadequate. This may include cross-diocesan support.

8. Before seeking consent

Before the DBE's consent is sought, schools should ensure that they:

- have sought advice from the Diocesan Director of Education (DDE) or Deputy Director at an early stage, 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, and the diocesan website- <https://www.cofesuffolk.org/schools/resources-and-information/becoming-an-academy/>. Schools should consider their reasons and expectations carefully and undertake appropriate due diligence on MAT options
- 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 informed consent of the PCC
- have consulted staff and parents as fully as possible
- complete a declaration, and any supplementary information, in good time for the papers to be circulated in advance of the DBE meeting. Templates are available from the DDE.

9. The process of seeking consent

- Schools are asked to complete a declaration, and any supplementary information, in good time for the papers to be circulated in advance of the DBE meeting. Templates are available from the DDE.
- Decisions will be made by the full Board. In exceptional circumstances, consent may be sought by electronic approval between meetings.
- The Headteacher and Chair of Governors will normally be invited to attend a DBE meeting for that item.

10. The DBE

The DBE will:

- provide information, advice and support to schools via the DDE and Deputy DDE
- decide whether to consent, give conditional consent, withhold consent or defer, pending further information and inform the Headteacher and Chair of its decision after the meeting
- provide a letter of conditional consent once approved.

The DBE's decision will be final and is not open to appeal.

The DBE will need to satisfy itself that:

- due process has been carried out
- the proposal is supported by the Headteacher and Governing Body
- the school has fully consulted staff and parents
- the school has sufficient capacity to become an academy
- the decision is in the best interests of the children who attend (or who will attend) the school.

11. New schools

As part of its commitment to education, the DBE is keen to promote more opportunities for children and young people in Suffolk to have access to a Church of England education. Where there is a need for a new school in Suffolk, as identified by Suffolk County Council, the DBE is committed to considering whether it will be possible to establish a new CofE school. Church MATs must comply with the requirement to obtain the DBE's consent to establish a new school with a religious (CofE) designation.

12. Review

The DBE will review its strategy in the light of any changes in DfE policy or other circumstances.

Jane Sheat
Diocesan Director of Education
February 2025