

Academy Conversion Policy

October 2017

Aim

The aim of this document is to inform governing bodies of the implications and processes involved in conversion to academy status, and to set out the process in detail. This document replaces the previous guidance issued in October 2015.

When working with our schools, it is our key aim that the values of Christian collaboration, co-operation and respect be embodied in the prospective Multi-Academy Trust (MAT) from the start, and that these principles should govern both policy and process throughout.

We seek to support the governing bodies of all Church of England maintained schools to consider converting to academy status but now only within a Multi-Academy Trust. Such a Trust must be suitable for church schools (see page 2 for details), although it may be a Trust containing a mix of church and community schools, according to the needs of the local context. As at 1 October 2017, 67 of our church schools have converted to academy status and across the diocese there are now 15 (soon to be 16) MATs suitable for church schools (although not all of these are suitable for former VA schools) and we expect this number of MATs to increase slightly over the next two years – see the lists of MATs at the end of this paper.

All Church of England schools require the permission of the Oxford Diocesan Board of Education (ODBE) to convert to Academy Status as part of a MAT or to move between MATs and therefore, schools must involve the ODBE at the earliest stage of their deliberations. If you are exploring joining a MAT not on the list at the end of this paper, you should contact the ODBE at a very early stage as in some cases, it may not be possible.

Background

Previously, ODBE had adopted a neutral stance in respect of schools converting to academies. Following the Education and Adoption Act 2016, the Board amended its advice to encourage church maintained schools to form, or join a MAT. Although DfE pressure to convert to academy status has now eased (apart from schools receiving an inadequate judgement by Ofsted and for all new schools to be established) and that the previous financial advantages have now disappeared, it may still be the right decision for some schools. Each school should ensure that they are not isolated, but are within a suitably strong partnership from which they will receive support – whether it is in a MAT or other local arrangement. Schools should seek to work together to share good and outstanding practice, and thereby support one another to improve. We also want to encourage schools to create large enough economic bodies to enable them to remain financially viable in the current climate of austerity funding. It is also driven by a commitment to establish strong MATs which may be able to support a school in need at a future point, and to encourage schools to make their own choices about academy destination while the full range of freedoms are available to them.

We want to work alongside governing bodies to find the right structure and the right partners to enable you to move forward in a time frame that suits you. The Board's advice to schools is currently designed to:

- 1) secure the Christian character of our church schools in the long term;
- 2) give schools which wish to convert to academy status a choice of destination, where practically possible;
- 3) enable groups of schools in geographical proximity to work together well, regardless of their religious designation;
- 4) ensure mutual support and collaboration.

We recognise that the role of local authorities (LAs) in our schools remains significant and we seek to continue in partnership with them, but we realise that the nature of that partnership is changing and the kind of support that schools receive from their LA is evolving.

We are committed to the sustaining of a clear Christian ethos in our schools, and seek to work collaboratively to ensure that any move to academy status retains that ethos. We are also aware of the need for schools to work increasingly collaboratively with other local schools regardless of status or category, and seek to enable appropriate mechanisms for this. There are 15 MATs now in existence across the diocese, suitable for church schools. We want to see inclusive partnerships and are willing to facilitate the coming together of church and community schools in structures that support, preserve and develop the different categories of each. The DfE will no longer allow a school to convert to becoming a stand-alone academy (nor a single school MAT).

Becoming a Church of England Academy: Key principles

For a MAT to be suitable for a church school, the following must be observed:

1. Any church school wishing to convert to academy status needs to obtain the consent of ODBE. We are committed to ensuring that all our church academies remain distinctively Christian in character and so we expect the following:
 - that the academy trust must maintain and develop the religious character of the Church of England schools within it, working in close partnership with their parishes/benefices/deanery and their local communities as well as ODBE;
 - that the academy trust continues to be committed to their wider family of schools and to developing its relationship with the local, national and international church;
 - that the new academy trust will work with and in support of others and not act in any way that is to the detriment of other local schools;
 - that Collective Worship and Religious Education in the new church academies continue to follow the guidance of ODBE and/or locally agreed syllabus, as appropriate;
 - that the SIAMS inspection framework will continue to be used to assess and monitor Christian distinctiveness in church academies.Naturally we also expect to be reassured that the academy proposal in question will have a positive impact on the education of pupils and be financially viable. Designated Church of England schools retain their Church of England designation on conversion.
2. All church schools in the Oxford Diocese converting to academy status will be required to appoint ODBE as a corporate Member of their academy company. Church membership shall be 25% for any MAT containing a VC school, and a larger total for any group containing a former VA school, usually up to 75%. The appropriate DfE approved model articles of association must be used to set up the company
3. ODBE is willing in principle to consider acting as sponsor for those church schools who ask for or require it, through the mechanism of The Oxford Diocesan Schools Trust (ODST) and The Oxford Diocesan Bucks Schools Trust (ODBST). It is also happy to consider proposals for sponsorship via a local school-based MAT, provided the MAT meets the required conditions 1-7.
4. All church academy companies must have several trustees appointed by ODBE (this replicates the existing appointment of foundation governors in schools; the number is dependent on the VC/VA category of the predecessor school). Any MAT with a VC church school in it must have 25% of the trustees appointed by ODBE; for VA schools converting to a stand-alone academy or in a MAT, the majority of the trustees are appointed by the members. There is no precedent for the percentage of trustees in a mixed VA/VC/Community school MAT and any group of schools wishing to propose such a company must speak to officers of ODBE at the earliest opportunity, but this would always be more than the 25% for a MAT containing a VC school alone.
5. All church academies must have several “governors” appointed by ODBE. In a MAT, school governors are technically Local Governing Body (LGB) members. This replicates the previous appointment of foundation governors in the schools; the number is dependent on the VC/VA category of the predecessor school, so is usually either 25% or 75%.

6. Community schools in a MAT with church school membership and trusteeship need not convert to being a church school. ODBE actively supports the preservation of the ethos of community schools and trustees of any MAT containing both church and community schools will be required in law to sustain the different ethos of each. We are committed to supporting collaborative working among schools of different characters and do not in any way seek to impose our values on others, though we require that those working with us respect our commitment to the furtherance of Christian education in church schools.
7. We work within the national agreement secured with the DfE that church land trustees (who they are varies from school to school) continue to hold land and buildings in trust. This is identified in the church land supplemental agreement and applies to both VA and VC schools. Land (e.g. playing fields) owned by the LA is usually transferred to the academy company on a 125-year lease.

The following MATs currently contain ODBE church schools. Those operating near a local authority boundary may seek to accept schools from other LA areas as they are not limited by these geographical boundaries.

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 1/10/17)

- Oxford Diocesan Schools Trust (28 schools)
- Eynsham Partnership of Academies (7 schools)
- Faringdon Academy of Schools (8 schools)
- River Learning Trust (Oxford) (11 schools)
- The Merchant Taylors Oxfordshire Academies Trust (Wallingford) (2 schools)
- Vale Academy Trust (Wantage) (7 schools)
- Warriner Academy Trust (Bloxham) (5 schools)
- MILL (Witney) (3 schools)

MATs operating in Berkshire which are suitable for church schools

- Oxford Diocesan Schools Trust (focused in Windsor & Maidenhead) – ODST (28 schools – 5 in W&M)
- Ashley Hill (White Waltham) (3 schools)
- Bonitas (Bracknell) (2 schools)
- Berkshire Schools Trust (Reading) (2 schools)
- The Keys Academy Trust (Earley) (2 schools)
- SEBMAT (Slough) (3 schools)

MATs operating in Buckinghamshire which are suitable for church schools

- Oxford Diocesan Bucks Schools Trust – opened 1/10/17 (ODBST) (2 schools)
- Great Learners Trust (Great Missenden) – 2 schools
- Kings Education Trust (Great Kingshill) – expected to open 1/12/17 with 2 schools