

## The academies picture – Position, Outlook, Collaboration

### Introduction:

As you know the Bishop's vision and the wider diocesan plan is for all schools within the diocese to be part of deanery based multi-academy trusts in time and this has not changed. This is something which has been articulated in a range of ways since [2017](#) and inevitably will come in to sharper focus as we eventually learn to live with COVID and feel able to look more confidently towards the future. All schools have been under pressure as they have focussed on delivering education under challenging circumstances whilst ensuring the safety of pupils and staff. Schools even now are identifying gaps in learning and putting in place a recovery curriculum to address those gaps. It is unequivocally recognised we have lived through some very challenging times and looking to the longer term future has not always been such a priority or even a possibility. It will be important to see how the pandemic plays out in the coming weeks and months. In Bishop Alan's July letter to schools he said:

"While now is clearly not the time I intend, in due course, to write to all Catholic schools and parishes to once again encourage the further growth and development of Catholic MATs across the diocese. Whilst this may be in line with thinking coming out of national Government it is also genuinely my firm belief that this is the best future for our schools."

In his Education Sunday letter September 2021, Bishop Alan restated his support for Catholic Multi-Academy Trusts saying that he saw them as "... an opportunity for schools to work together actively and formally to shape the Catholic education system in their locality. It is this approach that will enable high standards of Catholic education to be maintained and where schools can contribute more widely as beacons of good practice in the local community."

Fr Stephen followed these communications up urging all schools that are not in a CMAT to have the topic on governing body agendas so that governors could discuss and consider this on an annual basis. Fr Stephen is not alone in thinking that the direction of travel nationally is towards a school improvement system that is school led and based around the work of MATs. As Episcopal Vicar, he speaks on behalf of the Bishop and wants to ensure that all schools consider where their school will sit in the evolving landscape. Obviously for the Catholic Church in England, the home for every Catholic school must be within a Catholic structure. At the last count there were 75 Catholic MATs in existence across 18 Dioceses in England. We will update this information in the summer and identify the total number of Catholic schools that this involves nationally. Inevitably, there will be some out there that we can learn from. Existing CMATs in the diocese of Brentwood and in other dioceses can play an important role in articulating a compelling case for this direction of travel.

Fr Stephen went on to ask governors to write to him if they had reservations about moving forward in to a CMAT so as to enable us to understand the particular situations relating to individual schools circumstances so that we can work with governors and school leaders to support and develop thinking in this area. This could profitably lead to the establishment of a diocesan Working Group later this academic year and a CMAT development conference later in the summer, COVID permitting.

The context for all schools is different. Some schools are religious order schools, some are former religious order schools, some are already Single Academy Trusts, some are single form primary schools and others are much larger. Some schools have a long and well-established tradition going back over 100 years whilst others are relatively young by comparison. There are schools with high numbers of Catholics and others have many fewer. Some schools are single sex schools whilst others are mixed. All schools operate within the Diocese of Brentwood and come under the oversight of the Bishop. The diocese is a wide and diverse social, economic, geographical and religious entity and some schools will be operating in areas where they are already in a significant minority because the vast majority of schools have already become part of a local MAT, Academy Chain or another type of MAT. Once governors have discussed the subject of CMATs

in their particular context then their responses will allow us to fully appreciate the challenges and opportunities that exist.

Fr Stephen pointed out that, where CMATs have been established in our diocese benefits have already been identified, including financial savings, greater inter-school support and renewal of the mission they share as Catholic schools. These are things that we will look to exemplify through some case studies in due course. What we are now attempting to do is to produce a BDES document that will further articulate the position on CMATS, the outlook and the benefits of genuine collaboration between schools. At the same time it will be important to continue to learn from the experiences of those who have already engaged with becoming part of a CMAT locally and nationally.

**“Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interest of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus” Philippians 2:4-5**

#### Rationale for joining a CMAT

It is always beneficial to reflect on what it means to be the Church in our time and place and moreover more specifically what it means to be a missionary church. In response to this, parishes throughout the country are working more closely together, often sharing clergy and finding new opportunities for growth and renewal. We all recognise that our schools are part of the missionary church so it's important to explore how our schools can develop and ensure a firm foundation for the future. It can be argued strongly that just as our parishes need to work together for mission then our schools also need to work more closely together to make sure they provide the very best educational opportunities for the young people in their care. Sharing resources and expertise can only strengthen our schools. In a changing educational landscape we need to “future proof” our schools, as much as we are able to, so that pupils can flourish. Just as parishes can no longer work in isolation neither should our schools.

The gift of Catholic education is precious, not something we can take for granted but a gift that needs celebrating and we are duty bound to protect it for the future generations. There can be no better motivation for working together than that highlighted by the Catholic Bishops in their statement around the Common Good: *“Society as envisaged by Catholic Social Teaching should be made up of many layers, which will be in complex relationships with one another but which will be ordered as a whole towards the common good, in accordance with the principle of solidarity. [Solidarity](#) requires action to protect the common good at this level, where it can only be safeguarded by the collaboration of all.”*

Like anything alive, our Diocese is evolving and changing. We are blessed with many people from other countries and cultures who enrich the life of our parishes and schools. So our vision must be for a family of schools that is fully inclusive. The challenge is for school leaders and those with governance responsibilities to show courageous leadership. To be open to try new practices which respond to the current and future needs of learners as far as we can ascertain them. We need to have the confidence, self-belief and courage to challenge ourselves as professionals to adapt and change in the best interests of young people. In retaining a focus on the needs of every child we can be confident that we will collectively raise standards and attainment for all pupils in our schools. It is by taking a positive decision to join a Catholic MAT in our diocese that schools can explore opportunities, embolden governance, continue to raise standards and strive for excellence while fulfilling the vision of our Bishop. When we work together, for each other, in service of the common good we will achieve our ambitions for our children. It is equally important to stress that each school owns their improvement journey and shares their success across the Trust for the benefit of others. The benefits of collaboration are important and our understanding of these continue to evolve. This is an important evolving area of focus for other sectors as well. ([Benefits of collaboration](#))

## Bigger picture

There are currently 1,170 Multi Academy Trusts in England that manage at least two schools. About a third of Catholic schools nationally are academies educating 37% of Catholic pupils. In England 35% of primary and 77% of secondary schools are academies, with over 50% of Catholic Secondary schools now academies or part of CMATS.

There are a total of 83 schools in the Brentwood Diocese of which 66 are primary schools and 17 are secondary. Since 2011, 47 of these schools have converted to academy status with the majority being organised into 6 Diocesan multi academy trusts. We call these organisations Catholic Multi Academy Trusts (CMATs). The 6 trusts are largely regionally (Deanery) based but not exclusively so and do include schools not in their immediate area:

The Assisi Trust (Southend & South Essex)

The Good Shepherd Trust (Redbridge, Barking & Dagenham)

Our Lady of Grace Trust (Newham)

Our Lady of Fatima Trust (Harlow)

The Rosary Trust (Colchester, Chelmsford & Mid Essex)

The Christus Trust (Thurrock, Basildon & Billericay).

## Benefits for our schools

There are a number of perceived benefits for schools as part of a CMAT.

- **Deepening of shared ethos:** CMAT schools build on and develop a distinctive Catholic ethos
- **Increased collegiality:** through closer collaboration a shared approach to threats or [challenges](#) can be developed
- **Pedagogical advantages of collaboration:** through sharing good practice staff build up their expertise which ultimately benefits pupils
- **Financial savings:** through economies of scale and shared central services schools can be financially better off enabling the savings to be spent on pupils
- **Improved and more efficient support functions:** CMATs can procure greater expertise to support schools in areas such as finance, HR, audit and risk, recruitment
- **Effective staff development:** ITT, ECT and CPD training can be “in house” providing staff with a range of quality provision at a cost effective rate. CMATs can offer a more varied career path to staff
- **Leadership development:** CMATs can focus on succession planning and developing the leaders of tomorrow from within their family of schools
- **Strategic leadership:** governors and trustees can combine their knowledge to support each other and plan effectively for the long term
- **Access to specialist resources:** Schools can share specialist staff thus making it more cost effective e.g. speech and language specialists or SEND expertise
- **Safeguarding:** similarly schools can support each other to share expertise on safeguarding to ensure all pupils receive the support they may need
- **Access to capital funding:** larger trusts no longer have to bid for funds but receive a School Capital Allowance annually and the strategic use of these funds can be planned for in a way that is not achievable individually
- **School Improvement strategy:** Schools can design a strategy around the needs of schools and offer school to school support if and when necessary
- **Reducing policy burden:** the CMAT can develop and maintain the full range of policies for schools
- **Teaching and Learning:** the CMAT looks after the “business” side of schools to leave school leaders time to concentrate more fully on teaching and learning within their own school.

### Hurdles to overcome

Trusts have to ensure the relationship with local governing bodies is strong. Governors in schools have to be reassured they will still have a crucial role to play and will continue to fulfil most of the duties they currently perform. The scheme of delegation is important in ensuring that this relationship is clear and workable. Trusts need to be mindful of the financial burden a partnership contribution can place on tight school budgets, so central services need to represent value for money. The strategic direction of the trust is the responsibility of trustees who must ensure the organisation remains financially viable and that educational outcomes are good. Schools can sometimes find the centralisation of decision making slower, it can take longer to get an answer to a pressing concern, but this is not inevitable. Sharing good practice may not always be done effectively on a bigger scale and the logistics involved with running common CPD can be demanding. The pressure for growth, if rushed, may lead to problems with the effectiveness of central services or school to school support.

### Our Promise

When schools join a CMAT the diocese undertakes to ensure that the pay and conditions of staff will not change. Moreover the CMAT will continue to formally recognise and maintain good relations with unions and encourage its workforce to retain membership. The trusts will consult with unions in the same way they do at present. Academisation is not seen by the diocese as a way to make redundancies or cut staff costs. As evidence of this commitment the diocese has produced a [protocol](#) document to explain this.

CMATs will endeavour to consult with parents as appropriate and continue to involve staff and parents in governance. Individual schools will continue to have their own distinctive ethos, charism and values which will inform the overarching vision of the trust. Schools will continue to have their own uniform and admissions policies. Each school will have its own Headteacher and governors will continue to play a central role in local governance having decided when the time was right, for the school they are stewards of, to join a CMAT. Schools will continue to maintain collaborative relations with local schools and their local authority where they are already developed externally to the trust.

The prime aims of diocesan CMATs are the preservation and development of the Catholic ethos and charism of schools and the provision of high quality education where schools strive for excellence in every facet of education including pupil outcomes. CMATs are charged with doing everything in their power to ensure this happens.

### We recognise

The decision to become an academy is an important one and Bishop Alan fully understands the burden this places on governors to make the right decision for the long-term benefit of the school community. It is appropriate to be asking searching questions and working constructively with the education team to realise his vision to answer these questions.

Every school is different and the journey to academy and beyond will reflect each school's needs. The benefits of being part of a CMAT can sometimes be hard to appreciate at the outset but Bishop Alan is confident that the focus for each of the CMATs remains at all times on what is best for the pupils and their families.

Headteachers and Foundation Governors, have been tasked with preserving and developing the Catholic character of our schools whilst in the ministry of the diocese. This includes supporting and implementing the policies and procedures of the diocese, which are all rooted in the core values of the Gospel, Church teaching and Canon Law. We are all asked to share in Bishop Alan's vision for schools. Prayerful reflection is encouraged as we look for new ways of collaborating and working together for the benefit of all our schools.

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