

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 Hereford Diocesan Board of Education (HDBE) met in January 2024 and reviewed and updated 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.

The HDBE agreed the following parameters for Church schools as they plan to join multi-academy trusts (MATs):

1. All church schools must join a MAT where the Trust that establishes the MAT has the most recent [Church of England Model Articles \(September 2023\)](#) with a majority of Members derived from the Church and DHET is always a corporate member. Non-Church schools are also welcome to join such a MAT.
2. The **Diocese of Hereford Multi-Academy Trust** is the Diocese's own MAT. All Church schools are welcome to apply to join (as are non-Church schools). However, HDBE members felt that it was important to offer choice to maintained schools and single-academy trusts as they plan to join a strong MAT. Therefore, the HDBE have approved the creation of two additional MATs as detailed in items 3 and 4 below. 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 has 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 page 2.
3. The **Shropshire Church of England Academies Trust**
This is a partnership between Hereford and Lichfield Dioceses and will include schools from both sides of the diocesan boundaries. The Trust has got DfE approval and will develop in and will be a strong collaborative trust for schools on both sides of the border.
4. The **Orchard Multi-Academy Trust**
This is initially based on three existing single academy trusts near Hereford., We expect this trust to grow and flourish and will be a trust option for schools at the southern end of the diocese.
5. The HDBE must approve the creation of any MAT (under the parameters set in table below) 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.

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

[Link to Application Form](#)

Agreed by The Hereford Diocesan Board of Education 30th January 2024
Document due to be reviewed in January 2025

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. 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.