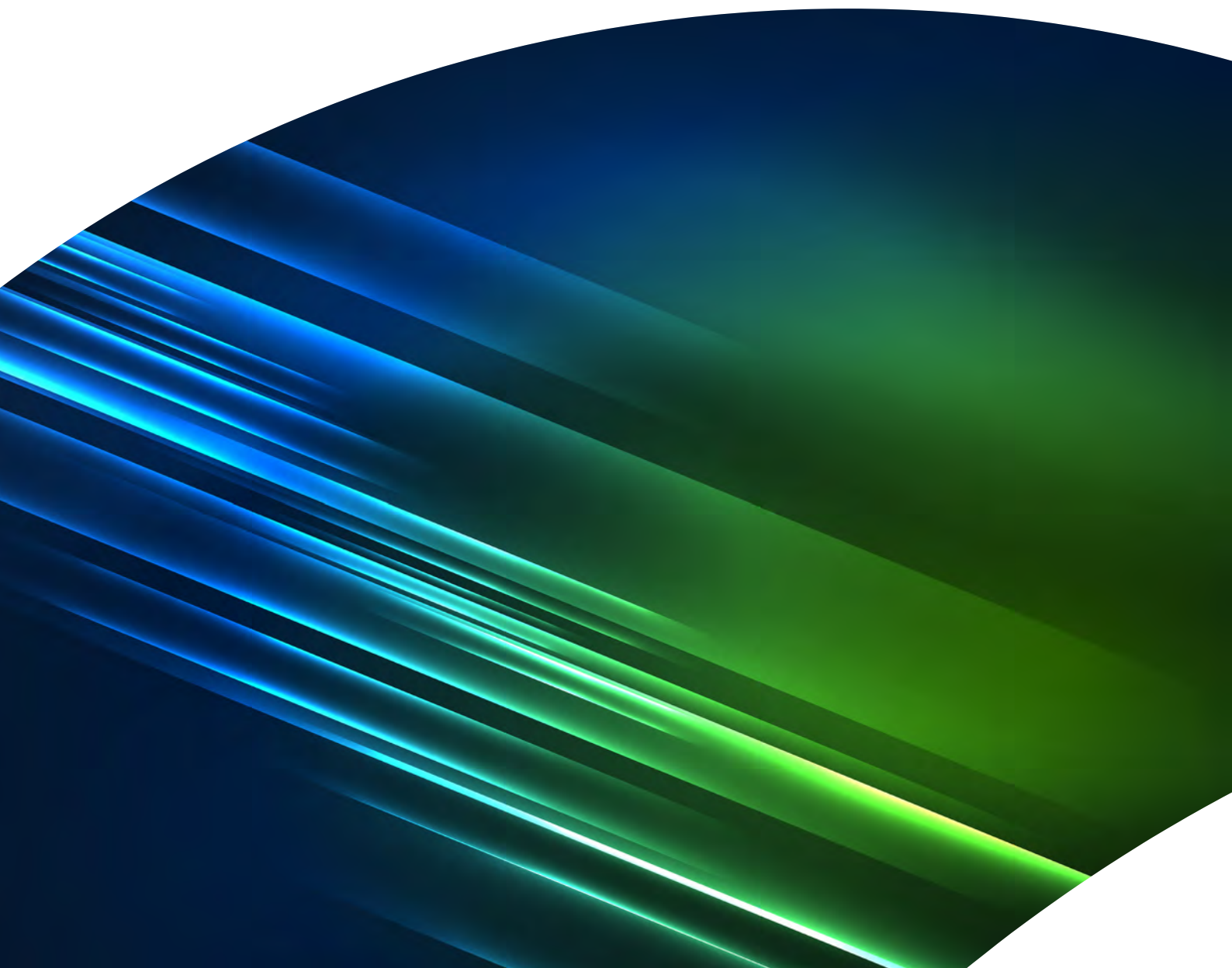




Confederation  
of School Trusts

# Looking to the future: a trust-based landscape for Church of England schools

A Bridge to the Future Paper



# About CST - The voice of School Trusts

CST is the national organisation and sector body for academy and multi-academy trusts - advocating for, connecting and supporting executive and governance leaders in School Trusts.

We are a charitable company, registered with the Charity Commission. Our charitable purpose, as set out in our Articles of Association, is "the advancement of education for public benefit."

We are governed by a Board of Trustees and are subject to the regulations of the Charity Commission and accountable to our members.

We are strictly apolitical. We work with the government of the day, political parties and politicians across the spectrum to advance education for public benefit.

CST's mission is to build an excellent education system in England, with every school part of a strong and sustainable group in which every child is a powerful learner and adults learn and develop together as teachers and leaders.

**Our vision is a system which holds trust on behalf of children.**

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Selflessness	Openness
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# The English Education Landscape since 2010

The Academies Act 2010 made it possible for any state funded school to become an academy and for trusts to be created bringing such schools together into a single legal structure.

This has provided an opportunity for a large proportion of England's formerly Local Authority (LA) maintained schools to join trusts. Often spoken of as 'leaving' the LA, it is perhaps more helpful to consider this change as resetting the relationship with it.


LAs retain responsibilities in respect of schools in trusts, their pupils and the communities they serve. However, crucially, LAs are not responsible for the quality of education in schools in trusts, nor for the leadership and governance which underpin it.

Those central responsibilities are carried by the trust board, the legally accountable body in a trust. In many ways this has clarified the respective roles of governing bodies and LAs and is enabling LAs to focus on their critical remaining statutory responsibilities.



Structures, of course, by themselves do not improve education. However, they can powerfully create conditions which predispose to educational improvement. When we place responsibility for educational quality and improvement in the hands of educationalists, in the context of an organisation which has the capacity to operate at sufficient scale, as has happened as trusts have formed, grown and coalesced, we are creating the structural conditions for educational improvement.

Supported by a national programme of investment in evidence-based teacher and school leader development, such as is now being offered through

for example the reformed NPQs and ECF, they have a real chance of success. Moreover, the CST paper [\*\*Systems of Meaning\*\*](#)  points the way to academy trusts as civic structures with the capacity and responsibility to advance education as a common good and to act on, rather than just within, the wider system to collective benefit. We are starting to get a glimpse of how the future landscape might look.





# The Church of England as a provider of education

The Church of England often describes itself as the largest and oldest 'provider' of education in England. Over a quarter of English primary schools are Church of England schools, plus around 200 secondary schools. That makes it a significant player, though the smaller than average size of Church of England primaries means the proportion of schools is not reflected in the national share of pupils. The claim to be the oldest is entirely reasonable. It is over two centuries since Joshua Watson and his collaborators, inspired by their Christian faith, formed the National Society which began to mobilise efforts to give a basic education to as many of the children of the poorer classes as possible - and of course the Christian commitment to education, and the especially the education of the poor, goes back many centuries before this.

The term 'provider' is a bit more complex. The Church of England is not a single organisational provider of education in the sense that a modern multi-academy trust is.

There is no single, central locus of responsibility or accountability. A range of legal provisions at national, diocesan, and local level surrounds the governance of Church of England schools. Roles and powers are typically fairly widely distributed. Like many such historical constitutional structures, they have the upside of ensuring stability, but the downside of making sometimes desirable change slow to implement and easy to frustrate.

So how is the Church of England sector responding to the changes in the school landscape since the 2010 Academies Act, and what could the future hold? Like many LAs, it is probably fair to say that many in the wider Church of England educational world were, initially at least, suspicious of academies.



I suggest that a number of reasons underpinned this, of which I will mention perhaps the most significant three by way of example:

- Firstly, there was an anxiety about what academy sceptics presented as a 'privatisation' or 'commodification' of education, pulling it away from a well-understood purpose as being there to serve local communities (the 'echo' of the Joshua Watson legacy). The fear was that academisation would put Church schools into the hands of distant and all-powerful boards and highly paid 'chief executives', driving a wedge between schools and their communities. Presented in this way, it all felt very culturally alien and uncomfortable.
- Secondly, there was worry over the extent to which Church of England schools would and could conserve their valued and distinctive Christian ethos and identity as academies or in trusts. Associated with this, some of the governance players within the sector, including for example Diocesan Boards of Education (DBEs) and Parochial Church Councils (PCCs), were concerned that their influence in the maintenance of the distinctive ethos of Church schools could be diminished as schools looked more to their trust for support and guidance.

- Thirdly, there was anxiety about land and buildings ownership and control. Land issues are complex in Church of England schools. Commonly, however, in particular in VA schools, the land is owned by the diocese or by a Church trust which is controlled by Church law. When a VA school becomes an academy, the land is made available for the use of the academy under the terms of the Church supplemental agreement. These measures in fact safeguard against any sense of a 'land grab' because no Church land leaves Church ownership.

The current diverse (some would say 'half reformed') landscape of academy trusts, single academies, and LA maintained schools of all varieties is unsatisfactory and inefficient, including for local authorities, whose resources are stretched and who have to be different things to different schools.



Indeed, LA capacity is likely to reduce further as there are plans to remove the funding for school improvement they currently receive. It is to be welcomed that indications from government are increasingly pointing to a wish to move more fully towards the trust model as the norm. How then should Church schools, DBEs and the leadership of Church of England education position themselves in relation to academy trusts now?

To answer this question, let us first take a step back from Church schools. As we noted above, while structures themselves do not improve education, the key features of academy trusts – accountability for and control of educational quality in the hands of educationalists, supported by a national programme of evidence-driven investment in teaching and leadership expertise – make trusts a very good bet for educational improvement.

Turning to Church schools now, they care about educational success too, of course, but make a strong claim for deeper and wider dimensions as well.

The Church of England's document [Called, Connected, Committed](#), as well as the [Church of England Vision for Education](#) itself, paint a rich picture of what those deeper and wider dimensions look like. The vision is underpinned by the four basic elements of wisdom, hope, community and dignity, and sees the mission of Church schools as existing for the benefit of the whole of society, serving the common good. The Church school "invites collaboration, alliances, the negotiation of differences and the forming of new settlements in order to serve the flourishing of a healthily plural society and democracy, together with a healthily plural educational system."<sup>1</sup>

When we turn to leadership practices in Church schools, we aspire, for example, to "create confidence by perceptively encouraging, supporting and resourcing others in their learning, teaching, and leading" and to "regard interdependence and service of others as crucial to their development, asking not just what we can gain, but also what we can give." Further, leaders in Church schools "create and implement a curriculum that liberates and empowers children and communities. Barriers are removed by wise pedagogy, transformative pastoral care and wise allocation of resources. Leaders build schools that enable disparate communities to live well together, rooted in dialogue, empathy and love."<sup>2</sup> This visionary and foundational thinking about Christian educational leadership underpins the work the Church is now doing to help develop leaders for the future of Church schools and trusts through its active participation in the delivery of the reformed National Professional Qualifications. This is very much to be welcomed.

There are many other pertinent examples and illustrations of the mission and character of Church of England schools in these and other recent documents. Importantly, taken together, they show us that Church schools are characterised not only by what happens inside the school, but also by the quality of their relationships more widely and deeply. This should not be a surprise to anyone who has worked in a Church of England school. Trinitarian and incarnational Christian faith is, after all, at its core relational.

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1 Church of England (2016) [Vision for Education: Deeply Christian, Serving the Common Good](#)

2 Ford, D. and Wolfe, A. [Called Connected Committed: 24 Leadership Practices for Educational Leaders](#)  
Church of England Foundation for Educational Leadership.



# Church schools and trusts: where next?

And so we return to our question: how should Church schools, DBEs and the leadership of Church of England education position themselves now in relation to academy trusts? At this point I will come off the fence and make a positive case. Academy trusts, understood as potent civic structures with a responsibility to act on, as well as within, the system, and as structures with capacity which are also hard-wired for relationships, should actually be the natural expression of the underpinning vision of Church of England education in the 21st century. Just as the trust is the best bet for securing sustainable and effective educational improvement for children and young people, so is it also the most aligned structure we have for incarnating the Christian vision of education. Interdependence, service, resourcing others in their learning, creating a curriculum

to empower and liberate – these and many other features of the Church school are also natural to the Church trust.

One moment please, I hear you say. What about our autonomy as a maintained (VA or VC) Church school? What about our relationship with the diocese?

What about all the trusts, Church and otherwise, which have failed, sometimes with more than a whiff of scandal? How can you be so confident that the trust is the right structure for the future of all our Church schools? And what about those earlier objections to do with ethos and proximity to the local community, and indeed so-called ‘corporatisation’ of education?



Let's deal with the autonomy point first. Autonomy for whom? On closer inspection this is our old friend 'provider interest', dressed up in different clothes. Schools exist ultimately to serve children and young people. Whenever there is a potential trade-off between adult autonomy, on the one hand, and quality of provision for children and young people on the other, the latter, morally, must trump every time. Christian faith is kenotic – we are called to a letting go of what we own in the interests of the other. Kenosis and jealously guarded autonomy are very uneasy bedfellows.

It is probably also worth noting that on a day-to-day basis Church of England schools in trusts still nurture their individual identities, traditions and links with their immediate communities, and their headteachers still take many decisions every day on the running of their schools. All of this happens, though, in the context of the wider interdependence between schools across their trust which is genuinely focussed on asking "not just what we can gain, but also what we can give".

At the moment, in the 'half-reformed' landscape, dioceses, like Local Authorities, are required to navigate a complex set of different kinds of relationship with their schools. One kind of approach is appropriate for those Church schools which are in trusts, whereas those which remain stand-alone maintained VC or VA schools tend to require far more resource-intensive, and often more operational, support. If we were to set ourselves the ambition of moving all Church schools into Church trusts, then DBEs would be able to focus all their (limited) resources into building mature, strategic and effective relationships with their trusts, leading to greater efficiency for all. And, of course, Church schools in trusts

benefit from the same essential but 'reset' relationship with the LA as all other academies, working alongside it as it discharges its essential statutory functions for its communities.

Academy trusts are of course legally companies, as well as charities. But jarring as that concept may seem for some, it has been deftly turned by the Church into a structure which arguably works even better in the Church context than it does outside it. For the 'members' of a church trust (in other words the co-signatories to the founding 'charter' of the organisation) are effectively the Church in the form of its corporate representatives such as the bishop, the DBE or the archdeacon (not, as is often the case for non-Church trusts, named individuals in their own right). The members then appoint the board of trustees who in turn must account to the members for their performance, including the maintenance of their Christian identity in accordance with their charitable object. This actually makes for a clearer line of accountability between the Church trust and the diocese than exists for either VA or VC schools and gives a high level of stability and longevity.

Finally, it is probably helpful to remind anyone who is still sceptical of the range of safeguards that have been put in place to ensure that no Church land ultimately leaves Church ownership. The carefully circumscribed 'license to occupy' built into the Church supplemental agreement makes sure of that. Moreover, Church schools in academy trusts (even where VC schools join non-'Church majority' trusts) retain their Church of England status as before conversion (including the VC-VA differences when it comes to SIAMS inspection, for example) and are still fully diocesan schools.

So as we emerge from the pandemic we should consider with fresh perspective the future for our Church of England schools. We should recognise a deep synergy (synergy defined as an interaction or cooperation giving rise to a whole that is greater than the simple sum of its parts) between the potential of academy trusts and the character and aims of Church schools. As the mature civic education trust is best placed to “create the conditions for deep collaboration among teachers and leaders to improve the quality of education” and to engage in “system building”<sup>3</sup>, so is it also the best forum and structure for the flourishing of the essential deep features of the Church school.

The Church of England’s Chief Education Officer Nigel Genders acknowledges this point specifically in recent comments at the Westminster Education Forum: “What I was interested in ... was not independence, but interdependence. How groups of schools could work together in a way that added value beyond the sum of their parts.” One might add that a Church trust with the

role and capacity to act on as well as within the system is also a potentially important way of the Church itself acting in the public square.

The operational decision on becoming an academy to join such a trust does not sit with the Church of England’s leaders at national level. The national Church nonetheless holds very significant moral authority, and the time is now right to set a strategic direction and framework of reference for the next two centuries for all Church schools. The Church should be seizing that initiative more courageously still and, as it has so successfully done in other aspects of its education work recently, increasingly articulate a compelling aspiration for a trust-based landscape of Church schools, drawing on its own compelling vision, and our vocation: to be deeply Christian and to serve the common good.



<sup>3</sup> Cruddas, L. (2020) [Systems of Meaning: Three Nested Leadership Narratives](#)  CST