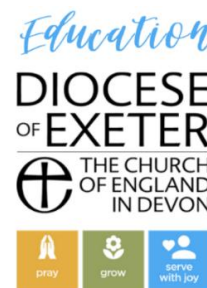


Exeter Diocesan Board of Education Committee Multi-school Grouping Policy and Guidance for Schools (Summer 2026)



To enable all, through the love of God in Jesus Christ, to 'live life in all its fullness' (John 10:10b)

Nurture vision-inspired education; **Nourish** personal and spiritual growth; **Enable** connected communities that **flourish**

Executive Summary and Contents

Section 1: Overview

The Exeter Diocesan Board of Education Committee (EDBE) has statutory responsibility for 134 Church of England Schools. This section sets out the context of these schools. It states this guidance is to give clarity to school leaders, including those involved in governance, of the EDBE's expectations in relation to partnerships.

This section also highlights the Department for Education's expectation, as stated within the Schools White Paper: Achieving and Thriving (Feb. 2026), in relation to school groupings.

Section 2: The EDBE's position statement regarding partnership working

The EDBE recommends all schools should be working in a strong formal partnership. Formal partnerships are defined as being part of an academy trust or a federation. Section 2 states what the EDBE consider to be a strong formal partnership and considers why the EDBE is recommending schools join a strong multi-school grouping. It shares that there is no time frame or compulsion for joining a multi-school grouping.

Section 3: Choosing a potential partner

The EDBE recognises the importance of choosing a strong and fruitful partnership so that your school(s) has every chance to flourish. This section provides guidance on choosing who might be a suitable partner and on EDBE's restrictions to potential partners. It outlines an option to enter a time-limited management partnership before making a final decision.

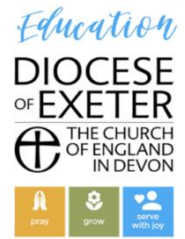
Section 4: Conclusion

The EDBE aims to see all schools working in strong formal partnerships. This section summarises what any partnership must seek to secure so that the best opportunities are provided for our children and young people and the wider school community. It recognises that we can achieve much more together than we can as individual schools, in seeking to fulfil the Christian hope for lives and communities transformed and flourishing together, in the love of God.

Appendices

Appendix 1:	Template to assist in considering the strength of a multi-school grouping
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Appendix 3a:	Academy Trusts with Church School Articles in the Diocese of Exeter, or with EDBE consent to adopt Church Articles
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Exeter Diocesan Board of Education Multi-school Grouping Policy and Guidance for Schools (Summer 2026)



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Nurture vision-inspired education; **Nourish** personal and spiritual growth; **Enable** connected communities that flourish

Section 1: Overview

Who should read this guidance?

This guidance is for all school leaders, including those involved in governance. Sections are relevant to those who are working within a maintained school setting (maintained schools and federations) and those in academy trusts.

What is the purpose of this guidance?

The EDBE has written this guidance to provide clarity of the diocesan viewpoint for all Church school leaders, including those involved in governance, in relation to partnerships. The aim is to guide schools in giving robust consideration to the future of their school community so that they are able to both deliver excellent education and ensure that each child, young person and adult within the Diocesan family has every opportunity to flourish and fulfil their God-given potential.

Diocesan Context

The Exeter Diocesan Board of Education Committee (EDBE) has statutory responsibility for 134 Church of England Schools and is committed to ensuring these are a vital and thriving part of our diocese both now and into the future. Our schools include small rural primaries with mixed aged classes; large urban schools; infant, junior and primary schools, some with nursery provision; and five secondary schools with two providing further education courses. These schools span three Local Authorities, four archdeaconries and twenty-one deaneries. We work closely with other dioceses and have schools within groupings which span our three neighbouring dioceses.

Currently 89% of our schools are in a formal partnership – either a federation or academy trust. Of those in formal partnerships, 80% are in an academy trust and 20% in a federation. 15 (11%) of our Church schools currently stand-alone in no formal partnership.

National Context

The Department for Education published a [Schools White Paper: Every Child Achieving and Thriving](#) on the 23rd February 2026. Specifically in relation to school groupings, the government sets an expectation that all state-funded schools will join or form a school trust. Whilst there is no timeline for this to be enacted, the paper states, 'our current system is fragmented which leaves some schools missing out on opportunities for improvement and sharing best practice'.

Section 2: The EDBE's position statement regarding partnership working

Position Statement

The EDBE recommends all schools should be working in strong formal partnerships.

The EDBE draws attention to the Schools White Paper: Achieving and Thriving (Feb.26) in which the government sets an expectation that all state-funded schools will join or form a school trust.

What does the EDBE define as a strong formal partnership?

A formal partnership is one where there is shared responsibility and collective accountability to do the best for all children and schools within the partnership. The EDBE defines this as being part of a federation or an academy (schools) trust (here-on referenced to as a multi-school grouping).

What features are seen in a strong multi-school grouping?

The EDBE believes a strong multi-school grouping will have:

- **Vision and Purpose:** The grouping will have a shared vision and a deep sense of collective purpose which is lived out across the whole organisation through the values and culture established. It will permeate throughout all areas, as follow.
- **Strategic governance:** Strong governance will ensure the grouping's strategy is anchored in the needs of its schools, the communities they serve and the wider educational system.
- **Expert, ethical leadership:** There is an embedded culture of expert, ethical leadership based on the Seven Principles of Public Life (Nolan Principles), and of one organisation, built around its vision, purpose and values.
- **High quality, inclusive education:** Everyday practice exemplifies a culture that is motivating and ambitious for all, especially disadvantaged children, and children with SEND, so that all pupils achieve their potential. This is evident in outcomes: relationships, attainment, character, wellbeing.
- **School improvement:** A strong understanding of excellence and a culture of continuous improvement is evident across all the schools within the group, with the power of the collective harnessed.
- **Workforce resilience and wellbeing:** The grouping creates a positive working culture for all staff that promotes collaboration, aspiration, support and a sense of belonging.
- **Finance and operations:** Everyone in the grouping recognises the importance of, and works towards, the effective and efficient use of resources for the wider benefit of all pupils, sharing in the collective accountability for all schools.
- **Public benefit and civic duty:** The grouping have an outward looking culture working beyond its own organisation with other system leaders and civic actors, including the Diocese of Exeter, in service of the common good.

*Adapted from the DfE's Annex A - Trust Quality Descriptions (July 2023)
and CST's paper, Building Strong Trusts (Sept. 2024)*

The outworking of the vision and purpose, through the areas outlined above, should be visible through the securing of transformational outcomes for young people by combining academic rigour with a rounded approach to personal development and a desire to lead education for 'life in all its fullness' (John 10.10).

In strong groupings, whilst there will be alignment to maximise the benefits of being in a grouping, the individual context and ethos of schools will be recognised and supported. Church of England schools shall be conducted in accordance with the principles, practices and tenets of the Church of England both generally and in particular in relation to arranging for religious education and daily acts of worship.

No particular size of grouping is recommended however for a grouping to be strong and resilient, and to remain rooted in the local community, the leadership (including governance) structures, systems and processes matter greatly. You can contact the Diocesan Education Team to explore this in your context.

Why join a multi-school grouping?

Where the features of a strong multi-school grouping (outlined above) are given importance by the multi-school grouping and are frequently reviewed to ensure the underpinning structures, systems and processes are effective and serve the shared vision and collective purpose, joining the partnership can offer benefits. The EDBE believes these to include the following:

- **Deep and purposeful collaboration:** Intensely focussed collaboration built around a shared vision and collective purpose leads to a culture of support and shared responsibility, removing isolation, and enabling sharing and innovation. Examples of this could include curriculum design to encompass mixed-age class structures changing annually, the application of specific expertise and oversight in IT, HR, or estates, and the building of procedural capacity through shared systems, policy and processes (adaptable for context). Collaboration should increase capacity and interconnectedness.
- **A strong and resilient structure:** Being part of an organisation that has the ability to recover quickly from difficulties and to shape itself to respond to challenges can lessen pressure points and offer increased support and protection as the grouping stands together. Examples could include the redeployment of resources (personnel and/or financial) to overcome a short-term fluctuation in a school's pupil numbers or a high level of need, expert support and time shared to build capacity during the absence of a key staff member(s), or a supportive response to a critical incident.
- **School (and grouping) improvement:** Within a multi-school grouping opportunities for staff to connect to each other and to professional and expert knowledge can be greatly enhanced. High-quality professional development gives adults opportunities to learn and develop in ways (and in networks) that are lasting and sustainable. Bringing staff together to share expertise and best practise benefits all, particularly where there are a shared vision and purpose. Talent pathways give opportunities for development and progression, supporting recruitment and retention.
- **Enabling all to live life in all its fullness** (John 10:10): A strong grouping will have a core belief in the inherent worth of every child and adult in the system and be characterised by a sense of togetherness, inclusion and belonging where all can flourish together. Character development will be valued as will ensuring every child can be a powerful learner. This is not the preserve of multi-school groupings and nor is it the case that multi-school grouping have the most effective teachers. Research however shows that *'the effects of high-quality teaching are especially significant for pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds'* (Sutton Trust, Sept 2011). Strong sustainable professional development, and associated growth, can be more accessible within a strong multi-school grouping and is key to building a talented workforce.
- **Civic Duty and Public Benefit:** *'All schools are deeply rooted in context and place... They are the anchor institutions for their communities, frequently acting as the backstop for society, providing services and support far beyond the delivery of excellent education.'* (CES, NSE & CST, Nov 2024). A

strong multi-school grouping will serve and work for the best of the whole community, leveraging resources and influencing strategic change on the system by helping to situate children, their families and education at the heart of a coherent public service offer (Leora Cruddas, January 2023). They act on, not just within, wider systems, with local examples including influencing locality Healthcare systems and accessibility, rural transport provision and a city-wide belonging strategy.

If you are exploring whether to join a formal partnership or the coming together of multi-school groupings, we advise speaking to the Diocesan Education Team at the earliest opportunity. Thank you.

What are the expected timelines?

It is the EDBE's recommendation that all schools should be working in strong formal partnerships, however there is no expected timeline and no compulsion.

Nevertheless, as part of schools' regular self-evaluation, the EDBE encourages all stand-alone schools and all multi-school groupings to regularly consider their effectiveness, resilience and sustainability. Leaders, including those in governance, should assure themselves that current arrangements best serve their community and the common good. This will involve looking outwards to ensure awareness of the wider education landscape. We advise attention should be given to the contents of the Schools White Paper: Achieving and Thriving (Feb.26).

Should you wish to explore joining a multi-school grouping, or the coming together of multi-school groupings, Diocesan Education Officers are here to help. Contact does not commit you to anything. Please reach out early.

Section 3: Choosing a potential partner

Who might be a suitable partner?

It is important when considering multi-school grouping options to seek the strongest and most fruitful partnership for your school community. This will involve focussing on what is important in ensuring the best possible outcome for the pupils/students in your school or grouping. It is recommended that your school or grouping's situation is considered against the backdrop of what has been progressed and achieved in the last 3 – 5 years, where you are currently, and what your vision is for the future. Through robust self-evaluation and by understanding your own context well, research and explorations will be focussed. Potential partners must be considered on current merit and a firm evidence base, not hearsay or speculation. It is your due diligence that will ensure you find a good match where vision, values and expectations are aligned.

The EDBE suggests you consider:

- What is in the best interests of children, young people and the wider community, and the rationale behind this.
- What is in the best interests of the staff in developing and sustaining great teaching and leadership.
- What can you bring to the partnership and share with other schools to help them to develop further.
- What can you gain from the partnership, specifically in relation to sustaining and improving educational outcomes, financial stability and the long-term sustainable future of your Church school.
- How the Christian foundation, vision and distinctiveness of the school will be upheld and developed.

Whilst the EDBE's recommendation is that all schools should be working in strong formal partnerships, the emphasis is on 'strong'. All multi-school groupings are different. Your authentic investigations and robust due diligence are essential. Appendix 1 may be helpful in your collecting of information.

All organisations considering joining or changing a partnership are requested to contact the Diocesan Education Team early in their thinking so that options can be discussed, the integrity of the process upheld, and any decision-making supported. Whilst the governance board ultimately make the decision about partnerships, please note the EDBE is required to give approval for Church school organisational changes. In the case of conversion to academy and the joining of a multi-academy trust, the EDBE and the site trustees must consent before the Department for Education Region's Group Advisory Board, make the final decision. With federations, the EDBE has to approve the Instrument of Government.

Does the EDBE place any restrictions as to potential partners?

Yes. The EDBE has a responsibility to protect the Christian foundation of schools and ensure children and young people have every opportunity to fulfil their God-given potential. This builds on over 200 years of heritage and seeks to ensure Church schools can effectively serve future generations.

To inform any explorations, please be aware that the EDBE expects the governance arrangements of any proposed partnership to reflect the Christian Foundation of the school(s). For example, if you are a Voluntary Aided (VA) school or equivalent, you will have majority foundation governance, and if a Voluntary Controlled (VC) school or equivalent, you will have minority foundation governance. The expectation is that, as a minimum, the governance arrangements of any proposed partnership will be at least in line with your current designation.

Diocesan Education Officers are available to discuss your thoughts and offer support.

What formal partnerships are available?

The EDBE defines formal partnership as academy trusts and federations. These have shared responsibility and accountability through governance. More details about both structures can be found in Appendix 2. Appendix 3a and 3b lists academy trusts and federations within the Diocese of Exeter.

On occasion, Church of England schools in the Diocese of Exeter enter a Management Partnership. This is a time-limited partnership with a specific focus and allows a school or grouping to work with others closely. The aims of a Management Partnership are agreed at the outset and don't necessitate a move into a formal partnership however can offer the opportunity for close working with another organisation before making a decision to formally partner. Whilst we are happy to support these arrangements they should not be viewed as a long-term solution. If you are interested in a Management Partnership, please engage with the diocese early. Diocesan Education Officers' details can be found in Appendix 6.

Section 4: Conclusion

The EDBE believe there is merit in all schools belonging to a strong formal partnership and as such recommend school leaders, including those involved in governance, seek a suitable strong partner to secure the school or grouping's long-term sustainability and to share strength across the system as together we seek to 'serve the common good'.

Any partnership must seek to secure:

- The long-term future of your school, preserving your unique Christian foundation and vision, and rich educational heritage for generations of children to come.
- A school that is flourishing within the local community and its mission community, serving the unique needs of its children, young people and locality.
- Excellent leadership, that seeks the best for children and young people, and values and develops staff.
- Teaching and learning with strong educational outcomes, enabling life in all its fullness.
- A clearly understood three-year financial forecast, with clarity around how school budget decisions are made, and with rigorous oversight by governance.
- A strong and skilled governance board and structure that can effectively oversee the strategic direction of all the schools and hold executive leaders to account for the outcomes of all pupils.

The research and investigation into options must be transparent, undertaken with integrity and authenticity, and demonstrate robust due diligence so that decisions are based on the lived reality of what all partners can bring to a partnership.

Please be aware that the Department for Education has stated clearly its expectation that all state-funded schools will join or form a school trust. In light of the changing educational landscape, the EDBE will review this policy and guidance regularly as more detail emerges about the implementation of the Schools White Paper.

When exploring partnerships, please do engage with the Diocesan Education Team early and use the considerable experience and expertise that has been gained from working across numerous federations and academy trusts, and from interacting with national colleagues and system leaders, over a number of years. Like you, we want the best for each of our school communities and recognise the importance of individual schools' vision and ethos. We can achieve much more together as we seek to fulfil the Christian hope for lives and communities transformed and flourishing together.

Policy Approved by Diocesan Board of Education Committee	Policy implemented	Policy review date
16/06/2021	16/06/2021	Autumn 2023
Updated to reflect the changing educational landscape and DBE strategy 1/10/2023	11/10/2023	Autumn 2025
26 th March 2026	20 th April 2026	Summer 2027

Appendix 1: Template to assist in considering the strength of a multi-school grouping.

Name of partner being investigated:		
Headline Summary Notes		
Vision and Ethos	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Culture and Context: Creates a culture in which all schools can confidently articulate who they are, what they are doing here and how then they live and learn together. Stakeholders feel genuinely engaged. There is a culture of high aspirations for all. • Vision: Enables all schools to express their own individual vision and ethos, and in Church schools to live out their Christian theologically rooted vision, valuing each for its own identity but as an important part of the whole. The academy trust/federation has a clear and known vision that has synergy with individual school visions. • Strategy: The overall grouping and individual schools' strategy is inspired by their vision and this is evident in its outworking. It enables all pupils and adults to flourish. • Collective Worship (CW): All schools should meet statutory requirements. Church schools will follow the Church of England (CofE) CW guidance which encourages schools to reflect on their practice and to ensure that CW remains the relevant and essential component of an education that enables all pupils to flourish and to 'live life in all its fullness' John 10:10. • Christian Foundation: Leaders, including governance, respect and value the contribution of church schools and ensure their Christian Foundation is upheld and developed. They work closely with the Diocese and local Churches to nurture spiritual growth and provide pathways for those who wish to explore their own faith. 	

<p style="writing-mode: vertical-rl; transform: rotate(180deg);">High Quality and Inclusive Education</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Culture: Creates a culture in all its schools that is motivating and ambitious for all, including disadvantaged children and children with SEND, so that students can achieve their full potential. • Curriculum: Oversees the design and implementation of ambitious, broad, well-sequenced and knowledge-rich curricula in all of its schools, and in Church schools reflects the schools’ individual theologically rooted Christian vision. Religious Education and Worldviews are well taught and given appropriate importance. • Student Outcomes: Achieves good outcomes for all its students by delivering education that is both high-quality and inclusive. • Accessible to all: Operates fair access. Welcomes and effectively teaches disadvantaged children and children with SEND from their local areas and ensures all are treated well. • Inclusive pastoral support: Supports students and schools to address issues so students can stay in mainstream school where possible. • Enrichment: Enables children to take part in sport, music and cultural opportunities that enrich the curricula and support wider development. There is an active culture of justice and responsibility. • Behaviour & attendance: Ensures its schools are places where all students attend regularly, are kept safe, feel calm and supported, and are able to actively participate and progress. • Destinations: Ensures all children leave its schools well prepared for the next stage of education, employment or training and prepared to become confident citizens. • Collaboration: Works collaboratively with schools, trusts, LAs, dioceses, churches, parents and other civic partners to ensure the delivery of statutory functions and acts in the wider interests of the local community. 	
<p style="writing-mode: vertical-rl; transform: rotate(180deg);">School Improvement</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Culture: Creates a culture of continuous improvement in its schools through self-evaluation, challenge, support and appropriate action, supported and driven by the school’s / groupings vision. • School improvement model: Has a clearly defined and effective strategy to improve and maintain the performance of schools that are already part of the grouping, as well as those that join. • Christian Distinctiveness: The trust/federation support Church schools in considering how effective is the school’s distinctive Christian vision, established and promoted by leadership at all levels, in enabling pupils and adults to flourish. • Transformation: Takes on challenging schools and transforms previously underperforming schools by delivering broad and sustainable improvement. • System-led improvement: Supports the wider system in sharing best practice; helps underperforming schools to improve; and contributes to building a self-improving system. 	

<p style="writing-mode: vertical-rl; transform: rotate(180deg);">Workforce</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Culture: Creates a high-performing working culture for all staff that promotes collaboration, aspiration, support and enables all to flourish. Uses the flexibilities of the trust/federation structure to create opportunities for staff. Recognises the critical value of high-quality teaching and champions the profession. • Workload: Fosters a supportive working environment by managing workload, prioritising wellbeing and taking action to support all staff. • Retention: Supports the retention of great staff both within the individual trust/federation and across the school system. • Working environment: Prioritises effective behaviour and attendance policies to create a safe environment in which to work and learn. Utilises the grouping structure so that staff are empowered to deliver their best. • Developing new and early career teachers: Makes a positive contribution to the wider system by delivering high-quality training and/or placements for trainee teachers, and supports ECTs through the Early Career Framework. • Continuing Professional Development: Encourages and enables all staff to build their expertise through evidence-based professional development and mentoring. • Collaboration: Builds an innovative and vibrant community of professionals, collaborating across schools, the diocese, churches and other trusts/federations to develop and share expertise and evidence-based practice. • Line management & career progression: Ensures every member of staff is effectively line managed to maintain high performance, and career progression is encouraged. • Equality, diversity, inclusion: Ensures inclusive working environments, and takes action to promote equity and diversity. 	
<p style="writing-mode: vertical-rl; transform: rotate(180deg);">Finance and Operations</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Culture: Recognises importance of effective and efficient use of resources for the benefit of all schools in the grouping and wider education system. • Financial Strategy: Uses financial data and intelligence to set a stable, accurate and sustainable long-term financial strategy for the trust/federation. Has a clear approach to delivering value for money through effective budgeting and risk management. • Resource allocation: Demonstrates efficient and effective use of resources, for example through school and trust/federation resource management benchmarking tools and Integrated Curriculum and Financial Planning. • Capital strategy: Maintains and invests sustainably in the capital infrastructure, including buildings, digital infrastructure and technology. • Reserves: Operates a well-planned reserves policy that provides sufficient contingency for cashflow and unplanned, urgent expenditure and aligns resources to expenditure priorities across all its schools. • Financial information management: Has strong financial and information management systems with effective oversight, for example ensuring data compliance and having policies and processes in place to minimise risk of fraud, data breaches and financial mismanagement. 	

Governance and Leadership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Culture: The Board and executive leadership team anchor the trust/federation’s strategy in the needs of its schools, the communities they serve and the wider educational system. • Governance of the Trust/Federation: Ensures the Board is made up of directors /governors with the necessary expertise to fulfil its functions effectively and uphold the Christian foundation and distinctiveness of Church schools. • Strategy: Chair leads the Board to set and champion a clear strategy for the trust/federation, which aligns with these quality descriptions and sets out aspirations for growth and rigorously reviews progress. The Chief Executive Officer (CEO)/Executive Head (EH) leads the executive leadership team (ELT) to create and implement an effective operating model with clarity about the delivery of trust/federation-level and school-level activities, that aligns with the strategy and, with the ELT, reviews progress rigorously. • Executive Leadership: The Board ensures high-quality executive leadership through appointing its CEO/EH and providing effective support and challenge to them and the ELT whilst maintaining sufficient independence to allow scrutiny of performance. The CEO/EH leads a high-performing ELT. Succession planning is considered by building a leadership pipeline. • Accountability: The Board holds the ELT to account for the effective implementation of the strategy and operating plan, including in relation to the use of resources and the drivers of impact. It assures itself of the integrity of financial information; that there are robust risk controls and risk management systems; and there is compliance with regulatory, contractual, and statutory requirements, including safeguarding. The Board and CEO/EH agree metrics and process by which progress will be assessed. • Non-executive leadership: The Board ensures a high performing governance structure where trustees and other non-executive leaders have the expertise to fulfil their functions effectively; accesses independent insight from internal and external audits, reviews of governance arrangements and other expert advice; provides board induction, training and review; and supports effective succession planning by building a pipeline of future governance members, with a focus on promoting diversity of thought and experience. The CEO/EH supports the trustees and other non-executive leaders to meet their duties, working to ensure operational compliance and fulfilment of all statutory responsibilities. • Engagement: The Board oversees strategic relationships with external stakeholders. The CEO/EH communicates strategy, plans and achievements to stakeholders. Both the ELT and Board involve the diocese, parents, schools and communities so that decision-making is supported by meaningful engagement. 	
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N.B.: Quality Descriptions based on Annex A - Trust Quality Descriptions (DfE 6th July 2023)

Appendix 2: Academy Trusts and Federation Overview

Academy Trusts

Academy trusts are charitable companies, with specific expertise in education, contracted through funding agreements with the Department for Education (DfE) to advance education for the public benefit.

Academy trusts are regulated by the DfE, subject to summary evaluations by Ofsted and independent financial audits. Church schools continue to be inspected under the Statutory Inspection of Anglican and Methodist Schools (SIAMS) framework.

Academy trusts exist in order to advance education for public benefit. This purpose is cemented in the academy trust's Articles of Association. Our Church schools can only join an academy trust which has Church Articles as these ensure the education is 'conducted in accordance with the principles, practices and tenets of the Church of England both generally and in particular in relation to arranging for religious education and daily acts of worship.' Academy trusts are required to recognise and support schools' individual vision and ethos. They are often referred to as civic organisations which act within the educational system and act upon it, helping to place children, young people and families at the heart of a coherent public services offer.

In the Diocese of Exeter, Church Articles of Association are either Majority Church Articles or Minority Church Articles. Academy Trusts with Majority Articles have a majority of foundation governance appointed to the board of directors (sometimes known as trustees). In addition, there will be a majority of foundation representation at member level. Members oversee the directors' running of the academy trust and hold them to account for its performance. There will be local governance at either a hub or individual school level.

All schools, church (VA and VC) and community, are able to join academy trusts with Majority Church Articles. Academy trusts with Minority Church Articles have minority foundation governance and therefore are a suitable home for Voluntary Controlled (VC) Church schools and community schools only.

It is important to understand that an academy trust is a corporate legal entity with responsibility for the success of every school within the academy trust and for advancing education for public benefit. To fulfil this responsibility there needs to be strong collaboration and cooperation. As a legal entity, an academy trust's success rests on the success of the whole organisation so all schools are supported to be effective with the aim of delivering high quality education and to ensure that no school fails. Strong governance expertise and resource, particularly at director level, is essential to hold executive leaders to account for the performance of the academy trust.

'Building Strong Academy Trusts' (DfE, May 2021) notes that governance is one of the defining characteristics of academy trusts. By operating under a single governance structure, a strong board of academy directors can effectively oversee the strategic direction of the academy trust and hold executive leaders to account for the outcomes of all pupils within the academy trust. Academy trusts are structured to enable local governance representation for individual schools or a small geographical hub of schools. This means the local identity and distinctive ethos of individual schools is retained and monitored by local governance who will have clearly delegated responsibilities from the board of directors. If there is a significant number of schools, perhaps with a geographical spread, local governance is particularly important to help ensure schools remain rooted in their local community whilst benefitting from the additional capacity and specialist expertise of a larger organisation.

Federations

A federation is a maintained school structure where a number of schools come together under a single governance board which is the accountable body for all the schools and sets the strategic direction for all schools in the federation. The Local Authority statutory responsibilities will remain the same.

There is a statutory process set down in The School Governance Regulations (2012) that must be followed if joining (or forming) a federation. Regulations cover the statutory foundation governance proportions in federations that comprise Voluntary Aided (VA), Voluntary Controlled (VC) and Community schools or a mix. Governors must be aware that the number of foundation governors can be diluted under the regulations and must consider any unintended consequences which could put the future of the school as a Church school is put at risk. Options to maintain the proportion of foundation governance should be explored. Please note that the EDBE expect that foundation governance will be maintained at levels reflecting the VA/VC designation.

When schools federate there is a legal requirement for one governing board to be formed. The composition of this is set out in a federation's underpinning governance document, the Instrument of Government. This names the Church schools and states that 'recognising their historic foundation, these schools will preserve and develop religious character in accordance with the principles and practice of the Church of England,' and 'these schools aim to serve their community by providing an education of the highest quality within the context of Christian belief and practice'.

A federation should be viewed as a long-term commitment to a family of schools, however it is possible to leave a federation through a statutory process, or for federations to convert its schools to academies. Governors must be aware that decisions regarding the future steps for all schools within a federation grouping would be taken by the newly formed governing board following the organisational change.

Schools in strong federations come together to increase capacity to improve the educational provision for their community, whilst remaining as local authority maintained schools.

Appendix 3a: Academy Trusts with Church School Articles in the Diocese of Exeter, or with EDBE consent to adopt Church Articles

The EDBE expects certain governance arrangements depending on whether you are a Voluntary Aided (VA) or Voluntary Controlled (VC) school, or have majority or minority foundation governance, so that the Christian foundation of Church schools is preserved in line with your current designation. See section 4 for more details.

Academy Trust (Type of Articles)	Church academies in Diocese of Exeter	Church academies in other dioceses	Community schools - Diocese of Exeter	Community schools beyond our diocese
Academies for Character and Excellence (ACE) (Majority)	9	4	2	2
Alumnis Academy Trust (Majority)	6		3	
An Daras Academy Trust (Minority)	1	1	1	8
Athena Learning Trust (Minority)	1		2	6
Blackdown Education Partnership <i>(Majority Articles requested and agreed by EDBE, though not progressed)</i>			4	8
Chulmleigh Academy Trust (Majority)			4	
Dartmoor Multi-Academy Trust (DMAT) (Minority)	6	0	13	
Education South West (ESW) <i>(Minority Articles requested and agreed by EDBE, though not progressed)</i>			14	
First Federation Trust (FFT) (Majority)	12	5	10	2
Harbour Schools Partnership (Majority)	13		23	
Ivy Education Trust (Minority)	1		7	
Learning Academy Partnership South West (LAP) (Majority)	11	2	4	1
LINK Academy Trust (Majority)	13		10	
St Christopher's Primary Academy Trust (Majority)	17		4	
TEAM Academy Trust (Majority)	3		5	
Ted Wragg Trust (TWT) (Minority)	2		15	

Appendix 3b: Federations with Church schools in the Diocese of Exeter

The EDBE expects certain governance arrangements depending on whether you are a Voluntary Aided (VA) or Voluntary Controlled (VC) school, or have majority or minority foundation governance, so that the Christian foundation of Church schools is preserved in line with your current designation. See section 4 for more details.

The following table lists federations within the Diocese of Exeter with Church schools. It indicates what the category of schools are within the federation (VA, VC, community). It is important to look at the proportionality of foundation governance when investigating a federation partnership so you can be assured that the Christian foundation of your Church school is protected.

Federation	VA schools	VC schools	Community	Total
Cedar Tree	2	0	0	2
Culm Valley Federation	0	2	1	3
Devon Moors Federation	0	1	7	8
Exe Valley and Moorsway Federation	0	4	6	10
Federation of Tiverton	1	0	2	3
Fort Federation	1	1	0	2
Goodleigh / Ilfracombe	0	1	1	2
Halberton / Uplowman	0	1	1	2
Otter Valley Federation	2	0	0	2
South Hams Federation	0	1	3	4
Three Rivers Federation	0	1	1	2
United Schools Federation	3	1	4	8
West Exmoor Federation	1	1	1	3

Appendix 4: Frequently asked questions

Are the Exeter Diocesan Board of Education Committee (EDBE) saying all schools need to join an Academy Trust?

No. Within the Diocese of Exeter, the DBE have never stated this. The recommendation of the EDBE is that all schools are in a strong formal partnership with shared accountability through governance. The EDBE defines a formal partnership as a federation or an academy trust. It is the strength of the partnership that concerns the EDBE most, and the synergy of the school(s) and grouping(s) vision and values.

Is the EDBE really open to federations as a model?

Yes. The EDBE has recommended for several years that schools / groupings are within a strong formal partnership with shared accountability through governance. This could be an academy trust or a federation - the emphasis is on 'strong'. It is however important to note that the Department for Education is now stating an expectation that all state-funded schools will join or form a school trust.

It is important to note that any partnership entered must protect the Christian foundation of the school and therefore should not result in diluted governance. This may limit the choices of academy trust and federation available. Please speak with the Diocesan Education Team for a deeper understanding.

Wherever there is a preferred partnership option, governance will need to be assured through their due diligence processes that it is a strong partnership which protects the Christian foundation of Church schools and essentially secures excellent outcomes for children / young people.

Does the Diocese have any powers if a school refuses to engage in partnership discussions with other schools or the Education Team?

The EDBE is asking you to consider what is best for your school community. Whilst it is recommended schools join a formal partnership, there is no stipulated timescale or compulsion. Nevertheless, as part of schools' regular self-evaluation, the EDBE encourages all stand-alone schools and all multi-school groupings to regularly consider their effectiveness, resilience and sustainability.

EDBE's preference is to come to a mutual understanding about what is in the best interest of each school / grouping and is respectful of contextualised local decision making. If information is not forthcoming, the DBE may require, by direction, the governance board to provide information to assist the EDBE in carrying out its functions. The Diocesan Board of Education (DBE) Measure 2021 does enable the Diocese to give direction to a governance board if the EDBE is satisfied that the governance board 'is accordingly acting in a manner which is not in the interests of the school or of Church schools generally'.

Will our Christian Distinctiveness and ethos be diluted if we join an academy trust or a federation?

In academy trusts the Christian foundation of the school is protected whether your designation is/was VA or VC as the Articles of Association ensure the appropriate majority or minority governance arrangements.

The Articles of Association is a legal document that also states the academy trust must, 'recognise and support their (Academy's) individual ethos'. This is cemented in the academy trust objects.

In federations foundation governance proportionality can be reduced, potentially putting at risk the Christian Foundation of a Church school. Federations can however choose to match the previous proportionality of Foundation Governance.

The EDBE is not supportive of schools entering a partnership where the foundation governance is diluted.

Will we lose our autonomy?

The degree to which you keep your autonomy will depend on your chosen partner and will be established through your robust due diligence. It is not dependent on whether you choose an academy trust or a federation but on the individual organisation. During your investigations consider where you might wish to keep autonomy, for example regarding curriculum choices, and where there will be advantages in working together, for example on assessment processes and some specific policies. All organisations are different.

We are a successful stand-alone school and don't need to join a grouping, so why would we?

Joining a multi-school grouping is about both giving and receiving and should be viewed as equal partnership. If you are a strong school, your expertise could benefit a wider group of children and young people. It could also give your staff improved career pathways so they are not lost from your school altogether. Being part of a multi-school grouping also gives a school resilience – if key personnel were to leave your successful school for how long could it retain its strength? Capacity should always be increased in a good partnership and practically all schools have an area which would benefit from further development or resource. Partnership options might enable new innovation, greater SEND support or improved provision, or simply the opportunity to spread good practice to benefit a wider or more diverse range of pupils / students.

We are a successful small grouping and don't need to join a larger grouping, so why would we?

As above. If you are successful with, for example, strong school improvement systems, you could consider coming alongside others in partnership to either merge or expand your grouping. Your expertise could help 'serve the common good'.

Why is a formal financially binding partnership the best way of collaborating?

It will only be the 'best way' of collaborating if you choose your partners wisely and have a full understanding of how accountability arrangements work. Finances whilst important are just one part of this and will be organised in different ways depending on the organisation. It is however the opportunities and benefits, such as increased expertise, capacity and focus on school improvement; staff recruitment, training and retention; shared resourcing; and increased resilience, which make formal partnerships worthy of serious consideration. The shared vision and collaborative purpose, shared governance structure and the joint accountability ensure all are working toward the same goal and pull together, however difficult the circumstances, to ensure all schools can flourish.

Appendix 5: Useful reading

Referenced and reference papers

Flourishing together: A collective vision for the Education system (NSE, CES, CST – November 2024)

<https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2024-11/flourishing-together-a-collective-vision-for-the-education-system.pdf>

Our Hope for a Flourishing Schools System: Deeply Christian, Serving the Common Good (NSE June 2023)

<https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2023-06/our-hope-for-a-flourishing-schools-system-report.pdf>

Building strong trusts (CST – September 2024)

<https://cstuk.org.uk/resources/building-strong-trusts>

Starting with Why: Why join a trust – and why a trust-based system? (CST – January 2023)

<https://cstuk.org.uk/resources/starting-why-why-join-trust-%E2%80%93-and-why-trust-based-system>

Academy Trust Handbook 2025

[Academy trust handbook 2025: effective from 1 September 2025 - GOV.UK](#)

Annex A - Trust Quality Descriptions: DfE July 2023

[Annex A - Trust Quality Descriptions \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](#)

Building Strong Academy Trusts: DfE May 2021

[Building strong academy trusts: guidance for academy trusts and prospective converters](#)

The School Governance (Federations) (England) Regulations 2012: No 135

<https://www.legislation.gov.uk/uksi/2012/1035/contents/made/data.pdf>

The School Governance (Federations) (England) (Amendment) Regulations 2015: No 1554

https://www.legislation.gov.uk/uksi/2015/1554/pdfs/uksi_20151554_en.pdf

Federations: guidance on the governance (DfE - Updated Sept 2022)

[Federations: guidance on the governance processes - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#)

Improving the impact of teachers on pupil achievement in the UK (The Sutton Trust - September 2011)

<https://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/2teachers-impact-report-final-1.pdf>

Management Partnership Contract – Diocese of Exeter and associated parties

We will be happy to share this with you – please ask by emailing education@exeter.anglican.org

Appendix 6: Contact details

Diocesan Education Officers are here to support you and your schools. Please do keep in touch.



From left to right

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Grace Stanhope, Communications and Engagement Officer

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Additionally, the Diocesan Surveyor for schools is a useful contact:

Richard Power, Diocesan Surveyor for Schools

Richard.power@exeter.anglican.org