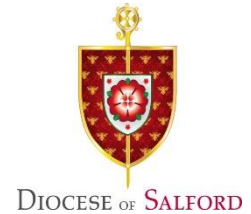


## **Rebuilding the Church, fit for future generations**

### **Growth of Catholic Academy Trusts in Salford: Position Statement**



#### **Introduction**

Bishop John, through Hope in the Future, exploring the possibility of a diocesan Synod and his ambitious plans for the restoration of the Cathedral and the development of the Laudato Si' Centre, invites us all to 'journey together' under the theme of 'Rebuilding the Church, fit for future generations'.

In this new, emerging landscape, a critical role for us as school governors and leaders is to look to the future and guide the strategic direction of not only our own school but the whole diocesan family of schools. We, as Catholic leaders, can play a real, significant part in 'rebuilding the Church' [Pope Francis] and renewing faith formation to preserve high quality, excellent Catholic education described in Canon 806b.

Without intervention and innovation, Catholic education may become vulnerable in decades to come. If we can align our mission over the current decade we will have a unique opportunity to renew the shape and charism of our Catholic schools in the Diocese of Salford. Our collective wisdom, vision and ambition can see us take control of a range of important aspects of the education landscape: Catholic initial teacher training and recruitment; professional development planned and delivered through and by diocesan schools; school improvement commissioned and delivered by our own system leaders and CATs; the range of opportunities to retain the very best staff and succession plan without an artificial ceiling on what is possible. All these have the potential to become reality and the norm.

Our schools strive to provide high quality education to all pupils and to assist parents as the primary educators of their child. Historical models of challenge, support and advice are on the decline and we must now reflect to discern new ways of ensuring that none of our schools are left vulnerable, isolated or disadvantaged. The diocesan CAT strategy is built upon two key elements of Solidarity: that we are all responsible for each other; and Subsidiarity: allowing people to contribute to decision making at all levels and at the right level.

Your active and positive engagement in this period of discernment is both welcomed and appreciated. We will over the coming months plan a series of opportunities and activities ensuring that you, and we, can listen, discuss and contribute.

#### **Historical position**

In 2016 Bishop John agreed for diocesan Voluntary Aided schools to convert to Academy status and join a Diocesan Catholic Academy Trust if the Governing Body resolved to do so. His decision was made in recognition of a changing national educational landscape which presented and continues to present potential opportunities or actual threats to the key purposes and effectiveness of Catholic schools.

In 2018 the first diocesan Catholic Academy Trust (CAT) was established. 2019 saw the approval of a three CAT plan across the Diocesan footprint. By September 2020 all three Diocesan CATs had been established: St Teresa of Calcutta CAT, Romero CAT and Emmaus CAT.

## **Current position**

### **In our Diocese:**

By the end of 2021 sixteen schools had joined a Salford CAT and there are a further five schools on track to convert before September 2022. These 21 schools represent 11% of those eligible. All have converted in to three diocesan CATs: Romero, St Teresa of Calcutta and Emmaus. These three trusts are territorially fixed and it is not anticipated this will change.

When we began the academy trust journey in 2016 our focus was very much centred on reducing the level of risk, vulnerability and disadvantage being experienced, particularly by our schools who were in receipt of a Directive Academy Order (dAO) from the Secretary of State to convert to an academy and join an academy trust. Of the sixteen academies within our Trusts, eleven were subject to such an order and they were joined by five schools who voluntarily converted showing a genuine desire and commitment by local governors and school leaders to live out the virtues of Catholic social teaching such as solidarity, the common good and Gospel values, powerfully articulated in Canon 795.

At the time of their conversion, these 'voluntary' converters took a leap of faith – they were not sure what might be ahead but were driven by a desire to support one of their wider Catholic family and truly demonstrate solidarity and faith in action.

### **The national picture:**

A Memorandum of Understanding (2017) agreed by the Bishops' Conference and the Department for Education provided guarantees in relation to the authority of the local Bishop, each diocese and each school within the diocese. Before this, in 2011, the Catholic Education Service (CES) census showed that there were less than 50 Catholic academies nationally. Figures for 2021 show this figure has now risen to just under 700. The bulk of this increase can be directly attributed to changes in the position taken by many of the 19 Catholic dioceses in England. In 2015, when the concept of Multi-Academy Trusts began to emerge, no diocese had a vision or strategy that all maintained VA schools would be required to convert and join a MAT. By 2021 that position has changed significantly, 14 of the 19 English dioceses having now introduced a strategy which requires all schools, within the particular diocese, to become academies and join a diocesan MAT. The remaining 5 dioceses have a mixed economy model.

What can we learn from our own experience and that of other dioceses and CATs?

Most of the Local Authorities (LAs) covered by the diocesan footprint are becoming less able to offer the range or quality of services schools have historically experienced and valued. This reduction in services has led to reduced capacity across all LAs and many services are now offered as contracted services, service level agreements or services that have been outsourced as traded services or through external commercial providers.

Questions over value for money, affordability and quality of service have placed an unwelcome burden on governing boards who historically received these services from the LA and in the main had little reason not to agree to a whole range of services being provided by the LA with costs taken prior to schools receiving their delegated budgets. During the last 5 years there has been a very significant shift in central government school improvement funding with far greater levels of funding now being allocated and delivered through MATs or the new teaching school hubs rather than the historical route through LAs, often in collaboration with National Support Schools. This shift has created a situation where LAs have to limit direct school improvement work to, in the main, those schools 'causing concern', either through an Ofsted grading or financial difficulties. The historical model, with schools being 'maintained' by an LA is no longer the predominant model nationally. This has been replaced by the MAT partnership model with 80% of secondary and 40% of primary schools in England now being academies. The last three years have also enabled us to witness and influence how this shifting

dynamic has impacted on our diocesan schools who have joined a CAT and now to gather a body of evidence based upon the experiences of CATs across a number of dioceses.

From a position of anticipating the benefits and risks of conversion, we can now use first-hand testimonies from schools working directly with CATs. The following are a selection of 'tangible benefits statements' made by schools who have joined a CAT:

- *We love the networking and the support CAT membership offers*
- *I could not have managed through Covid without our Trust support. My colleagues in LA schools faced delays when seeking advice. I got immediate answers*
- *The Trust subject network meetings are a really valuable tool for developing middle leaders*
- *I cannot believe how beneficial the skill sharing approach has been in developing staff confidence and effectiveness*
- *The Trust HR central team have significantly reduced the work we have to undertake in relation to numerous staffing matters and their support is top class*
- *The Governing Body and Headteacher were worried about a loss of autonomy when we joined the CAT but we continue to lead and run our school on a daily basis and benefit from CAT central team capacity and expertise*

As the Diocesan Trustees contemplate how the educational landscape in Salford Diocese will look in future decades, a growing number of Bishops have concluded that growing CATs in their own diocese will secure the long term delivery of the key purposes of Catholic education in our schools and provide an environment for collaboration, cooperation and partnership. Some comments attributed to Diocesan Bishops:

- *Strengthening and safeguarding of our Catholic mission tailored to our Catholic needs including through the curriculum*
- *Many of our schools are now unsupported. The solidarity and collegiality offered by a CAT fills this unwelcome void*
- *Our VA schools are facing existential threats – isolation, declining LA capacity, market forces pushing up service costs – since joining a CAT our academy schools do not identify with these pressures and threats*

### **Next steps**

There will be material and activities posted on the 'Academies Strategy' website and through our normal communication channels such as the weekly newsletter beginning in a few weeks' time. Each of our CATs, Romero, St Teresa of Calcutta and Emmaus, will provide opportunities in the coming weeks, to engage with them as they too work to discern the future and develop plans to build capacity if the number of schools in a CAT increases significantly.

This period of discernment will run until 30<sup>th</sup> June 2022 after which diocesan trustees will continue to consider their next steps as they too seek to 'rebuild the church'.

Applications from schools to join the relevant CAT will continue to be considered and supported in the usual way.

**February 2022**