



Department
for Education

Diocese of Wakefield

In-depth sponsor profile

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Introduction

The Diocese of Wakefield sponsors 17 academies through a Diocesan Umbrella Trust and a very active Diocesan Academies Trust (DAT), founded in 2012.

The DAT works exclusively with what they term 'schools requiring intensive care'. It currently includes six Academies, including two former community schools which have no religious designation. As well as having increased rates of progress in all schools the DAT is expecting to have two rated as at least 'good' in their next Ofsted inspection.

Key themes

- Diocesan Academies Trust (DAT)
- Turning around failing schools
- Community partnerships
- Local financial responsibility

Founding and ethos

“Our motive is, in a sentence, just responding to the gospel imperative ‘a mandate to serve’.” The Reverend Canon Ian Wildey, Diocesan Director of Education

The Church of England Diocese of Wakefield has been an active member of the education community for many years in the five local authorities within the Diocesan boundary: Barnsley, Calderdale, Kirklees, North Yorkshire and Wakefield. There are 84 Voluntary Aided (VA) and Voluntary Controlled (VC) Church of England schools in the diocese in addition to the 15 Church of England and 2 community Academies. Prior to the Academies programme, the Diocese had played an active role in its schools working to ensure the teaching of religious education and embedding a Christian ethos. As with many dioceses, historically, school improvement had been a role for the local authority.

Following the Academies Act 2010, the Diocesan Director of Education, Canon Wildey, and the Wakefield Diocesan Board of Education acted quickly to become forerunners in the Academies programme. Canon Wildey explains that they were eager to “take charge and begin to shape an unknown future”. Specifically, they wanted to maintain the integrity of the family of church schools and avoid any *“maverick type opportunities beginning grasped by any more maverick type head teachers or governors who had misunderstood and would take the opportunity to do something which would not best place them within the diocese.”*

They were also concerned that church buildings and land should be protected for specific uses and wanted to ensure that church schools converting to Academy status would not be able to circumvent the Diocese’s interests in: teaching religious education; acts of collective worship; and, the religious designation being the core character of the school.

Creating an Umbrella Trust

Reflecting these concerns, Canon Wildey and the Board approached the DfE in 2010 and were advised to set up a Diocesan Umbrella Trust to house two very strong Church of England schools that were keen to convert to Academy status. Since then, the Diocese of Wakefield Umbrella Trust has taken in nine more converting schools and there are three more in the process of converting. The Umbrella Trust has successfully maintained the integrity of the church family of schools while allowing these strong institutions greater autonomy.

Having established the Umbrella Trust, Canon Wildey and the Board became increasingly interested in using the Academies model to play a more proactive role in supporting some of the weaker schools in their community. To drive improvements in those schools they recognised they would need stronger intervention powers than the Diocesan Umbrella Trust made possible.

In March 2012, the Wakefield Diocesan Academies Trust (DAT) was founded. The aim of the DAT is for every school to have the right support to become a success and to benefit the community in which the school sits. To achieve this, DAT's three

Trustees – Archdeacon Peter Townley; Canon Wildey; and John McLeod (a retired Director of Education and active lay member of the Diocese) – engaged Kevin Jones as Director of Finance and Operations. His role was to sit alongside them and to add to their capacity to take on this new school improvement role. They also recruited Simon Barber as an educational adviser. He is currently head teacher at the Holy Trinity School in Barnsley, which is the only purpose built 3-16 Catholic and Church of England school in the country.

Developing a chain

There are currently six sponsored academies in the Wakefield Diocesan Academies Trust (DAT), all of which require what the Board terms “intensive care”. Four of the six schools were struggling church schools. Due to DAT's wider role in serving the community, they have also taken on two failing community schools, neither of which they have required to take on a religious designation. Canon Wildey is pleased with taking non-church schools into the DAT. He sees the fact that they have been approached by the schools and the local authority as a reflection of long-standing strong relationships in the community, a history of working collaboratively and wide confidence that the Diocese wants what is best for every school and is capable of providing good support.

Canon Wildey and his colleagues are not ambitious for future growth but the DAT will expand as necessary to meet the requirements of Diocesan schools in need of “intensive care”. They hope that there will be few of these. They plan that, in the future, strong schools converting will offer further capacity to the DAT and maximise its potential for school-to-school collaboration and staff sharing.

The Diocesan Academies Trust model: central commissioning, local financial responsibility

“We’ve set up a regime where we work with schools and partners to find solutions; we don’t do it all ourselves.” Kevin Jones, Director of Finance and Operations.

The Diocese wants to create a Diocesan Academies Trust (DAT) where everyone in the schools has the opportunity to be part of the solution and where schools feel actively involved in the changes the DAT is making. Any money taken off schools by the DAT must be used fairly, in line with their Christian principles. For them, this means: limiting the amount of money they receive from schools for central costs; maintaining schools’ financial control; and ensuring central money is not used for activities which will not benefit every school. For this reason, the DAT takes a very small top-slice for central activity – £100 per pupil (excluding nursery pupils) from each school. This pays for: recruitment of head teachers; financial audit; and the cost of the Director of Finance and Operations. Beyond this, the DAT commissions, arranges and contracts for the services schools need but the schools pay for these services directly so they retain responsibility. The schools also receive unspent sponsor grant which provides another incentive to work collaboratively with the DAT.

The DAT believes that having the schools pay for the support it arranges enables them to take ownership and responsibility for the necessary changes and makes them an active partner in the improvements. The idea is that none of the schools feel “done to” and being trusted with their funding sets up an “adult to adult” relationship and does not cast the DAT in the role of the schools’ “parent”.

The DAT also does not insist on rebranding activity as Canon Wildey and Kevin Jones are keen for all schools to keep their identity. This sits directly with the Church of England’s aim to provide community-based education and create “local schools for a local system.” As Kevin puts it *“our name will come from how good each of our*

Academies are” rather than from branding activity. Some schools might choose to rename themselves, to let everybody know that they have changed and to bring the title of Academy or the DAT into their school materials, but many do not.

Turning around failing schools

The DAT believe that it is valuable for any school converting to have strong relationships which cater for different parts of the academisation process. For this reason, Canon Wildey leads the work with the local authority, DfE and other stakeholders in the run up to the school acquiring Academy status; and Kevin Jones works with the schools to define their problems and how they will improve. The DAT says this allows them to specialise and allows the school to have someone else to go to if one of the relationships becomes fraught due to the academisation or improvement process.

In every situation, the first step is to make sure the DAT and the school senior leadership team understand the problems the school is facing and why. To do this, Kevin will run a meeting with the senior leadership team and head, probing them about the school but in which the head is given limited opportunities to speak.

“The head teacher bites her lip, kicks me under the table, as keeping quiet is not natural, and the rest of SLT present the case for the school” Kevin Jones

This helps the DAT to quickly establish the extent of any denial among the senior staff. This same process is used with the governing body. A shared understanding about the current state of the school, with no rose-tinted glasses, is essential to ensure the school can turn itself around. This process also enables the DAT to take a view as to whether the governing body will be able to help with the improvement or whether they will be disbanded until there has been improvement. Canon Wildey describes it as “tough love” as it can be a challenging process for the staff of the school but it is done in a supportive way.

It is only when these processes have concluded and there is agreement of the plan of action between the school community and the DAT that plans for academisation are put to the community. This means that the announcement and consultation on becoming an Academy is a joint activity between the DAT and the school. So far they have not encountered any objections.

Once the school has become an Academy it gets two improvement partners whose initial role is to open the eyes of schools and thoroughly challenge them about why they have had poor Ofsted reports, results and progress. Since over half of the improvement partners are current or former Ofsted inspectors they are very skilled at supporting schools through this process. Having two improvement partners gives the schools the benefit of two points of view but the DAT ensures that each improvement partner is assigned to different elements of the improvement plan so there is no confusion.

In the first days of the school reopening as an Academy, the improvement partners and Kevin work with the school to understand its running. They spend several days

observing and questioning everything they see until they really understand how the school operates and its weaknesses. Kevin and the improvement partners, head teacher and chair of governors (if there is one) will agree what school improvement support needs to be purchased – although the DAT has the final say – and the school buys it. This leads to each school having a detailed and bespoke improvement plan in place within weeks of the school becoming an Academy.

The DAT is clear that everything stems from good teaching and prioritises support for teachers. It triangulates assessment of all teachers, half-termly, looking at their performance against classroom observation, observations of marking and planning and pupil progress. These assessments are externally moderated by an improvement partner and no teacher can be found to be ‘good’ or ‘outstanding’ unless the pupil progress is also ‘good’ or ‘outstanding’. Improving teaching can take many forms. In some schools it involved buying in an Advanced Skills Teacher for two days a week from a range of sources including non-diocesan schools that come forward to work with the DAT. In one school this led the school to move from no teachers being assessed as ‘good’ in the summer of 2013 to 77% of the teaching being ‘good’ by February 2014. Another school used the unspent sponsor grant to employ an additional teacher for a year.

The DAT puts so much support in place in schools that staff soon realised if they cannot meet the standard and they either leave of their own accord or through compromise agreements. To date, one compromise agreement has been agreed and there are two other cases being reviewed. The idea is that, when teachers leave, it does not damage staff morale as the other staff can see the chances and support that have been given. This pattern is also seen with head teachers – the DAT has not yet had to sack a head, although two new heads have been appointed during the academisation process.

Diocesan Academy Trust School Governance

“One of the real strengths of the Academies programme is that we can start to tackle the area of school leadership and school management.” Canon Wildey

Schools are allowed to have their own governing body once they have proved their competence to Canon Wildey, Kevin Jones and their improvement partners. This includes, initially, demonstrating a willingness to work with the DAT. A lack of willingness and ability has led to two schools currently not having a local governing body and instead being directly overseen by the DAT. This approach means that schools fully understand the seriousness of the role of the local governing body and what skills they need on the board.

In some schools where they are allowed a local governing body, the DAT go to meetings as an observer. In other schools, there is a more active role in the standards committees or main board. No governing bodies are left untouched but some need a light touch and some need more help.

Sustaining a high quality chain

School improvement support

As the DAT's approach is predicated on working with improvement partners it is essential that Canon Wildey and Kevin Jones ensure a good supply of candidates with which to work. Since their reputation has grown, they have found that they are attracting excellent people and schools from outside the DAT. For example, Shelley First School in Kirklees is an outstanding non-denominational school and future teaching school, which has expressed an interest in becoming a school improvement partner for one of the DAT's academies.

As the schools improve there should be some internal capacity to begin school-to-school improvement support as the DAT expect at least two (if not more) of its schools to be judged as at least 'good' in their next inspection.

Continuous monitoring of performance data

The Trustees monitor data on the Diocesan Academies Trust (DAT) schools on a half-termly basis with a focus on particular groups of children. They do not insist that the schools all use the same data management systems but ensure that all of the systems they use drill down to the same fine level of detail to enable the board to see performance and improvement in a consistent way.

Data is examined by Kevin and the school improvement partners and then presented to the main board. If necessary, Simon Barber, as education adviser for the Board, will analyse and explain the consequences of the data. The data is also reported to the standards board of local governing bodies. At one governing body, they have appointed specialist trainers to go through the performance data to teach the governors what they should be looking for and what they should be expecting. If this approach is successful they will roll it out to other schools.

The future

The Diocese will merge with the Dioceses of Leeds, Bradford and Ripon from April 2014. The dioceses are currently looking at how the Diocesan Academy Trusts will operate across the new diocesan boundaries.

Summary of key learning points

- A Diocesan Academies Trust (DAT) is a strong model for dealing with educational failure within a Diocese. Current Umbrella Trust arrangements have much less leverage over school improvement.
- A DAT will, more than likely, need to recruit educational expertise onto its Trust board, especially if it has had limited experience leading school improvement.
- Having the schools pay for the support which the DAT arranges enables them to take ownership and responsibility for the necessary changes and makes them an active partner in the improvements.
- At the point of taking on a failing school, the Trust has a key role to play in ensuring the school comes to terms with previous problems and appraises issues honestly. This remains the case where the sponsor's philosophy is for improvements to be led from within the school.



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