**Date      :               5th January 2024**

**Re           :             Ofsted Inspections pause; DfE Consultation on Gender Questioning Children; Board update on Academisation**

Dear colleagues

Welcome back after the Christmas break. I hope you were able to have some rest and recuperation and I send my best wishes as we begin a new year with the opportunities and challenges that will greet us.

I appreciate your consideration and reading the following information, relevant to all schools.

**1.Ofsted pause in school inspections**

You will have seen the media coverage this week on the new Chief Inspector’s decision to pause all inspections (other than any relating to Safeguarding concerns) with immediate notice further to his commencement in the role on January 1st. This is welcome, and demonstrates that Ofsted is now taking seriously the findings from the recent recommendations from the inquest following the tragic suicide of Headteacher Ruth Perry, and more widespread concerns about the value and impact of single word inspection judgments on schools, as well as attending to the impact on the wellbeing, mental and physical health of Headteachers, given the potential direct ramifications on them as individuals following inspection.

I look forward to the update on inspector training and other decisions that Ofsted will take regarding school inspections.

Meanwhile, I continue to thank you for all you are holding and doing, which is so public and often challenged in both content and manner that is inappropriate and unnecessary. You are valued and cherished, doing extremely important but challenging work, giving beyond and above routinely. Anything we can do to support and engage with you is always offered and available.

**2.Government Consultation on Draft Guidance - Gender Questioning Children**

At the end of term, you may or may not have noticed that the DfE published draft Guidance for Schools on Gender Questioning and related matters, and opened a public consultation on this Guidance – which is now live until early March 2024.  This Guidance was promised two years ago when there was media reporting on several developments and legal challenges about the validity and appropriateness of some of the Guidance available to schools.

The Church of England has consistently said that it would review and update its Guidance as appropriate and necessary, once the official Guidance from the DfE was available, so there could be due reference and explanation of any matters that require additional advice or contextual information to Church Schools. Our Guidance to date has been in the CofE document ‘Valuing All God’s Children’ – which will be reviewed once the DfE Guidance is published.

I will be offering schools the opportunity to meet me and my colleagues for clarification and discussion once the DfE and National CofE Guidance is published, and suggesting how best this can be shared with parents and carers.

Meanwhile, Governing Bodies are invited to consider if they wish to respond to the Guidance with an agreed corporate response from Governors, or if Governors and any others wish to respond individually (both can also happen). I would strongly encourage you to read the draft Guidance as it is relevant to all schools and Governing Bodies.

The consultation document for responses, and the draft guidance can be found [**here**](https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2023/22-december/news/uk/dignity-at-heart-of-c-of-e-response-to-children-who-question-gender).

I would also ask you to read the statement from the Church of England’s Chief Education Officer – as well as the link to previous comments where the CofE’s document was misrepresented. Dignity at heart of C of E response to children who question gender | Church Times

**3.Board progress on Academisation**

You will recall the extensive consultation I arranged over several venues and weeks regarding the changing position of the DfE on Academisation. Our Board has been busy considering all the feedback, as well as navigating further changes and messages from the DfE. Our context is complex as in our region academies are a small representation of schools, unlike some areas where very few Local Authority schools exist. We have a very small number of Church schools that are academies – some are Stand Alone (a category no longer available from the DfE), some are in an Umbrella Trust (a category no longer available from the DfE) and some in two partner Trusts.

Decisions by the Board will affect all CofE schools in both Winchester Diocese and Portsmouth Diocese. We anticipate that the proposed decisions will be finalised by Easter, I then propose to offer Governors and School Leaders the opportunity again to meet with me to receive any comments and feedback before the final policy decision is made.

As repeatedly stated at the Consultation events and in all conversations with school leaders and governors, it remains the case that we will not be asking or expecting all / any of our diocesan schools to academise. This is for Governors to determine, but within the choices and policy that our Board offers. Church Schools cannot act unilaterally and although I explained the reasons in detail at the Consultation Events why it is currently not helpful that Governing Boards approach any Trust they know, or want to understand a particular Trust’s approach, a small number of schools nevertheless did this. The Trusts in approaching me were (as I explained to all at our events) informed that it is only when the Board finalises its policy that we will (or will not – depending on the policy) engage with any or a number of Trusts.

I need to emphasise that no diocesan school will be required or expected to academise – unless it falls within the current government legislation and DfE practice, of receiving repeat RI judgments from Ofsted, or is placed in Special Measures.

If after receiving the final Board Policy any schools decide they do want to academise (within the parameters of our Board’s policy), we will then advise on next steps and costs for the schools.

Thank you for your understanding and work as we navigate these matters. Your wisdom and views are appreciated.

Best wishes

Jeff

**Jeff Williams**

**Director of Education**

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