Summary
The Church of England has published a report on its recent review of the future of Church schools. Its aim is to build on developments since the 2001 ‘Dearing report’, recognising the need to respond to the changes brought in by the Coalition Government – particularly the growth of Academies and the consequential opportunities and challenges to the Church’s continued role in the public education system.

The report observes that ‘The Church of England is the largest single provider of schools in England with more than 4,800 schools. It plays a key role in shaping change in the education system.’

Overview
The Church School of the Future reports on the work and recommendations of a recent review established to consider the changing policy context of school provision nationally and the implications for the Church of England’s continued role in the system. It does not present a blueprint for the future of Church schools so much as a framework within which the continuing work of the Church can be developed. It recognises the need for change on a number of fronts, and makes 26 recommendations (listed in an annex at the foot of this briefing).

In 2001, The Way Ahead: Church of England schools in the new millennium (the ‘Dearing report’) led to some major changes, including a major expansion in the number of Church schools, particularly secondary schools. The need for the present review was established by the General Synod ‘in the light of the fundamental changes to the education system related to recent legislation and government policy’. The review gathered views from a wide range stakeholders, through an online survey and extended interviews during a three-month consultation period at the end of 2011; it looked at four broad areas:

- the challenges facing the Church school system in the future
- the defining characteristics of Church schools
- how the Church school family might develop and grow
- how schools should be supported at diocesan and national levels.

A detailed delivery action plan will be drawn up to implement the review’s recommendations.
Briefing in full

The report is in six chapters: Mission and Purpose – the Church’s involvement in schooling; Achievements in the past decade and challenges for the future; What it means to be a Church school; Church schools in the wider context; The role and work of the National Society; and, The roles and work of Diocesan Boards of Education and directorates.

Mission and Purpose – the Church’s involvement in schooling

In 2011 the Church of England celebrated the bicentenary of the founding of the National Society (for the Promotion of the Education of the Poor in the Principles of the Established Church, to give it its full name), which marked a commitment to systematic provision across England and Wales – 60 years before the landmark 1870 Education Act. The definitive incorporation of Church schools into the publicly funded system came through the 1944 Education Act, which created voluntary aided and voluntary controlled schools.

The report says, ‘The social context has changed greatly since 1944, and the historic settlement at that time is no longer the lonely statutory framework for the publicly funded school system.’ In 2000, the Church commissioned the Dearing review; ‘Schools were seen as standing at the centre of the Church’s mission to the nation, in clear recognition that in many dioceses there are as many children in Church schools as there are Sunday worshippers in churches…If the Church is serious about transforming society, its school system is the principal arena within which to express this intention.’

Achievements in the past decade and challenges for the future

The Dearing Report

The Dearing report’s most significant recommendation was the call for an increase in the number of Church secondary schools by the equivalent of 100 new schools over the following 7-8 years, with a particular focus on deprived areas. It stressed the importance of employing Christian teachers and school leaders, and urged dioceses to set targets for improving teaching and learning in their schools. It looked at admissions to Church schools, and recommended a balance between open places allocated to the local community and reserved places for children of Church families. ‘...the schools should be seen as a service to the whole community and not solely as a service to the Church.’ Dearing also supported an ecumenical approach to new schools, and strengthening of links between maintained and independent Anglican schools.

A summary of achievements and outstanding issues

‘In the 10 years since the [Dearing] report, there has been the greatest expansion of Church school places since the National Society was formed’: several Church schools were formed from failing county or community schools, followed by around 70 so-called Dearing schools and then the first wave of 45 academies sponsored by the Church of England – making it the largest provider of academies.

A small number of new schools and Academies are ecumenical, mostly in partnership with Roman Catholic dioceses and some new primary schools with Methodist involvement. Training for Church school leaders has been developed greatly, largely in partnership with the National College for
School Leadership - including work on succession planning and development of black and minority leadership.

‘Admission arrangements continue to be contentious, with renewed attacks on the principle of foundation places from parties hostile to Church schools.’ The Academies serve their immediate neighbourhoods, and few have foundation places, but revised guidance issued in 2011 by the National Society and the Church’s Board of Education reiterates Dearing’s emphasis on all Church schools offering both open and foundation places.

The supply and development of leaders for Church schools remains an issue raised in the current review, as does the need to ensure that clergy have a full understanding of the role of a Church school in the mission and ministry of the parish – with strong feelings expressed that the wider Church places inadequate value on its schools.

New challenges for church schools
Challenges are listed under the headings of: the 2010 Academies Act; the changing role of local authorities; school improvement; religious education; and secularist attack. They include (summarised):

- as quasi-independent schools, academies are outside most of the core education legislation, accountable only to themselves for their curriculum, organisation, admissions policies and teachers’ pay and conditions
- for a Church of England school to convert to academy status, a number of conditions have to be satisfied relating to land and title, maintaining relations with the wider diocesan family of schools, and preserving the distinctive character of the foundation; the change to academy status should in no way compromise the things that support and maintain the distinctive character of Church of England schools
- the acceleration of the academies programme and serious reductions in funding have had a substantial effect on the ability of local authorities (LAs) to support schools
- free market principles strongly govern the supply of services to schools, which can be seen as an opportunity – including for dioceses to provide services to schools
- underperforming schools may be directed to become Academies, and a number of Church schools are below floor targets; ‘the National Society has been able to challenge the automatic assumption that an external organisation takes over the school and to establish that, for Church schools, the Diocesan Board of Education (DBE) will be the default sponsor’
- this formal responsibility for educational quality in Church schools has placed the system under serious pressure, and how the new work will be resourced is not clear – but the Church must demonstrate capability, otherwise it risks the loss of schools
- the report lists a number of challenges to the teaching of religious education ‘which the Government seems to have no will to address’

What it means to be a Church school
At a time of educational change and challenge, the need to be unambiguous and explicit about the key characteristics of Church schools is a priority. The fundamental character of a Church school
is set out in the 1944 Education Act, and has not been undermined in subsequent legislation. The review recommends a list of basic requirements for any Church of England school, and that any new Church of England schools are established on the model derived from voluntary aided (rather than controlled) schools. Some aspects of Church school distinctiveness are written into the foundation of the school; others are expressed through the denominational inspection process or formal policy processes of the Church.

The review found the needed expressed for further developments in the quality of religious education in schools, and the quality of teaching and learning. ‘Many respondents were passionate about remaining committed to a bold and broad view of education in the face of what they saw as a utilitarian, economically driven, narrowly test-oriented system.’ A pilot study is recommended to establish well-being indicators adapted to the Christian framework for Church schools.

The Church has always been committed to partnership working – focused in the past on partnership with LAs; the new context extends the range of potential partners and the future will see the development of new relationships, which should be established with the elements of Church school distinctiveness at their hearts.

**Church schools in the wider context**

The Church school system needs to adapt to a very different environment to that created by 1944 Act settlement, with increasing independence for schools of many different types, with many providers and sponsors. Results from the survey showed a widespread perception that the current agenda poses a risk to the Church school system (84% indicating a medium to highly significant risk; 16% a slight or no risk). Issues raised included fragmentation, loss of sense of family, diminishing commitment to the Christian foundation, difficulty in appointing suitable staff and heads, and inadequate capacity in diocesan support.

Discussion with representatives of the three main political parties, who all had a particular interest in Church matters, raised a number issues (beyond party policies) – including strong affirmation for the work of Church schools and the future of the Church school system, which must deliver high-quality schooling and which have a valued role in serving all communities.

The review suggest that other categories of school are likely to want to affiliate in some way with the Church of England through association with DBEs, and a fuller understanding is required of how affiliation might be defined and implemented.

‘Accountability in the school system is increasingly focused towards the Secretary of State for Education…[so] it has never before been so important for the Church school system to be close to government…[It] must emerge as a distinctive and strong provider of schools and it must be accorded the appropriate status, clarity and certainty that lead to the support and confidence of government.’ A Memorandum of Understanding, issued by the DfE in December 2011, clarifies the way that the Church and Government will work together to convert low-performing schools to Academies (CSN was told the MoU is not a public document, so has submitted a FoI request for it). ‘As the statutory framework that secures the Church’s involvement is superseded in the academy era, a new mechanism needs to be developed. It is strongly recommended that the
National Society Council and Board of Education aim to create a new concordat that redefines and re-establishes the Church’s relationship with the Government on matters related to schooling. The approach should be to build forward from the 2011 Memorandum of Understanding."

The report comments on the changing role of LAs, and their generally diminishing capacity to provide a full range of services to schools – affecting their ability to manage the school improvement aspect of Church schools on behalf of DBEs. It outlines the increasing range of alternative providers, and suggests the benefits of a National Society register of quality-assured organisations and a protocol for creating and establishing relationships with a range of partners committed to the core Church school values and purposes. It also outlines the opportunities for partnerships between independent schools and state schools, such as those already being developed through Academy sponsorship nationally.

The particular issues facing small rural schools are outlined, with a recommendation for a working party to bring forward recommendations for dioceses on a way forward.

The role and work of the National Society
This chapter outlines the separate roles of the National Society (which largely oversees the Church school system) and the Archbishops’ Council Board of Education (which oversees the fulfilment of the national Church’s objectives through education in the widest sense) – which are served by the same officers; it acknowledges the potential for, and existence of, some confusion and recommends development of proposals for a single organisation to represent the Church’s interests in schools for discussion with relevant stakeholders.

It highlights and considers:

- issues of capacity around staffing and funding of functions in relation to meeting the expectations of various stakeholders, and recommends a new approach to financing a proportion of the central schools service – possibly based on a service level agreement with the dioceses and schools
- the need to develop new systems for communicating and sharing policy and operational knowledge
- revision and clarification of the current legal advice service
- the relationship between the National Society, the Board of Education and the Association of Anglican Directors of Education
- improving the links with the General Synod, the House of Bishops, the diocesan synodical structures and Diocesan Secretaries.

The roles and work of Diocesan Boards of Education and directorates
Each diocese has a Diocesan Board of Education (DBE), with powers and duties derived from the DBE Measures, which are passed by the General Synod and Parliament. This chapter describes the powers and duties of the DBEs, and says there is a growing recognition that the brief will need to be extended to take account of the changing educational landscape – though revising the DBE Measure would be long and complex, requiring the approval of Synod and Parliament.
There is recognition that DBEs and their directorates will need to become more proactive, strategic education organisations able to develop as commissioning bodies and to provide brokerage for school-to-school support. They will need to consider their composition and how they work, and the review recommends establishment of a forum to consider ways forward. Again, the issue of resourcing arises to meet this new agenda, with redefinition and clarification of the working relationships and scope of activity between the Diocesan Board of Finance, the Diocesan Secretaries and the DBEs and DDEs becoming increasingly important. There is scope for achieving economies of scale by working collaboratively, especially over service provision (and some pilot schemes already exist), and rethinking DBE directorate structures is likely to be necessary.

Comment
This report highlights significant and widespread concerns about the potential risks to the Church of England’s current role in the provision of schools posed by the rapid changes introduced by the Coalition Government, and the limitations on its present capacity to respond with adequate agility to the opportunities and challenges presented. Its recommendations are intended to restore the situation, and strengthen the position of the Church.

Press reports suggest that the Church is optimistic about the outcome, with plans (not arising directly from the review) for a further 200 schools over the next five years. And the Secretary of State’s remarks during education questions in the Commons (16 April) will have provided reassurance: “…we praise and cherish the role of the Church of England in making sure that children have an outstanding and inclusive education. I welcome the report, and I look forward to working with Bishop John Pritchard to extend the role of the Church in the provision of schools.” A number of recent adverts for senior jobs within the Diocesan education structures is an indication of activity and change within the Church.

The report repeats recommendations which have featured in every report on the Church’s role in education over the last 60 years, such as the need to ensure that clergy have an understanding of the work of Church schools. However, the report is lacking (as indeed the Dearing report was 10 years ago) in both a strong theological perspective and practical solutions, including the vexed questions about how sufficient staff can be found for Church schools who are prepared to support the aims outlined in this report, and the new problems thrown up by academisation. For example, a failing Church Academy has already been taken over by one of the national Academy chains not noted for its commitment to church education, and converting schools are joining multi-academy trusts with non-faith schools with the attendant complications which inevitably arise when the need for an executive head arises.

In order to meet the concerns identified by the review, and implement its recommendations, the Church has a lot of work ahead. Directors of Children’s Services may wish to discuss the report with their regular meetings with Diocesan education staff.

Annex – summary of recommendations
1. Clergy training and appointments must include an understanding of the role of Church schools in the Church’s mission
2. Further work is needed on recruitment and training of Christian teachers and headteachers for Church schools.

3. A review of the communications function of the National Society and the Board of Education should be carried out and recommendations brought to the Council and the Board.

4. While the specific differences between the voluntary aided and voluntary controlled models will for the most part remain in existing schools, the establishing of new Church of England schools on the basis of the voluntary aided schools model is recommended.

5. In partnership with professional associations and other faiths, strategies for the improvement of teaching and learning in religious education should be identified.

6. Partnerships should be developed with Church foundation higher education institutions and outstanding schools to address the level of subject knowledge for religious education and the supply of specialist teachers.

7. The proposal to develop a new resource for the teaching of Christianity should be developed with all reasonable speed.

8. The National Society must work with educationalists and schools to model a Church school curriculum that includes implications for pedagogy, curriculum content and school organisation.

9. A study needs to be undertaken to establish ‘well-being’ indicators stemming from or adapted to the Christian framework for Church schools.

10. A protocol should be developed for partnerships with external organisations.

11. Different models of affiliation should be shared among DDEs and their usefulness evaluated.

12. Work should be undertaken to achieve a new concordat with the Government that develops and affirms the Church’s relationship with central and local government on matters related to schooling.

13. Additional support should be provided for dioceses to aid development of local or regional services for schools, including school improvement.

14. More exploratory work should be done to establish collaborative schemes with the independent schools sector and with other service providers.

15. Further opportunities for joint working with other Christian denominations involved in schools, especially the Roman Catholics and Methodists, should be actively pursued as well as possible collaboration with other faith groups interested in establishing new schools.

16. A working party should be established to explore the specific issues of rural schools and to set out recommendations for dioceses on a way forward.

17. Proposals for creating a single organisation representing the Church of England’s interest in schools should be developed and discussed with relevant stakeholders.

18. A detailed review of the National Society charter and bye-laws needs to be carried out within the next 5 years and recommendations made for a new Council constitution and its functions.

19. National Society membership and funding should be reviewed to improve the working income for the Society.

20. The way legal advice is provided to the National Society, dioceses and schools need to be carefully examined and a revised cost-effective contractual arrangement put in place.

21. A draft management charter should be developed to identify the respective roles of the central organisation and dioceses.

22. The House of Bishops should be consulted to identify effective support in dioceses for DBEs and their teams.
23. Amendments should be made to the DBE Measure that ensure DBEs can respond appropriately to the new responsibilities they will acquire.

24. The role and functions of the DDEs and their support staff should be given proper consideration in every diocese to ensure that they are properly resourced and able to meet the challenges of the academy programme and of their responsibilities for school improvement.

25. Dioceses should review the balance of finances between parish and school development services and the allocation of funding to ensure the long-term survival of the CoFE as a provider of education.

26. A number of pilot schemes should be set up to investigate and trial new ways of collaborative working between dioceses.

External links
The Church School of the Future

For further information, please visit www.lgiu.org.uk or email info@lgiu.org.uk