

Small Schools Strategy

1. Small schools in the diocese

The definition of small schools varies. The DfE refers to small schools in terms of having fewer than 210 pupils on roll. In this diocese, that would mean 73 church schools (84%). 35 out of our 87 (40%) church schools have fewer than 100 pupils on roll as at the October 2022 census. Six of these have fewer than 50 pupils on roll.

2. Local and national context

In Suffolk, the RSA's report "No school an island" was published in May 2013-
https://www.thersa.org/globalassets/pdfs/blogs/rsa_no_school_an_island_report_05-13.pdf

It included the following recommendation:

"We recommend that any small school with a roll fewer than 100 pupils should enter a federation" (page 45).

Nationally the Church of England's report published in October 2014 "Working Together: the Future of Rural Church of England Schools" addressed the issue under the following headings: Structural Collaboration, Dare to be Different and Face the Future

https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2017-10/2014_working_together_the_future_of_rural_schools_web_final.pdf

The following questions, adapted from the report, are helpful:

- How do schools fit into the diocese's wider vision for its rural communities?
- What criteria are used to determine the sustainability of individual schools? How should this be developed?
- How does the DBE develop and maintain the distinctiveness of its school provision in rural communities and are the foundation governor places filled with suitably skilled people?
- What mechanisms exist/ need to be developed in order to encourage and support schools to work together?
- Does/ should the DBE have a preferred model of MATs, federations or other forms of working together?
- How should the DBE advise schools when the headship becomes vacant?
- How does the DBE encourage larger schools to offer support and collaborate with smaller rural schools as part of its development of a strong diocesan family of schools?
- What will be the impact of a national funding formula on the funding for small schools?
- How does the diocese maintain its influence and connection with communities where there is no school or where the Church of England school may need to close?
- In what circumstances might a church school have to close?

Its self-review questions for governing bodies are shown at Appendix 1.

3. Viability

Section 15 of the Education and Inspections Act 2006 requires that when formulating proposals for the closure of a rural primary school, those proposing the closure have regard to specific factors. These factors include the likely effect of the closure on the local community and any alternatives to the closure of the school. The decision makers must also consult parents and the district and parish councils. This Order designates rural primary schools by reference to a list of such schools published on the Gov.uk website at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/rural-primary-schools-designation>.

114 Suffolk schools are listed, of which two are in Norwich diocese, 52 are VC and 7 are VA.

Previous DfE guidance provides further guidance:

“There is a presumption against the closure of rural schools. This does not mean that a rural school will never close, but the case for closure should be strong and a proposal clearly in the best interests of educational provision in the area.

When formulating a proposal, the proposer must carefully consider:

- the likely effect of the closure of the school on the local community;
- educational standards at the school and the likely effect on standards at neighbouring schools;
- the availability, and likely cost to the LA, of transport to other schools;
- any increase in the use of motor vehicles which is likely to result from the closure of the school, and the likely effects of any such increase; and
- any alternatives to the closure of the school.

In order to assist the decision-maker, the proposer of a rural school closure should provide evidence to the decision-maker to show that it has carefully considered:

- alternatives to closure including the potential for a federation with another local school or conversion to academy status and joining a multi-academy trust or umbrella trust to increase the school’s viability; the scope for an extended school to provide local community services; and facilities e.g. child care facilities, family and adult learning, healthcare, community internet access etc.;
- transport implications; and
- the overall and long term impact on local people and the community of closure of the village school and of the loss of the building as a community facility.”

The DBE cannot close a school. The decision-making body is usually Suffolk County Council or, in the case of a voluntary aided school, the governing body may propose closure.

Four small schools have closed in Suffolk in recent years- Badwell Ash CEVAP, Monks Eleigh CEVCP, Stoke Ash Community Primary and Peasenhall Community Primary.

Factors which make a school vulnerable to closure include: an inadequate Ofsted judgement, a falling roll, typically below 30 pupils, budget pressures, difficulties in securing effective leadership and recruiting and retaining teachers. The school funding regime is increasingly challenging for all schools but especially for small schools working on their own. The cost of repairing and maintaining school buildings is also a factor, given limited capital funding.

4. The DBE

The DBE respects the responsibility of governing bodies to make decisions in the best interests of pupils. The DBE has advisory rights in relation to the appointment of Headteachers and an opportunity to advise governors, alongside the local authority. The DBE's consent is also required for any church school seeking to become an academy. The DBE is not the decision-maker on school closure. The DBE supports schools through its education team.

5. Strategy

The DBE affirms its support for small schools as follows:

1. The DBE values the important role that rural church schools play in their local community.
2. The DBE supports successful, sustainable small schools and sees part of its role as helping small schools to work collaboratively with others.
3. The DBE commits to working with the Local Authority on identifying small schools which are vulnerable.
4. The DBE commits to widening the pool from which foundation governors are appointed, across a deanery rather than within a parish, and to equipping them through training to be effective in supporting their school.
5. The DBE encourages governing bodies of small schools to use the self-review questions at Appendix 1 if helpful.
6. The DBE encourages the coming together of schools for training and sharing best practice, along the lines of RE hubs and aided school breakfast meetings for Headteachers and chairs of governors.
7. The DBE's academy strategy sets out its approach to the government's academy policy. The DBE seeks to secure good governance for all schools for the long term, which reflects their status as C of E schools.
8. The DBE commits to helping small schools find the best MAT solution which retains their church school ethos, in line with the Memorandum of Understanding and its own DBE Academy Strategy.
9. The DBE encourages schools to gather information about academy status and to consider their options. The DBE is committed to providing schools with information and support on academy status.
10. The DBE supports federation and collaboration arrangements and undertakes to work with schools in a federation or collaboration with a view to identifying success factors and supporting Headteachers in addressing any difficulties.
11. The DBE will advise schools to satisfy themselves that their plans to recruit a Headteacher are affordable and sustainable and will encourage small schools to consider the most appropriate arrangements.
12. The DBE believes that the quality of education is of paramount importance and recognises that closure of very small schools which are no longer viable may, unfortunately, be a last resort.
13. The DBE will work with Headteachers and governors of small schools to try to avoid closure if at all possible.
14. The DBE takes Headteacher wellbeing seriously and supports Headteachers with resilience days, managing workload and time management.

The DBE will monitor the implementation of this strategy and review annually.

September 2023

Working Together: The Future of Rural Church of England Schools - Appendix

Self-Review Questions for Governing Bodies

These self-review questions are intended to help Governing Bodies build a picture and analyse the context of the school dispassionately, and then to consider their options on the basis of that analysis. It is recommended for use by Governing Bodies to help them continue to reflect on their strategic plans and their need to work in partnership with other schools.

DBEs encourage self-determination and respect the autonomy of individual governing bodies, at the same time seeking to work with you at an early stage, to ensure that the wider good of the whole family of Church of England schools can be promoted. The DBE therefore has an expectation that the governing bodies of all rural schools will conduct this review of their school's strategic position each year.

The checklist is not intended to provide a formulaic approach that determines how and in what ways schools should collaborate, but it does identify some key issues for consideration. It is vital to understand the context for any school and for the DBE and local schools to work in partnership to provide a secure future for education.

As indicated in the body of this report, all schools are encouraged to complete the review. Schools with less than one form of entry must use the self-review every year and completed forms should be returned to DBE to assist it with its responsibility for strategic planning. This is not intended to be a further burden for schools but a helpful tool to enable the DBE to have a dialogue with governing bodies. It is intended to be proactive and should lead to a discussion about next steps and a suitable action plan. The DBE will be happy to facilitate this discussion with governing bodies.

With each question grade yourself red, amber or green and add comments to explain your judgement.

1. <u>Quality of Education</u>	Rating	Comments
a. Does the school provide a high quality sustainable standard of education that is appropriate for the 21st century?		
b. What is the whole educational experience of children attending this school?		
c. What progress do pupils make?		
d. What was the outcome of your most recent Ofsted and SIAMs inspections?		
e. Given that the Ofsted framework has changed, what is your prediction for future Ofsted and SIAMS inspections based on your SEF and three-year projected attainment?		
f. What is the condition and suitability of the school's buildings?		
g. How secure are the school's finances? – are you having to set a deficit budget within the next three years?		

2. Leadership and Staffing

	Rating	Comments
a. How easy is it to recruit and retain high quality teaching staff?		
b. What is your leadership structure, how does it assist your strategy for succession planning?		
c. How long is it likely to be before your current head leaves? What do you expect to happen then?		
3. Governance		
a. How many governor vacancies have you got?		
b. How easy is it to find capable governors who have time and skill to give to the school?		
c. Do governors receive regular training and are they suitably equipped to fulfil all of their responsibilities?		
4. Demographics		
a. Where do your pupils live?		
b. How many of your pupils live within the village or catchment area of the school?		
c. How many school age children live in the village or catchment area of the school but choose to attend other schools instead?		
d. What are your projected pupil numbers for the next few years, based on an assessment of local demographics (e.g. new housing that is likely to produce new primary aged children, how many?)		

5. Links with Community	Rating	Comments
a. What is the school's place within the community - how integrated is the school in the life of the community?		
b. How are the school's facilities used for/by the community?		
c. How good are the links with the Church?		
d. Is the school used for worship/ Sunday school/after school clubs/holiday clubs etc?		
6. Partnership and Collaboration		
a. What collaborative arrangements are already or should be in place?		
b. Has the governing body discussed the challenges and opportunities of such arrangements with HT and staff?		
c. Where are the next nearest / surrounding schools and what is their position re numbers/demographics?		
d. What are the next steps you need to take to develop effective structural partnerships with other schools?		