

Small & Rural Schools

Statement



DIOCESE OF
CHICHESTER
EDUCATION DEPARTMENT

1. Introduction

- 1.1. The Chichester Diocesan Board of Education (CDBE) appreciates the uniqueness and value of small and rural schools. The CDBE acknowledges the challenges that small and rural schools face, supporting the objective that wherever possible these schools should be given the support they require to continue to thrive for the future.
- 1.2. 'In the Bible, God consistently raises up the small and places the outsider in the centre of the narrative of salvation... It is not simply that the small and humble are given equal weight as the great and mighty. The message is far stronger, God chooses the small, the little, the despised and the humble and reveals them to be more significant than the things the world praises for being great and mighty.'¹ Embracing Change: Rural and Small Schools, 2018.
- 1.3. Embracing Change: Rural and Small Schools (The Church of England Education Office, 2018) urges us to think about the context and challenges for these schools; in particular, the educational experience of children, sustainability and collaborative partnerships, and how they fit into the dioceses rural strategy and wider mission for schools.
- 1.4. The definition of small schools varies. The Department for Education (DfE) refers to small schools in terms of having fewer than 210 pupils on roll. In this diocese, that would mean 103 Church of England Schools (67%), would be identified as small schools. 38 (24%) Church of England schools within the diocese have fewer than 100 pupils on roll as at the January 2024 census.
- 1.5. There are 89 (57%) Church of England schools in the diocese that were designated as "rural" by the Department for Education² in 2024. Of these, 42 are in East Sussex and 47 are in West Sussex.

2. Characteristics

- 2.1. Rural and small schools play a significant role in their communities, often delivering a valuable social function and service. They usually provide an education for children in the immediate locality and in neighbouring villages although in some instances parents are choosing to travel greater distances to access these schools.
- 2.2. Rural and small schools are proven to deliver a high-quality education where there is excellent leadership, teaching and an imaginative curriculum. Many successful small and rural Church of England schools across the diocese have been highlighted by both SIAMS and Ofsted as being communities where pupils of different ages flourish both educationally and personally.
- 2.3. The CDBE acknowledge that there is a significant interdependency between services in rural communities. Often a rural school will provide many more services to its community than just education.

3. Quality of Education

- 3.1. The CDBE believes that the quality of education in all Church of England schools is of paramount importance. Successful small and rural schools often employ innovative thinking, using the school's location to develop a curriculum to suit the local community.
- 3.2. Church of England schools should exemplify distinctively Christian communities of learning. Underpinned by Gospel values; The CDBE believe that these schools should enable children to encounter a real lived experience of God's love for all humanity and receive affirmation that they are loved as a child of God.
- 3.3. Many small and rural schools may see that parents of children with particular SEND needs may favour this setting over a larger, urban school.
- 3.4. Successful small and rural schools will need to tackle the challenge of recruitment and retention of skilled teachers, leaders and governors. The unique challenges of small and rural schools require talented, adaptable and resilient staff.

¹From Appendix 1, 'A theology of small' - Embracing Change: Rural and Small Schools (The Church of England Education Office, 2018)

²<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/rural-primary-schools-designation>

4. Viability

- 4.1. The CDBE recognise that there are several factors which could impact on school viability. These include, but are not limited to, falling pupil role, inadequate Ofsted judgment, difficulties in securing effective leadership, recruiting and retaining teachers and support staff, and budget pressures. The way in which funding is provided to schools is increasingly challenging for all schools but especially for small and rural schools working on their own. The cost of repairing and maintaining school buildings is also a factor, given limited capital funding.
- 4.2. The CDBE is committed to working in partnership with local authority colleagues, Multi Academy Trusts (MATs) and the Regional Director's office to achieve the best educational outcomes and opportunities for all to flourish in our small and rural school communities. In some instances, this may mean that schools will need to look to different models of school organisation for the future to remain viable.
- 4.3. Any conversation about school viability should be considered as part of a wider strategic discussion about maintaining a quality of education in an area as a whole. As recognised in 2.3, there is an interdependency between services in rural communities; if the closure of a small school is proposed, the CDBE must consider the likely impact on these services and community resilience.
- 4.4. The CDBE recognises that the closure of very small schools which are no longer viable, may, unfortunately, be a last resort. The CDBE is not the decision-maker with regards to school closure.

5. Partnership and Collaboration

- 5.1. The CDBE recognise the important role that school governors play in the strategic vision for their school. The CDBE expects that all governing bodies will regularly review their structure and consider whether they should form, join or grow a group of schools³.
- 5.2. The CDBE is proactive in encouraging and supporting schools to develop collaborative arrangements. Schools can work together in formal partnership, federations or academy structures, whilst reflecting the importance of the 'local' through governance.
- 5.3. Where a headteacher indicates their intention to leave a small or rural school, CDBE officers will expect school governors to explore all options for partnership and collaboration before progressing to recruitment.

6. Strategy

- 6.1. The CDBE affirms its support for small and rural schools as follows:
 - 6.1.1. The CDBE values the important role that small and rural Church of England schools play in their community and sees part of its role as helping these schools work collaboratively with others.
 - 6.1.2. The CDBE commits to working collaboratively with colleagues in the local authorities of Brighton & Hove, East Sussex and West Sussex on identifying both small and rural Church of England schools which may be vulnerable.
 - 6.1.3. In line with the Foundation Governor Appointment Policy 2024⁴, the CDBE 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.
 - 6.1.4. The CDBE will advise school governors to satisfy themselves that plans to recruit a headteacher are affordable and sustainable and will expect small and rural schools to consider the most appropriate arrangements.
 - 6.1.5. The CDBE 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.
 - 6.1.6. The CDBE is committed to providing schools with information and support on academy status. The CDBE expect schools, where appropriate, to gather information about academy status and to consider the options.
 - 6.1.7. The CDBE commits to helping small and rural schools to find the best MAT solution which retains their church school ethos, in line with the Memorandum of Understanding⁵ and Diocese of Chichester Strategy for Academisation⁶.
 - 6.1.8. The CDBE will work with Local Authority colleagues, headteachers and governors of small and rural schools to try to avoid closure if possible.
 - 6.1.9. The CDBE believe that the quality of education is of paramount importance and recognises that closure of schools which are no longer viable may, unfortunately, be a last resort.
- 6.2. The CDBE will monitor the implementation of this strategy and review annually.

³ <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/governance-in-maintained-schools/1-effective-governance>

⁴ https://cofechichestereducation.contentfiles.net/media/assets/file/DBE_Policy_for_the_Appointment_of_Foundation_Governors_September_2024.pdf

⁵ https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/65032f79702634000d89b8cc/Memorandum_of_understanding_between_the_National_Society_and_DfE_.pdf

⁶ https://cofechichestereducation.contentfiles.net/media/assets/file/Diocesan_Academy_Strategy_Jan_2024.pdf

Questions for Governors and School Leaders of Small and Rural Schools

1. Characteristics

- 1.1. To what extent is the school and local church at the heart of the village/area of population?
- 1.2. How are church and school working together in ministry and for the community?
- 1.3. To what extent are parents/carers involved in the life of the school?
- 1.4. How integrated is the school in the life of the community; how are the school's facilities used for/ by the community, and vice-versa?
- 1.5. How does the school contribute economically to the community using local contractors and providing employment?
- 1.6. Where do children live- within the village/area of population or beyond? In relation to other schools?
- 1.7. How many people live locally but choose to attend other schools instead- and how do hubs/groups of schools in a geographical area share this information?
- 2.5. What is your experience of recruiting and retaining high quality teaching staff?
- 2.6. How straightforward is it to find capable governors who have the time and skills to give to the school? Are they representative of the community you serve in age and diversity?
- 2.7. How secure is the school budget for the next 3 years? How do you know the state of your budget for the longer term?
- 2.8. What is the condition and suitability of the school's buildings- and is the school moving towards 100% renewable electricity, with a costed plan to achieve a net zero carbon target?

2. Quality of Education & Viability

- 2.1. What is the whole educational experience of children attending this school? How is this reflected in data?
- 2.2. Do you ensure that the school's distinctive Christian vision enables pupils and adults to flourish? To what extent is this evidenced (e.g SIAMS, Ofsted, Diocese visit reports)?
- 2.3. What were the key areas for development in the most recent Ofsted and what proactive steps have been taken to address these?
- 2.4. How does your access to external support (professional advice, staff development, support for pupil/student needs) compare to schools in other areas and contexts?

3. Partnership and Collaboration

- 3.1. What are the features of your current informal or formal partnerships and what positive outcomes do you see for staff and children, i.e., how do they impact in the quality of education and support for vulnerable children?
- 3.2. Have you considered the possibility of federation or academisation for the future?
- 3.3. What is your current strategic plan should your Headteacher indicate their intention to leave?
- 3.4. How are you engaging with local secondary schools?
- 3.5. What is the local need and capacity for nursery/ wraparound care? What steps do you take to help parents/carers access high quality care- and are there any opportunities to collaborate with other partners to enhance/develop provision?

Appendix 2

Links to Relevant Documents

DfE/ National Guidance

Rural Primary School designation <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/rural-primary-schools-designation>

Federations Guidance (2022) <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/governance-in-federations/federations-guidance-on-the-governance-processes>

Academy Trust Handbook (2024) https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/66a3909aab418ab055592dda/Academy_trust_handbook_2024_FINAL.pdf

National Society for Education

Vision for Education (2016) <https://www.nse.org.uk/s/CofE-Vision-for-Education-2016.pdf>

Flourishing Together (2024) <https://www.nse.org.uk/s/flourishing-together-a-collective-vision-for-the-education-system.pdf>

Our Hope for a Flourishing School System (2023) <https://www.nse.org.uk/s/Our-Hope-for-a-Flourishing-Schools-System-2024-d27d.pdf>

Embracing Change: Rural and Small Schools (2018) <https://www.nse.org.uk/s/rural-schools-embracing-change-web-final.pdf>

Chichester Diocesan Board of Education

The following documents can be found at <https://schools.chichester.anglican.org/academies/>

Brief Guide to Federation

Diocese of Chichester Academy Policy

The Chichester Diocesan Board of Education Strategy for Academisation

Academy Conversion Toolkit

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