

The Challenges facing our Small and Rural schools
Policy and Practice
March 2018

In 2015 the DBE team produced an initial report on Small and Rural Schools. Since then a Rural Education Advisory Group has been convened, supported by the DBE and DoM and diocesan rural strategy personnel. They have worked with the team to support and advise on policy and practice. This document is an updated re-working of that initial document and was approved by the ODBE Board on 14 March 2018.

Context

Rural schools are a significant part of the Church of England's contribution to education. Nationally 57% of CE schools are located in a rural setting and are highly valued for the role they fulfil in local communities. In this diocese, the figure is higher, at around 68% and we must therefore consider a local diocesan response to give appropriate guidance to these schools and their governing bodies.

Whilst there is also some debate about what constitutes a small school, the fact is that currently, 85 of our 284 schools (30%) serve less than 100 children (with correspondingly small budgets) and the vast majority of these schools are in rural settings. The issue is therefore both pertinent to and urgent in this diocese.

In March 2018, the National Church of England Education Office published a new report entitled "*Embracing Change: Rural and Small Schools*". This built on the report of October 2014, "*Working Together: The Future of Rural Church of England Schools*". Both these reports are a response to the growing challenge faced by many rural CE schools in a fast-moving educational landscape where funding is decreasing, and securing leadership (and indeed teachers) is becoming more difficult.

A number of other dioceses are now actively considering their response to this issue and as previously identified in this diocese, there are generally four key elements now nationally recognised as actively impacting this area. These being:

- 1. Finance**
- 2. Leadership**
- 3. Standards**
- 4. Governance**

In this diocese we would also add **5. 'Location'** to this list as this has significant impact on a school's future viability.

It is also now recognised as more schools convert to become part of a Multi Academy Trust, that this may in fact cost schools more in real terms budgets. This is proving a major consideration in the growth of MATs across the diocese.

These key elements each have their own particular contribution to the issue.

1. Finance

- The government has again reviewed its funding arrangements for schools, resulting in some major discrepancies in schools' funding, there being some significant disparities depending on a school's location and other factors eg SEND. Many of our schools are now facing either a current deficit position or the prospect of a deficit in the next three to five-year period.
- Many of the top-up grants, once allocated to schools for various purposes are gone.
- The IFS has signalled that school budgets will, in real terms, see a drop of between 5% and 8% in the next five years.
- The Local Authorities are now in a minimal service position, most having retained only their statutory functions eg LAC, SEND, Safeguarding and Pupil Place planning so LA services to schools are at an all-time low.
- The Academy agenda continues to remove schools (initially secondaries) from the remaining LA 'pot' resulting in less money to be shared by maintained schools.
- The national shortage of primary school places now seems to be easing and those new schools which are being built, are inevitably linked to new housing developments, which are rarely in rural areas due to the need for existing infrastructure. They are also either free schools or academies, and therefore outside of LA budgetary controls and funded directly by the DfE.
- We have noticed a significant decline in applications for primary school places in certain areas this year. This could very quickly have a significant impact on small schools after several years of already tight budgeting.

2. Leadership (& recruitment and retention)

- Nationally we are losing teachers from our schools at record rates: 10,000 departed the profession between 2010 and 2015, and the pace of that loss is speeding up as disillusionment grows. Another £3bn cut to budgets is anticipated in the coming years and that spending will reduce by 8% per secondary pupil within the next three years.
- By 2025 there will be 3 million pupils of secondary school age, but not enough young people are choosing to become teachers themselves. Teacher training places are going unfilled. Early last September, half of places on some such courses were sitting empty with just days to go before classes began.
- Government recruitment targets have been missed in the majority of subjects, including Physics (by 19%) and Mathematics (by 16%). Design and Technology only reached 41% of its recruitment target this year.
- According to figures from the Association of Teachers and Lecturers (ATL), more than 40% of new teachers now leave the profession within the first 12 months. (Unions have cited excessive workload as a reason for this figure which has tripled in the last ten years).
- Record numbers of teachers are also leaving the profession 'mid-career' and a proportionate number of these are head teachers leaving before retirement age.

In this diocese, we have supported head teacher appointment processes in a total of 52 schools in the last two years - almost 20% of schools. In a number of cases, these processes have had to be repeated two and three times to secure leadership for the school. Small schools are particularly vulnerable here as the level of head teacher pay for a very small school is often less than that of a deputy or equivalent in a larger school.

The reputational impact of maintaining a Church of England school in a village/rural setting cannot be ignored. Many of these schools were set up in the early 19th century, when the vision was to have a church school in every parish and England boasted over 12,000 church schools in 1840. That number is now less than 5,000 nationally and given the challenges described above there is a very real threat that this number could decrease significantly over the next 5-10 years.

The CEEO summarises the situation thus:

“The continued development of a system (where rural schools have a part) will mean embracing new opportunities to enhance our provision, it will require dioceses and schools to be innovative and demonstrate a willingness to seize the initiative rather than sitting back and waiting for something to happen, or someone else will propose a solution. A failure or a reluctance to do this will leave us with a system that was good for yesterday’s world..... doing nothing is not an option.’

3. Standards

Nationally there is a drive for all schools to be judged by Ofsted to be good or better. The DfE is therefore (rightly) using school standards as a basic benchmark for any and all decisions regarding the running of schools. If a school is subject to an Ofsted category ie (Special Measures or Serious Weaknesses), it will now be in receipt of a Directive Academy Order, requiring the school to become part of an approved MAT within an agreed time scale. New Ofsted arrangements mean even if a school is judged to be still ‘Good’, it may have conditions placed upon it to improve certain areas in a short period of time. If a school is judged to require improvement twice, it is also in significant danger of a DAO or DfE monitoring.

Of itself, this is not necessarily an issue for small or rural schools (in this Diocese there is no significant difference between the Ofsted judgements of small or rural schools compared with others) until other factors are also taken into account eg

- Small schools tend to attract a disproportionately high percentage of SEND children.
- Small schools may not have the professional expertise to deal with specialist areas within SEND.
- Small schools can struggle to recruit teachers with the skills, or interest in teaching mixed year groups.
- Often, head teachers in very small schools have to carry a significant teaching commitment and this has an impact on their wellbeing.

Whilst in the Oxford Diocese, we have a number of excellent small schools, which can and do offer children a wide and rich curriculum, the squeeze is on to ensure their effectiveness remains comparable with all schools.

4. Governance

Governors are critical to the leadership of a CE school and the diocese currently has a **19%** vacancy rate in the number of foundation governors (ie 187 vacancies). Although, this is decreasing slowly and we have a number of strategies to support, train and recruit governors, increasingly, as small parishes have less people willing and able to take on this crucial role, this becomes difficult.

5. Location

We are very aware of schools which are relatively isolated and unable to take advantage of close partnerships and shared working arrangements. Add to this an academisation agenda which has disrupted many local partnerships, and isolated schools can find themselves vulnerable and confuse about where to find services and support.

In summarising the context therefore, many of our schools, and especially our smallest schools, may well find themselves; in a financially vulnerable position within the next three years; in a pressurised situation to maintain high standards; having difficulty in recruiting staff, especially head teachers; struggling to find skilled foundation governors, thus impacting the overall effectiveness of the school and in a location where local support is decreasing.

Proposed Policy and Actions

The CEEO has asked dioceses to consider their position under three headings:

1. Structural Collaboration
2. Daring to be Different
3. Facing the future

1. Face the future (with us)

- Schools and governing bodies should be encouraged and supported to see and reflect on the reality of their own situation in this new landscape. This is a sensitive issue and many schools find it challenging. As a team, we should be gently working with schools and stakeholder groups to help them see the reality and work with them to explore their options. Only by doing this will we preserve our own relationship with these schools and their relationship with the local church. We have an essential brokering role here. The 2014 National Society report also has a helpful appendix which is a Self-Review questionnaire by which governing bodies can assess their local situation. This exploration encompasses several areas: finance, leadership, geography, demography and support needs.

2. Dare to be Different

- The diocesan team has communicated a consistent message to schools (and other stakeholders eg PCCs) to support governing bodies in this exercise. Schools must actively look for and find creative solutions in order to thrive, including the prospect of executive leadership, collaborative working and sharing of resources. This has allowed us to support number of schools in identifying schools where head teachers might become EHTs over more than one school and supporting them specifically for this role. This must continue and in some locations be accelerated.

- A similar presentation has been and will continue to be used for Deanery Synods. (This has already been taking place over the last three years, but the message may need to be harder-hitting in the light of recent changes.) The current presentation on ‘Reality, Relationship and Reward’ has been delivered in at least 20 of our deanery areas. Working alongside the Department of Mission, we will attempt in the next year to accelerate this programme to help church stakeholders understand the very real threat to church schools and how they may play a part in supporting changes.

3. Structural Collaboration – find a friend

- We will actively encourage schools to consider a range of collaborative options. These will range from procurement arrangements with other schools to federations of various types and ultimately consideration of academy status within a Multi Academy Trust, advising them of options which are most beneficial to preserve and sustain their Christian character and where we can maintain a strong relationship with them.
- We will seek to work with schools either to form viable, local school-led MATs or to join existing MATs where we have already established a corporate interest.
- Capacity issues allowing, we will continue to work with parish communities in supporting their local schools and assist their understanding in the need for collaboration and excellent governance.
- We will seek to have individual conversations with schools where there is a clear and obvious threat, either because of decreasing numbers, a leadership issue and/or because of financial concerns. We have been actively checking over the schools in the diocese and now have identified a number of small schools who will receive targeted support to consider their situation.

As a team, we will do all we can to support schools to find a solution which means they can be maintained as an educational presence of Christian character in our rural communities, but ultimately, we may have to face the fact that some of our small and rural CE schools may not survive in their current form. We also need to be aware of and be prepared for the inevitable reputational issue and loss of influence that will bring in some of our rural communities.

Fiona Craig and Gordon Joyner
March 2018

Appendix A

A Rural Education Advisory Group, supported by the DBE and DoM and diocesan rural strategy personnel has been established. They have worked with the team to support and advise on policy and practice. Their purpose and terms of reference are set out below.

TOWARDS AN EDUCATION STRATEGY FOR RURAL SCHOOLS

Background/Rationale

Following the previous small schools' strategy paper, we established a discrete multi-disciplinary group to evaluate and assess how the situation may be responded to in terms of education, mission and pastoral support of parishes and schools.

Purpose of the Group

The overarching purpose of the Rural Education Advisory Group (REAG) is to begin to formulate and collate diocesan thinking and strategy relating to rural schools and to make a series of reports/recommendations to the Bishop's Staff/Bishop's Council/ODBE/Board of Mission on a regular basis. This will enable the diocese to engage creatively and constructively with a significant change to the provision of education, nationally. ***Without this collation of information and joint thinking we may find ourselves driven by events.***

- To review the communication of the context, culture and content of changes in education, currently being undertaken on a deanery basis by the Department of Mission and ODBE team, working collaboratively.
- To promote good practice of governing bodies and PCCs in working together to review their own context.
- To encourage the adoption of a creative range of options for joint working between schools.
- To develop experts and expertise in this field, with specific reference to the handling of change.
- To be aware of the reputational impact to parishes, deaneries and diocese of changes in provision of local education.
- To provide appropriate resources and support relating to change, loss and endings for churches, community/ies and individuals.
- To develop and deliver clergy training to include reference to the above points.
- To devise materials to facilitate creative partnership working between churches, schools, and the wider community.

Membership

- Director of Education - Fiona Craig
- Rural Head teacher - Andrew Browne
- Rural Head teacher - Alison MacDonald
- Rural Clergy person - Dorchester Archdeaconry - Richard Hancock
- Rural Clergy person - Bucks Archdeaconry - Priscilla Slusar
- Principal Schools Adviser - Robin Sharples
- Rural Adviser & Chair of Rural Programme Steering Group - Glyn Evans
- PDA Dorchester Archdeaconry, CMD Team Member & Executive Secretary of Rural Programme Steering Group - Charles Chadwick
- Diocesan Children's Adviser - Yvonne Morris

Accountability

Terms of reference and updates to both ODBF and ODBE.

Appendix B

ATL	Association of Teachers and Lecturers
CE	Church of England
CEEO	Church of England Education Office (formerly National Society)
CMD	Continuing Ministerial Development
DAO	Directive Academy Order
DBE	Diocesan Board of Education
DfE	Department for Education
DoM	Department of Mission
EHT	Executive Head teacher
IFS	Institute of Fiscal Studies
LA	Local Authority
LAC	Looked After Children
MAT	Multi Academy Trust
OFSTED	Office for Standards in Education
ODBE	Oxford Diocesan Board of Education
ODBF	Oxford Diocesan Board of Finance
PDA	Parish Development Adviser
PCC	Parochial Church Council
REAG	Rural Education Advisory Group
SEND	Special Educational Needs and Disabilities