

## **Wiltshire Council**

### **Children's Services Select Committee**

**9<sup>th</sup> June 2011**

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## **Update on the Strategic Direction of Small Schools**

### **Purpose of Report**

1. This report provides an update on the position in relation to small schools, particularly in the primary phase. It highlights the developments and progress made; it captures some of the emerging challenges in the light of the changing national and local policy development and sets out next steps.

### **Background**

2. The Strategy for Addressing Issues Facing Small Schools in Wiltshire was presented to Cabinet in 2005. The report identified the increasing challenges facing small schools including:
  - Fewer children especially in rural areas
  - The effects of house prices and planning decisions
  - The challenge of recruiting Headteachers
  - Financial pressures and cost effectiveness
  - A rigorous inspection regime and
  - Parental preference
3. The report established the definition of a small primary school in Wiltshire as one with less than 70 pupils on roll. The report also responded to the national expectation that the Local Authority would proactively remove surplus places. The key outcome of the report requested that governing bodies with less than 70 pupils on roll consider options for their future, including the potential for structural change. A programme was put in place to support the federation of small schools. Follow up reports have subsequently been presented to the Children Services Select Committee in 2006, 2008 and 2009 highlighting the changes in national and local context and the progress in reducing the number of small schools.

4. The 2006 report identified 33 primary schools as having less than 70 pupils on roll. By 2008 this figure had reduced to 22 and in January 2011 the school census identified that Wiltshire now has 17 schools with fewer than 70 pupils on roll. It is also important to note that of the 17 schools with less than 70 pupils only two schools have less than 35 pupils, one of which is currently consulting on closure (Grafton Church of England Primary School) and the other supports transient service families (Lypiatt Primary School). A key aspect of our support is facilitating schools to work together. Of the current 17 schools below 70 pupils on roll 4 schools are already involved in some form of partnership or federated arrangement while others are more actively exploring how they will work with other schools to ensure effective provision for their pupils and communities.
5. In summary, since 2003, 32 schools have amalgamated (in 2 cases 3 schools were involved in the amalgamation) to establish 15 new schools, many of which were designated small schools under the Wiltshire definition. Nine schools have closed; with size as a key factor in their closure. Four pairs of schools have established either a form of federation or collaborative partnership. While not all of these structural changes have been driven by size, the arrangements are supporting increased effectiveness.
6. A review of projected pupil numbers suggests there is potential for a further 7 primary schools whose number on roll may fall below 70 in the coming years. They are geographically spread across Wiltshire. A number of these schools are already working in partnerships to support both their provision and efficiency. There is support available for these schools and we are planning to develop this support further through our focus in developing school-to-school support in the practitioner-led climate. For one school structural change is planned as the school is being relocated and rebuilt in order that it will be closer to new housing.

### **Main Considerations for the Council**

7. The 2009 report to Children Services Select Committee on the development of the small school strategy identified a number of key drivers which included:
  - The Regional Spatial Strategy and its impact on shaping local housing growth and therefore the need to plan school places;
  - The need to effectively manage surplus places as part of the central government policies under either the 'Every Child Matters Primary Capital Programme – Primary Strategy for Change' or the 'Building Schools for the Future – Secondary Capital Programme';
  - The national presumption against the closure of rural small schools;

- National Curriculum Reviews and the development in both primary and secondary of particular provision with the curriculum, including Vocational Diploma development 14-19;
  - The implications of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Schools White Paper, including reinforcing the new models of leadership and governance (including Accredited School Groups, federation, amalgamations, Trusts and 'Traditional' Academies);
  - The need to lead and manage within a changing financial environment, with an increasing number of national funding reviews which were exploring new funding models.
8. An outcome of the report was to establish a development group to consider the impact of the key drivers outlined in paragraph 7. Within a matter of weeks of the report being published the agenda began to change and this was reported to the Committee in June 2010 as part of the paper sharing the Primary School Strategy. With the introduction of the new Coalition Government's agenda many of the drivers for change in paragraph 7 were either suspended or adapted as new policies have begun to emerge, including the development of 'Converter' Academies or Academy groups and partnerships and Free Schools. There is also less emphasis now on the removal of surplus places by the Local Authority. As a consequence of these changes the establishment of a working group was delayed in order that both the national and local drivers for further change can be understood.
9. Work has continued to support small schools. Advice and guidance has been made available to support both individual and small groups of schools as they review their own or collective situation. Through the Academy Board a development project has been exploring how the schools (primary and secondary) in the Marlborough area can work together to secure both improved outcomes for children and young people and improve cost effectiveness in the future. This work has provided a structure through which the schools in the area, including a number of small schools, can explore future options. In the West and North Wiltshire areas a group of primary schools are developing different models for business support; this group includes smaller schools and is helping them to improve financial efficiency. The Collaborative Partnerships, established through the extended services agenda have ensured that schools can access services and support which as individual schools may not have been available. This has been particularly beneficial to pupils, parents and staff in smaller schools.
10. The recent Governors and Headteachers conference (02.03.11) built on the 2009 conference, which explored different school leadership models, by sharing a range of practical tools and strategies for understanding and securing improved efficiency and effectiveness. As an outcome of the conference groups of

governors and Headteachers of schools (including those both above and below 70 pupils) acknowledge the need to work together to explore different ways of working. Expansion and development of locally available leadership programmes is planned and this support, alongside other developments will underpin the way in which groups of schools can work together, to secure a local self-improving practitioner-led school system.

11. The launch and application process of the Teaching Schools programme in late March 2011 reinforced the national move toward a new self-improving school system. The Teaching School model is based on a group or alliance of schools working together with a range of partners including Universities to support Initial Teacher Training, Continuous Professional Development and wider aspects of school development. Three schools have submitted applications in partnership with others. Within each of the applications, reference is made to improving outcomes for all the children in their area, the outcome of the applications is not yet known.
12. Schools Forum have been leading and managing the budgetary changes affecting schools. This reflects national funding changes and the impact of local policy and priorities, such as the increase in delegation of funding for special educational needs. There have been no specific changes to the arrangements associated with small schools, although the impact of changes on small schools is considered in each case. As part of the budget setting process a decision has been taken to change the current arrangements for devolved formula capital for federated / amalgamated spilt-sites. From 2011-12, schools who amalgamate will only receive the devolved formula capital for both sites for a further year following federation/amalgamation, this reflects the way in which the Department for Education funds the local authority for devolved formula capital. Further budgetary changes which may affect small schools, including national formula changes, are not yet known and are likely to become clearer for the 2012 planning.
13. The Education White Paper *The Importance of Teaching* sets out a clear role for the Local Authority as a champion for educational excellence, vulnerable pupils and parents and families. Within the champion role, the Local Authority also retains a range of statutory duties and responsibilities including continuing to secure sufficient high quality places for pupils. As the Wiltshire Core Strategy for future housing needs becomes clearer, alongside the other national policy and developmental changes, it will be important to support and manage change effectively. Our approach to school-to-school support will manage this change process.

## **Environmental Impact of the Proposal**

14. There is no specific environmental impact within this report. However any future strategy developments in relation to small schools would need to be considered carefully assessing and then managing the environmental impact.

## **Risk Assessment**

15. Any future development of a national funding formula for schools could adversely impact on small schools. Changes to the current funding arrangements are being managed locally by Schools Forum, while individual schools are working to improve their cost effectiveness through a range of developments including increased collaborative working.

## **Financial Implications**

16. There are no direct financial implications as a result of this report. However the financial implications of future national and local developments will need to be considered carefully.

## **Legal Implications**

17. There is currently good involvement from the legal department in relation to schools converting to academies. As groups of schools increasingly work together to support the needs of their pupils and wider community, legal advice will be sought on governance arrangements.

## **Conclusion**

18. Since 2005 our strategic approach to addressing the issues faced by small schools has enabled us to move forward in a planned and open way. The existing partnership arrangements across schools is having an impact in both securing improved outcomes for children and young people and improving the efficiency of provision. This work is being extended under the practitioner-led self improving school system. This approach to collaborative working will support all schools, particularly the smaller ones to secure high quality outcomes for children and young people.

## **Proposal**

19. That Children's Services Select Committee notes the content of this paper.

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*The following unpublished documents have been relied on in the preparation of this Report: None*