

Broad Oak Community Primary School

Presumption against the closure of rural schools

Introduction

Broad Oak Community Primary School (Broad Oak) is designated as a rural school under the Designation of Rural Primary Schools (England) Order 2018.

The Department for Education (DfE) statutory guidance *‘Opening and closing maintained schools’* November 2019 (the guidance) refers to a presumption against the closure of rural schools. The guidance states:

“Proposers should be aware that the Department expects all decision makers to adopt a presumption against the closure of rural schools. This doesn’t mean that a rural school will never close, but that the case for closure should be strong and clearly in the best interests of educational provision in the area”

The presumption against closure does not mean that rural schools cannot be closed by local authorities, but they have a duty to carefully consider the factors set out in the guidance when proposing to close a rural school. These factors are:

- Alternatives to closure including: federation with another local school; conversion to academy status and joining a multi-academy trust; 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 i.e. the availability, and likely cost of transport to other schools and sustainability issues;
- The size of the school and whether it puts the children at an educational disadvantage e.g. in terms of breadth of curriculum or resources available;
- The overall and long term impact on local people and the community of the closure of the village school and of the loss of the building as a community facility; and
- Wider school organisation and capacity of good schools in the area to accommodate displaced pupils.

Each of these factors is addressed below.

Alternatives to closure

A number of alternative options were considered by the local authority before agreeing to consult on the proposed closure of Broad Oak. These were included in the consultation document and are set out below:

- **Federation.** Broad Oak is in a federation with Punnetts Town Community Primary School (Punnetts Town) and Dallington CE Primary School (Dallington). Although federations are recognised as a way of enabling smaller schools to work more formally in partnerships to share costs, this has not addressed the financial challenges faced at Broad Oak.

- **Amalgamation.** Consideration was given to amalgamating Broad Oak with Punnetts Town. This option was discounted because there is little pupil movement between the two schools and there is insufficient capacity at either site to accommodate all the pupils on roll across the two schools.
- **Linked infant and junior schools.** Consideration was given to merging Broad Oak with Punnetts Town with one school becoming an infant school and the other a junior school. The local authority's School Organisation Policy states that it is committed to amalgamating infant and junior schools as data analysis shows that overall Key Stage 2 pupil outcomes are higher in East Sussex all through primary schools in comparison to junior schools where children transfer at the start of year 3. As stated above, there is little pupil movement between the two schools and this would not address the low pupil numbers and budget challenges the school faces. For these reasons this option was discounted.
- **Academisation.** In undertaking their due diligence, academy trusts, both local and national, find some small schools to be financially unviable or too isolated to be included in their trust, unless they convert with other small schools as a local hub. Governors have not expressed a desire to academise and no academy trust has approached the local authority about taking the school into their trust. This would not address the low pupil numbers and budget challenges the school faces.
- **No change.** As outlined in the consultation document, Broad Oak has been undersubscribed in each of the last five years and pupil numbers fall significantly short of its published admission number each year. There is very little in-area demand for places at the school. The school faces significant financial challenges, with the governors' three-year budget plan submitted in May 2019 showing a deficit of over £200,000 by 2021/22. An interim estimate of the 2020/21 budget using the current pupil numbers in 2019/20 and the new funding assumptions contained in the announcement from the government shows that, whereas the budget might have been between £370,000 and £375,000 based on pupil numbers built into the school's budget plan, the likelihood is that the budget could reduce to somewhere between £314,000 and £318,000 based on current numbers and will further increase the budget deficit. Governors were unable to provide a strategy to overcome the financial challenge prior to the consultation when pupil numbers were higher; the budget projection is now significantly worse making it even harder for governors to identify a viable solution. Doing nothing is not an option.

A number of alternative options to closure were suggested by respondents to the consultation to address the challenges the school faces. These are set out below and have been categorised according to the following headings.

Those considered unrealistic, costly or outside the control of the local authority or school

- Increase the funding for the school either from local authority resources or by lobbying government, and work with the school to help improve it.

Local authority response: The national funding formula is determined by the government and allocated to local authorities via the Dedicated Schools Grant. The local authority does not have resources to increase funding for the school.

- Re-open the swimming pool to attract more pupils.

Local authority response: Re-opening the swimming pool would be costly both in terms of initial outlay and ongoing running costs which would fall to the school. There is no evidence that a swimming pool would attract more pupils to the school.

- Merge Punnetts Town, Broad Oak and All Saints and St Richard's CE Primary School (ASSR) and build a new school on land in Halley Road, Broad Oak.

Local authority response: The cost of purchasing land and building a new school would be prohibitive and could not be considered a priority within the local authority's agreed capital programme.

- Insist that children from the village go to the school.

Local authority response: The local authority cannot insist that children from the village attend the school.

Those considered within the local authority's control / influence

- Lower the PAN at Broad Oak to 15 and invite the local pre-school to move into the spare classroom on site
- Reduce the PANs at Broad Oak and ASSR to 15 and Cross-in-Hand to 30.

Local authority response: While these options would reduce the amount of surplus places in the area it would not address the financial challenges that Broad Oak faces.

- Give the school more time (respondents suggested different timescales) and advertise it better.

Local authority response: The local authority does not believe giving the school more time would alter the situation, decline has been evident over-time, and governors have been unable to identify solutions or present a case for the school's viability.

- Include Broad Oak in the Heathfield school's community area so that children in Heathfield have access to two church schools and two community schools in the area.

Local authority response: This option would not reduce surplus places in the area or address the challenges the school faces.

- Merge Punnetts Town and Broad Oak over two sites, one infant and one junior.

Local authority response: This option was considered prior to consulting on closure but was discounted for the reasons set out above.

- Close Five Ashes which is a smaller school.

Local authority response: Five Ashes does not face the same challenges as Broad Oak in terms of its pupil numbers, surplus places and financial position. Five Ashes is full to capacity and is predicted to remain so. It has no surplus places. Five Ashes is rated good by Ofsted.

- Sell the school's detached playing field to provide a cash boost to the school; and partially develop the school site to release some of the asset.

The DfE '*Advice on standards for school premises*' March 2015 confirms that all maintained schools and academies must provide suitable outdoor space to enable physical education in accordance with the school curriculum and to enable pupils to play outside. Except with the consent of the Secretary of State, local authorities cannot dispose of any playing fields used by a maintained school for the purposes of the school.

Those considered within the school's control

- Expand the Woodlands Federation to include other local primary schools or Heathfield Community College
- Academisation
- Develop the school as a community hub.

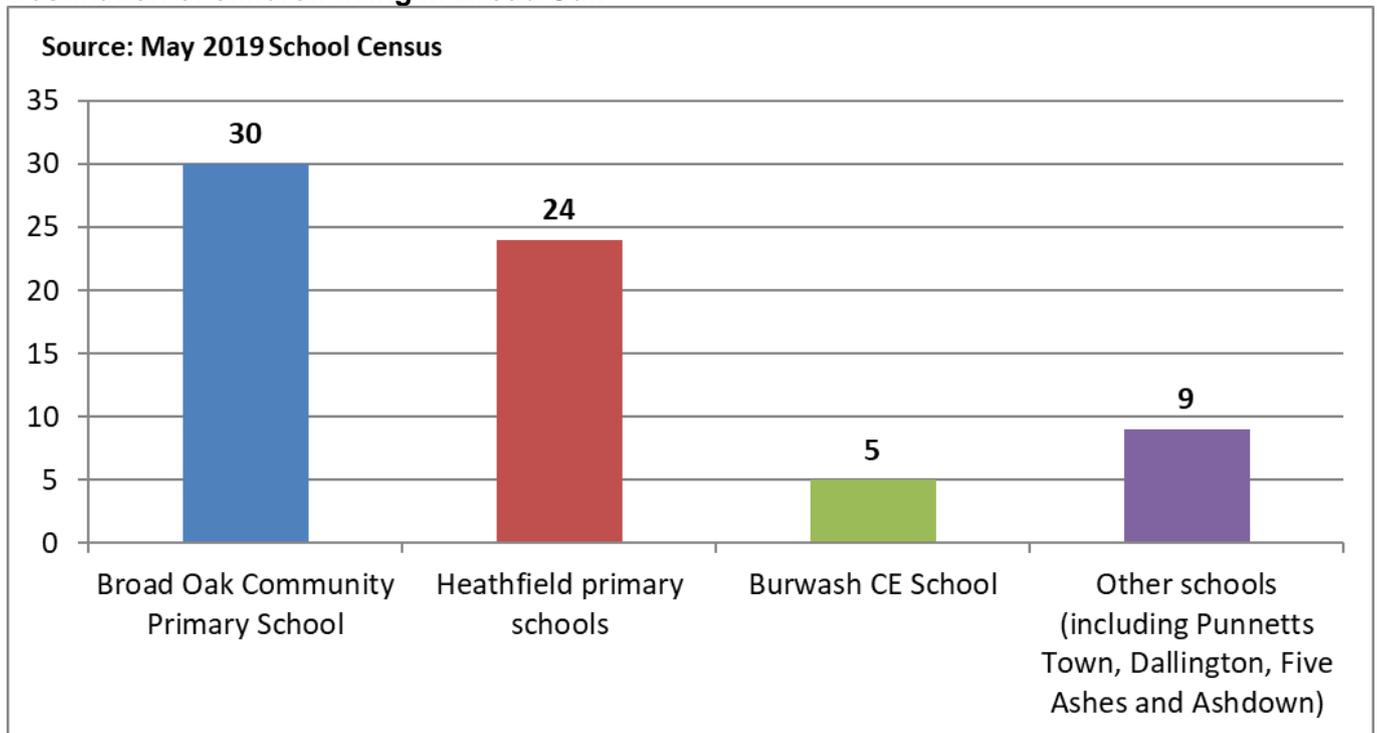
Local authority response: The governing board has given no indication that it is considering any of these options.

Transport Implications

Some families may be impacted by additional travel costs and travel time. The closure of the school may impact members of the community who would have to go beyond the local village to engage with teachers and use community facilities. Respondents to the consultation cited the impact on traffic and the environment of children having to travel by car to their nearest alternative school.

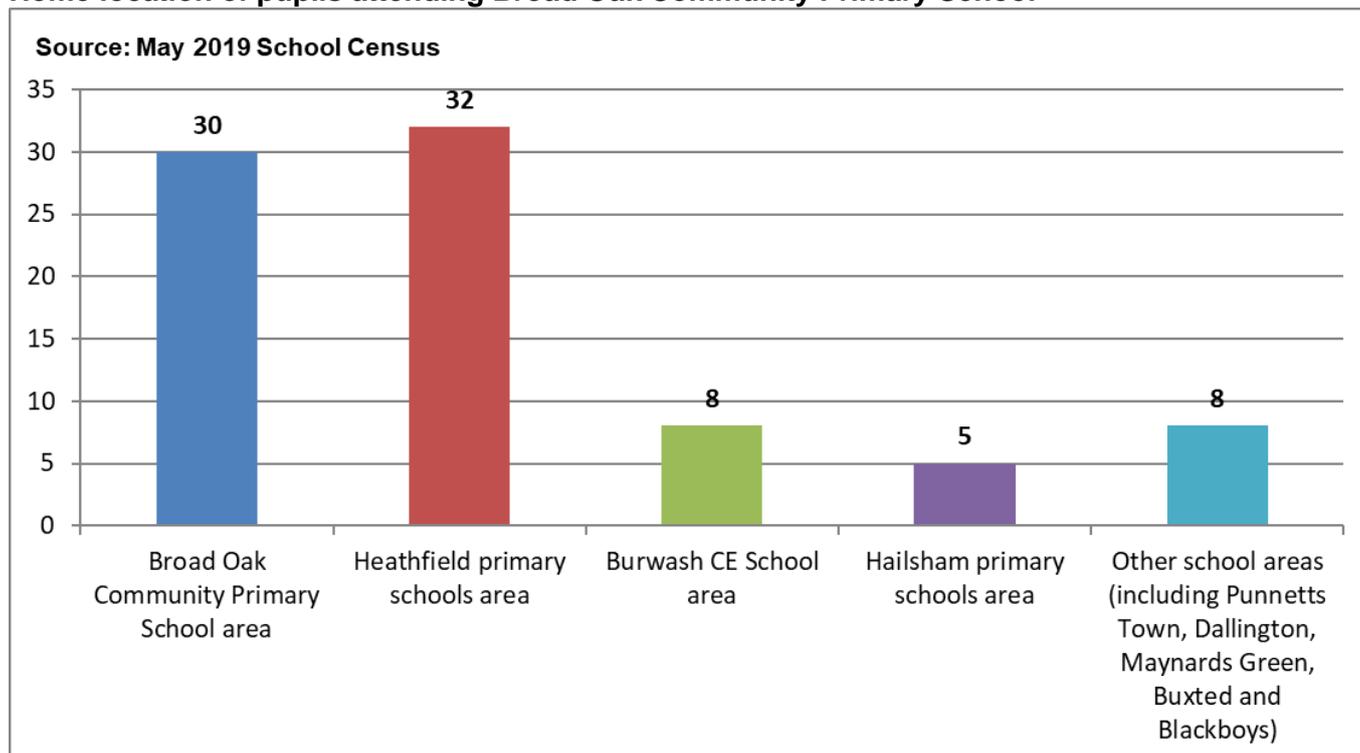
The May 2019 School Census showed 68 children living in the Broad Oak community area attending state funded school in East Sussex. Of these, 30 (44%) attended Broad Oak while 38 (56%) attended other schools in the surrounding area.

Destination of children living in Broad Oak



The 30 pupils who attended the school in May 2019 made up 36% of the total number of pupils on roll, whereas 53 pupils (64%) lived in areas served by other schools.

Home location of pupils attending Broad Oak Community Primary School



Alternative schools are between 1.5 and 5.4 miles away from Broad Oak as shown in the table below. For the majority of pupils and families these schools might be nearer to their home address.

School	Distance from Broad Oak Community Primary School in miles (rounded)
All Saints' and St Richard's CE Primary School	1.5
Cross-in-Hand CE Primary School	2.3
Parkside Community Primary School	2.5
Punnetts Town Community Primary School	2.3
Dallington CE Primary School	3.8
Maynards Green Community Primary School	3.5
Mayfield CE Primary School	3.7
Five Ashes CE Primary School	5.4
Burwash CE Primary School	5.1

The majority of pupils currently attending Broad Oak are from outside the school's community area while a number of children living in-area travel to other schools. The majority of children therefore already face journeys to and from school each day. Latest analysis shows that of the 35 Reception to Year 5 pupils likely to be affected by the proposal, approximately 57% live nearer/same distance to an alternative school, with approximately 43% living further away. Free home to school transport would be provided for eligible pupils who meet the criteria set out in the link below. The local authority currently estimates five pupils would be eligible for free home to school transport to their nearest alternative school. The cost to the local authority would be negligible as either pupils are already in receipt of free home to school transport or arrangements are already in place to the alternative schools. The local authority acknowledges that some pupils living in Broad Oak and attending the school might face longer journeys to and from an alternative

school each day. However, for many their nearest alternative school is within statutory walking distance.

<https://www.eastsussex.gov.uk/educationandlearning/schools/transport/>

It is envisaged that displaced pupils would continue to be transported to and from school under arrangements made by their parents and carers and that, given the majority of pupils would be able to attend a school nearer to their home address it is unlikely there would be a noticeable increase in car usage. To the contrary, it would be hoped that car usage would reduce.

Size of the school and quality of education

Broad Oak is a small rural school with a published admission number of 20 and capacity for 140 pupils (20 x 7 year groups). At full capacity the school would be expected to have 5 classes. Due to its low pupil numbers the school is currently organised across 3 classes as follows:

Reception, Year 1 and Year 2 class of 12

Year 3 / 4 class of 17

Year 5 / 6 class of 23

Source: School's pupil number return dated 18 October 2019

Broad Oak last received an Ofsted rating of 'good' in 2011. At its last two Ofsted inspections in 2016 and 2018 the school was rated overall as requiring improvement. In 2018 the effectiveness of leadership and management, personal development, behaviour and welfare and early years provision were all rated good. However, quality of teaching, learning and assessment and outcomes for pupils were rated as requiring improvement resulting in the overall judgement of requires improvement.

The local authority has provided a range of support to the school in recent years for teaching and learning and leadership and management. The school also has a progress group in place which provides additional support and monitoring from the local authority.

Prior to 2016 when Broad Oak received the first of its two Requires Improvement judgements, pupil numbers were at or close to the school's capacity of 140. Between 2016 and 2019 numbers declined to 81. Since the start of the current academic year pupil numbers have fallen to 52 (source: the school's pupil number return dated 18 October 2019) meaning there are now 88 (63%) surplus places. 13 Year 6 pupils left the school at the end of the last academic year to be replaced by 5 Reception pupils, a net reduction of 8 pupils. The local authority recognises that the consultation on closure has contributed to the further reduction in numbers.

A section 8 monitoring visit was undertaken at Broad Oak by Ofsted HMI on 8 October 2019, three days before the end of the consultation period. The monitoring inspection was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005 and took place because the school had received two successive judgements of Requires Improvement at its previous section 5 inspections. The key findings of the inspection were that:

"Senior leaders and governors are taking effective action to tackle the areas requiring improvement identified at the recent section 5 inspection in order for the school to become good.

The school should take further action to:

- *Continue to develop the school's curriculum to ensure that it is coherently planned and sequenced so that pupils are able to know more and remember more as they progress through the school*

- *Ensure that the recent improvements in the teaching of phonics are sustained so that there is a clear focus on ensuring that younger pupils promptly gain the phonics knowledge necessary to read well*
- *Maintain a sharp focus on continuing to improve teachers' subject knowledge to enhance the teaching of the curriculum”.*

The monitoring letter also noted the “*Local Authority is providing effective support and challenge to Leaders and Governors to improve the school. Advisers from East Sussex Local Authority are following timely, focused support and guidance in all aspects of the school’s work. Staff training, together with the school’s involvement in specific local authority-led projects, is helping to improve the quality of education in the school.*”

All other schools in the Heathfield area are rated good or outstanding by Ofsted

The impact on local people and the community

The majority of respondents to the consultation classified themselves as members of the local community. The local authority recognises that the majority of respondents disagree with the proposal to close Broad Oak. The school is seen as an important part of the village and its loss could have an impact on community life. This is addressed in the Community Impact Assessment appended to the Lead Member report.

School organisation and capacity to accommodate displaced pupils

At the time of writing, the October 2019 school census had not been released by the Department for Education (DfE). In the absence of this official data set the local authority has used the pupil number returns submitted by schools between September and November 2019 to assess, albeit informally, the current capacity at Broad Oak and the surrounding schools.

Provisional pupil numbers 2019/20

Capacity	PAN	YR	Y1	Y2	Y3	Y4	Y5	Y6	Total	Capacity	Surplus	% surplus
		230	230	230	230	230	230	230				
Broad Oak	20	5	1	6	9	8	6	17	52	140	88	63%
All Saints' and St Richard's	20	15	13	13	10	17	6	13	87	140	53	38%
Cross-in-Hand	60	57	37	43	42	56	44	30	309	420	111	26%
Dallington	15	16	13	17	17	18	14	11	106	105	0	0%
Five Ashes	10	10	10	8	7	14	7	7	63	56	0	0%
Mayfield	30	21	21	28	25	21	24	21	161	210	49	23%
Maynards Green	30	30	30	30	30	33	32	30	215	210	0	0%
Parkside	30	30	30	29	31	29	30	30	209	210	1	0%
Punnetts Town	15	15	12	16	12	14	17	10	96	105	9	9%
Totals	230	199	167	190	183	210	180	169	1298	1596	311	19%

Data source: Pupil number returns from schools between September and November 2019.

Pupil numbers at Broad Oak have fallen from 81 in January 2019 to 52, with surplus places increasing to 63%. 13 Year 6 pupils left the school at the end of the last academic year to be replaced by 5 Reception pupils, a net reduction of 8 pupils. The local authority recognises that the consultation on closure has contributed to the further reduction in numbers.

Surplus places in the Heathfield area remain high at 19%. Schools operate most efficiently and effectively when full or nearly full. To this end the local authority seeks to keep the number of surplus places (the number of places in schools that are unfilled) to a minimum. However, it is generally accepted that not all unfilled places in a school are surplus places, but that a small margin of surplus capacity is often allowed to facilitate parental preference, to take account of the fact that schools with available places may not always be in the part of a planning area where the demand is, and to allow for a degree of error in the forecasts. A school is generally considered to be full when it has less than 5% of its places unfilled. This is in line with the National Audit Office report on Capital Funding for new school places published in 2013, where it states:

“It is considered that on average 5 per cent was the bare minimum needed for authorities to meet their statutory duty with operational flexibility, while enabling parents to have some choice of schools”.

In larger towns around one form of entry (30 intake places) is allowed while in other areas around half a form of entry (15 intake places) is allowed although margins vary depending on specific forecasts, capacities and circumstances. This figure is deemed to give the appropriate amount of flexibility in an area and is set against the need to ensure the efficient use of resources. In practice, the amount of surplus places planned for in an area will also take account of local circumstances.

The following tables show the local authority’s projected pupil numbers for the Heathfield area taken from the annual update to its pupil forecasts in July 2019. The local authority’s pupil forecasts take account of housing plans in the area and the likely demand for school places they will generate.

Reception intake and total number on roll forecasts

Reception intake forecasts	Combined PAN	2018/19			2019/20			2020/21			2021/22			2022/23		
		Yr R NOR	Surplus places	Surplus %	Yr R NOR	Surplus places	Surplus %	Yr R NOR	Surplus places	Surplus %	Yr R NOR	Surplus places	Surplus %	Yr R NOR	Surplus places	Surplus %
Heathfield primary review area	230	168	62	27%	198	32	14%	197	33	14%	168	62	27%	189	41	18%

Number on roll forecasts	Combined capacity	2018/19			2019/20			2020/21			2021/22			2022/23		
		Total NOR	Surplus places	Surplus %	Total NOR	Surplus places	Surplus %	Total NOR	Surplus places	Surplus %	Total NOR	Surplus places	Surplus %	Total NOR	Surplus places	Surplus %
Heathfield primary review area	1596	1299	297	19%	1317	279	17%	1347	249	16%	1354	242	15%	1343	253	16%

Source: January 2019 School Census and ESCC Pupil Forecasts 16.07.19

The Heathfield Primary Area Review Area contains the following schools: All Saints' and St Richard's CE Primary School; Cross-in-Hand CE Primary School; Parkside Community Primary School; Dallington CE Primary School; Broad Oak Community Primary School; Five Ashes CE Primary; Mayfield CE Primary School; Maynards Green Community Primary School and Punnetts Town Community Primary School

The provisional pupil numbers in 2019/20 (approximately 1,298) are lower than the numbers projected when the forecasts were finalised in July 2019 (-19). Should Broad Oak close, the combined PAN in the area would reduce to 210 and capacity would fall to 1,456. It is clear from the information above that there would be sufficient places in the surrounding schools to accommodate displaced pupils from Broad Oak. Based on the provisional pupil numbers in 2019/20 surplus places in the area would reduce from 19% to 11%, still well above the level recommended by the National Audit Office.

November 2019