

Fletching CE Primary School

Presumption against the closure of rural schools

Introduction

Fletching CE Primary School (Fletching) 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 Fletching. These included:

- **Federation.** Fletching is in partnership with Chailey St Peter's CE Primary School until August 2020 and could consider federation beyond this. Although federations are recognised as a way of enabling smaller schools to work more formally in partnerships to share costs, the governing board have not presented any plans that demonstrate how a federation would address the financial challenges faced at the school.

- **Amalgamation.** Consideration was given to amalgamating Fletching with Chailey St Peter's. This option would produce the same outcome as the current proposal to close Fletching and merge the two community areas for admissions purposes.
- **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. The diocese has not indicated any interest in the school becoming an academy in a diocese multi-academy trust. No other academy trust has approached the local authority about taking the school into their trust.
- **No change.** Fletching 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 £145,000 by 2021/22. Doing nothing will not address the low pupil numbers and the longer term viability of the school. Since the consultation was launched the financial position of the school has changed and this is addressed in the Lead Member report.

A number of alternative options to closure have been suggested by respondents 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

- Ask parents for a subscription type payment
- Make the school a privately funded community school

Local authority response: Fletching is a state funded primary school. It is not allowed to ask parents for a subscription type payment and cannot change its status to become a privately funded school.

- Organise a school bus to run from Uckfield to the school

Local authority response: Running a bus from Uckfield could be costly and would potentially take children away from their local schools.

- Establish/recognise the specialist SEN provision at the school

Local authority response: The local authority recognises the strength of positive comments regarding how the school meets the needs of pupils with SEN. However, identifying and meeting the needs of learners with SEN is an expectation of all mainstream schools, as set out in the SEND Code of Practice and measured through the East Sussex Quality Mark for Inclusion (ESQMI).

Fletching is a mainstream school; it is not a special school. Although the school identifies a high percentage of pupils requiring SEN support this is a threshold the school sets for additional support. The needs of these pupils are well below the threshold for specialist provision, which requires an Education Health and Care Plan (EHCP). This below average level of pupils with complex SEN needs in the school is evident in the school's below average proportion of pupils with an EHCP. Unlike the threshold for additional needs which is determined at school level, the threshold for EHCPs is managed consistently across the County.

Data indicates that there is limited demand for specialist SEN provision in the area and pupil need is met through existing provision. A specialist facility would not address the challenges that the school is facing as it would not be available to the current Fletching School pupils as they are working above the threshold for that provision.

- Increase the funding for the school either from local authority resources or by lobbying central government

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.

- Build more houses in the local area

Local authority response: The local authority is not responsible for planning house building in the local area, this falls to Wealden District Council as the local planning authority.

- Encourage more families with young children to move to the village

Local authority response: It is not the school's or local authority's role to seek to encourage families with young children to move to the village and indeed the resources required to attempt to do so would be prohibitive and likely to be of little effect.

Those considered within the local authority's and/or school's control

- Merge the school with another local school

Local authority response: No further information was provided about the option to merge Fletching with another school so it is unclear how this would address the challenges the school faces.

- Establish a pre-school on the school site to help recruit more pupils

Local authority response: The birth rate in the village is low at less than 7 per annum and there is insufficient demand locally for a pre-school on the school site. As there is no unmet demand in the area, a new pre-school would need to attract children from other providers potentially putting those existing providers at risk.

- Reassign the community area of the school so that it is larger. One suggestion was to merge the community area with that of Newick rather than Chailey St Peter's as it is the closest neighbouring school

Local authority response: Expanding Fletching's community area is unlikely to increase the roll as there are sufficient unfilled places at the school for out of area children. In addition the increase might be at the expense of other schools which would be required to operate within a reduced community area and it is very unlikely they would agree to such a proposal.

- Shut another local school (Holy Cross)

Local authority response: Closing Holy Cross is not an option as it would reduce capacity in Uckfield when 1,000 new homes are to be built there.

Those considered within the school's / diocese's control

- Expand the partnership / federation with more schools to share costs
- Academisation
- Seek funds from the Diocese / Church
- Consider the sale of the school house to invest in the school
- Put a road sign on the main road to advertise the school.

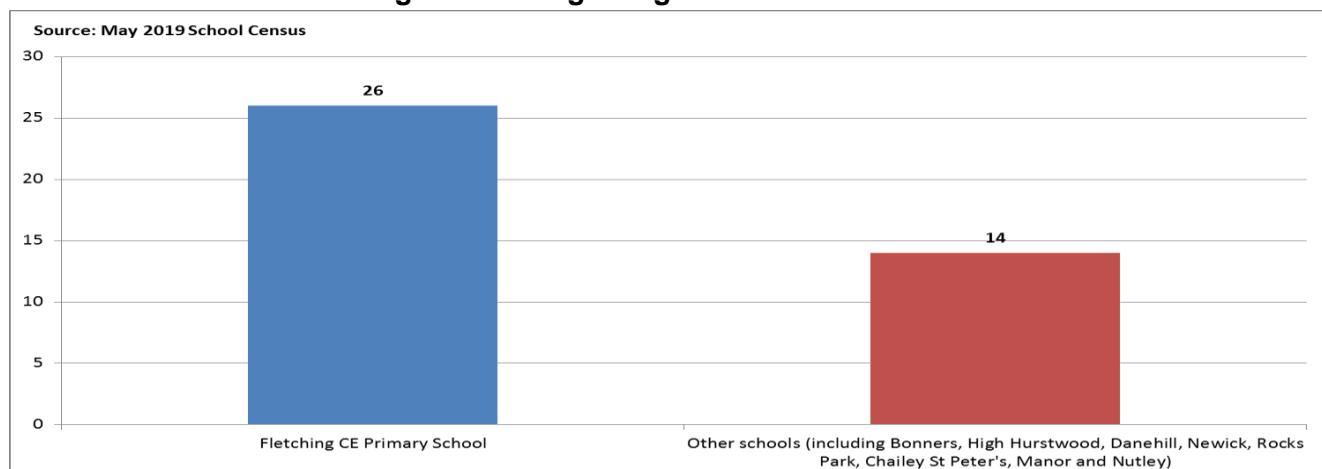
Local authority response: These are options for the school and diocese to consider together. The local authority's view on partnership, federation and academisation is referred to under the heading 'alternatives to closure' above. The installation of a road sign would be unlikely to increase pupil numbers; the school is advertised to parents and carers through information provided during the admissions process as is the case for all schools. A significant proportion of pupils who attend Fletching live outside the school's community area. This indicates that parents and carers who do not live in Fletching are already aware of the school; it is unlikely that the installation of a road sign would make a material difference.

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 will 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.

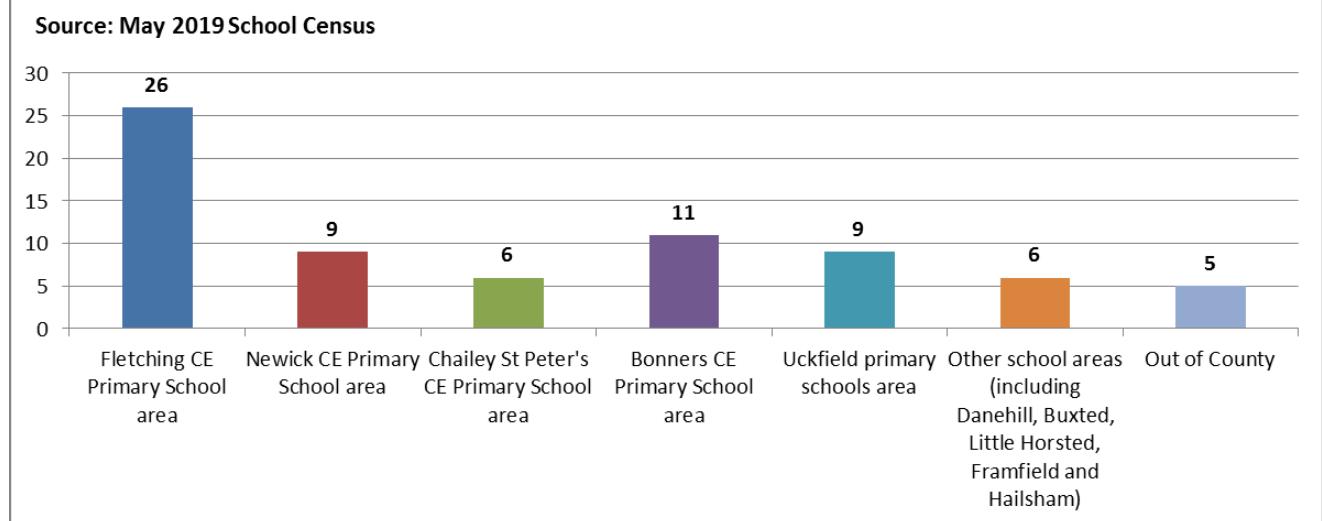
The May 2019 School Census showed 40 children living in the Fletching community area attending state funded schools in East Sussex. Of these, 26 (65%) attended Fletching while 14 (35%) attended other schools in the surrounding area.

Destination of children living in Fletching Village



The 26 pupils from Fletching made up 36% of the total number of pupils on roll. The remaining 46 pupils (64%) live in areas served by other schools.

Home location of pupils attending Fletching CE Primary School



The majority of pupils currently attending Fletching are from out of the area, while a number of children living in the village travel to other schools. The majority of pupils therefore already face journeys to and from school each day. Latest analysis shows that of the 55 Reception to Year 5 pupils likely to be affected by the proposal, approximately 68% live nearer to an alternative school, with approximately 32% living further away. Should the school close the likely impact on traffic and the environment might potentially be reduced if displaced pupils attend schools nearer to their home address. The local authority acknowledges that some pupils living in Fletching and attending the school might face longer journeys to and from an alternative school each day and that this might increase car usage for these families. For families that live outside of the Fletching community area it is envisaged that displaced pupils would continue to be transported to and from school under arrangements made by their parents and carers. It is hoped that for these families car usage might reduce.

Alternative schools are between 2.6 and 5.9 miles away from Fletching 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 Fletching CE Primary School in miles (rounded)
Chailey St Peter's CE Primary School	4.0
Danehill CE Primary School	4.0
Newick CE Primary School	2.6
Bonners CE Primary School	3.1
Buxted CE Primary School	4.5
Framfield CE Primary School	5.9
Harlands Primary School	4.7
High Hurstwood CE Primary School	5.9
Holy Cross CE Primary School	3.7
Little Horsted CE Primary School	5.7
Manor Primary School	4.2
Nutley CE Primary School	3.5
Rocks Park Primary School	3.7
St Philip's Catholic Primary School	4.2

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 although this figure might change if pupils are unable to access a place at their nearest alternative school.

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

Size of the school and quality of education

Fletching is a small rural school with a published admission number of 15 and capacity for 105 pupils (15 x 7 year groups). At full capacity the school would be expected to have four classes organised as follows.

Reception class of 15
Year 1 / 2 class of 30
Year 3 / 4 class of 30
Year 5 / 6 class of 30

Due to its low pupil numbers the school is currently organised across three classes:

Reception, Year 1 and Year 2 class of 24
Year 3 / 4 class of 23
Year 5 / 6 class of 22
Source: School's pupil number return dated 4 November 2019

The local authority has recently categorised the school as good. It recognises that the school provides a good level of education, as do other schools in the local area. However, the case to consult on the proposed closure of the school was based also on the low pupil numbers, long-term limited in-area demand for places and the high level of surplus places.

The school's budget position for this year and next year has improved. The substantial PTA fundraising effort has allowed the school to avoid a deficit for 2019/20 and significantly improves the 2020/21 year end forecast (see section 3.10 of the Lead Member report). However, though comparatively small, the school is still forecasting a deficit in 2020/21 and spending exceeds sustainable income sources year on year. The majority of the fundraising appears to be one off in nature with no demonstrable ongoing commitment beyond 2019/20. The school has already restructured to three classes to achieve budget savings, further restructuring is arguably not possible without impacting on the quality of education being provided.

The local authority remains of the view that the school continues to be vulnerable, its budget deficit has only been addressed on a short-term basis through one-off funding and concern remains about the lack of any ongoing committed funding to support the school beyond next financial year, 2020/2021. Current forecasts for the school do not suggest it will attract many more pupils from out of area than it has in the past. In-area demand for places remains low.

Importantly, the position has not changed with regard to the number of pupils in the surrounding area and there is a risk that while Fletching may succeed to grow its roll over time the cost could be felt by other local schools.

The impact on local people and the community

A number 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 Fletching. 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. In the absence of this official data set, the local authority has used pupil number returns submitted by schools between September and November 2019 to assess, albeit informally, the current capacity at Fletching and schools in the North Chailey area.

Provisional pupil numbers in North Chailey review area

Capacity	PAN	YR	Y1	Y2	Y3	Y4	Y5	Y6	Total	Capacity	Surplus	% surplus
		80	80	80	80	80	80	80				
Fletching	15	5	9	10	10	13	8	14	69	105	36	34%
Chailey St Peter's	20	17	15	17	20	22	23	25	139	140	1	1%
Danehill*	15	13	16	11	11	17	10	18	96	105	9	9%
Newick	30	30	27	33	34	32	30	30	216	210	0	0%
Totals	80	65	67	71	75	84	71	87	520	560	46	8%

Data source: Pupil number returns from individual schools during the 2019/20 academic year.

* Danehill's capacity takes account of the decision to increase its PAN to 15 with effect from 2020/21 and that the school is already organised to its new PAN.

Fletching has largely maintained its pupil numbers despite the consultation on closure. There has been a net loss of only two pupils since the January 2019 school census.

Reflecting that Fletching takes children from a wider area than just North Chailey (including Uckfield and the surrounding area), an analysis of pupil numbers in the wider area is included below.

Provisional pupil numbers in North Chailey, Uckfield and the surrounding area

Capacity	PAN	YR	Y1	Y2	Y3	Y4	Y5	Y6	Total	Capacity	Surplus	% surplus
		365	365	365	365	365	365	365				
Fletching	15	5	9	10	10	13	8	14	69	105	36	34%
Chailey St Peter's	20	17	15	17	20	22	23	25	139	140	1	1%
Danehill*	15	13	16	11	11	17	10	18	96	105	9	9%
Newick	30	30	27	33	34	32	30	30	216	210	0	0%
Bonners	15	17	20	19	18	14	13	10	111	105	0	0%
Buxted**	30	30	27	23	26	25	30	24	185	210	25	12%
Framfield	15	15	15	9	14	17	12	13	95	105	10	10%
Harlands	30	28	30	24	30	29	26	28	195	210	15	7%
High Hurstwood	15	16	15	15	15	16	15	13	105	105	0	0%
Holy Cross	30	9	15	11	10	19	9	12	85	210	125	60%
Little Horsted	15	17	14	18	17	13	16	13	108	105	0	0%
Manor	60	60	55	61	60	60	59	60	415	420	5	1%
Nutley	15	16	12	17	12	12	16	14	99	105	6	6%
Rocks Park	30	30	30	30	30	30	30	30	210	210	0	0%
St Philips	30	29	30	15	32	27	30	30	193	210	17	8%
Totals	365	332	330	313	339	346	327	334	2321	2555	249	10%

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

* Danehill's capacity takes account of the decision to increase its PAN to 15 with effect from 2020/21 and that the school is already organised to its new PAN.

** Buxted's capacity takes account of the decision to increase its PAN to 30 with effect from 2020/21 and that the school is already organised to its new PAN.

Surplus places at Fletching remain high at 34%. 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 North Chailey, Uckfield and surrounding area taken from the annual update to its pupil forecasts in July 2019. The local authority's pupil forecast 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 projections for the Heathfield primary review area																	
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 %	
North Chailey primary review area	80	66	14	18%	69	11	14%	70	10	12%	71	9	12%	65	15	18%	
Uckfield primary review area	180	166	14	8%	154	26	14%	160	20	11%	137	43	24%	130	50	28%	
Rural Uckfield primary review area	105	105	0	0%	107	0	0%	94	11	10%	99	6	6%	94	11	11%	
Totals	365	337	28	8%	330	37	10%	324	41	11%	307	58	16%	289	76	21%	
Number on roll forecasts		2018/19			2019/20			2020/21			2021/22			2022/23			
Number on roll forecasts	Combined capacity	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 %	
		560	517	43	8%	526	34	6%	516	44	8%	518	42	7%	507	53	10%
North Chailey primary review area	560	517	43	8%	526	34	6%	516	44	8%	518	42	7%	507	53	10%	
Uckfield primary review area	1260	1117	143	11%	1092	168	13%	1100	160	13%	1091	169	13%	1069	191	15%	
Rural Uckfield primary review area	735	700	35	5%	699	36	5%	709	26	4%	712	23	3%	712	23	3%	
Totals	2555	2334	221	9%	2318	237	9%	2326	229	9%	2321	234	9%	2288	267	10%	

Source: January 2019 School Census and ESCC Pupil Forecasts 16.07.19

The North Chailey Primary Area Review Area contains the following schools: Newick CE Primary School; Chailey St Peter's CE Primary School; Danehill CE Primary School and Fletching CE Primary School.

The Uckfield Primary Area Review Area contains the following schools: Harlands Primary School; Holy Cross CE Primary School; Manor Primary School; Rocks Park Primary School and St Philip's Catholic Primary School.

The Rural Uckfield Primary Area Review Area contains the following schools: Bonners CE Primary School, Maresfield; Buxted CE Primary School; Framfield CE Primary School; High Hurstwood CE Primary School; Little Horsted CE School and Nutley CE Primary School.

Danehill CE Primary School's capacity takes account of the decision to increase its PAN to 15 with effect from 2020/21 and that the school is already organised to its new PAN.

Buxted CE Primary School's capacity takes account of the decision to increase its PAN to 30 with effect from 2020/21 and that the school is already organised to its new PAN.

The provisional pupil numbers in 2019/20 (approximately 2,321) are slightly higher than the numbers projected when the forecasts were finalised in July 2019 (+3). Should Fletching close, the combined PAN in the surrounding area would reduce to 350 and capacity would fall to 2,450. It is clear from the information above that there would be sufficient places in the surrounding schools to accommodate displaced pupils from Fletching, although the local authority would need to analyse which alternative schools parents and carers had applied for to assess whether additional places at Chailey St Peter's would be required for in-area pupils.

November 2019