

# Small Schools Policy

## Introduction

The Local Authority (LA) and the Joint Board (see appendix 1 for more information on the board structure) believe that the future of our schools is best safeguarded through groups of schools working together in partnership, within their locality.

The Primary Board have agreed that for small schools, the strategic ambition of any informal collaboration should be to move towards formal partnership arrangements, including hard federation and academisation.

The LA will continue to encourage small schools to work together, developing a variety of strong partnership models which contribute to the broader school-led system across the county.

Partnerships which are comprised of three or more schools, working with a shared budget, shared resources and shared curriculum framework, tend to see the greatest benefits. This is also key when joining an academy trust. The Department for Education (DfE) has updated its guidance on converting to an academy (March 2024). The key change being that from September 2024, the £25,000 grant will only be paid to schools approved to join or form a trust as part of a group of 3 or more schools.

Partnership working is the most effective way to ensure that small schools continue to be sustainable, and that they remain at the heart of their communities.

The LA favours groups of schools working together in a geographical area.

Our long-term ambition is for all schools, including our smallest, to be part of strong local partnerships usually within a multi-academy trust or as part of a hard federation.

## What is the Small Schools Strategy?

In East Sussex we have defined small schools as those with under 150 pupils, however this policy provides guidance for all maintained schools below one form entry. We also encourage larger schools and existing federations to make use of this strategy when considering their own strategic growth plan.

This strategy provides a range of creative opportunities for school leaders, governing boards and trusts to consider how to sustain and secure the provision of sufficient, high quality school places.

In the same way that a School Improvement Plan achieves a balance of support and challenge, this proposed strategy provides advice and guidance (in respect of leadership, governance, school improvement, finance, recruitment, and retention) that will prompt and challenge schools to form robust models of school organisation which are tailored to their needs.

The LA will work with all schools to broker innovative solutions based on a collective responsibility to meet the needs of the children and young people in East Sussex. It is intended to assist governing boards, school leaders and academy trusts with their strategic plans for the future sustainability of their provision. It is intended to assist governing boards, school leaders and Trusts to formulate a strategic plan.

### **The benefits to small schools of working in partnership**

Small primary schools are a key feature of the East Sussex education landscape. Small schools offer many strengths in serving their local community: relationships are strong, and pupils are well-known by staff and their peers. However, the small size and capacity of these organisations, means that it can be more difficult for them to overcome challenges such as staffing changes, falling pupil numbers and limited resources. The LA believes that it is important for small schools to work together to ensure they have the key attributes that make schools strong and sustainable.

- a. **Leadership and Governance** - different schools may need to apply different leadership styles and models to meet their needs. The traditional single headteacher model may no longer be the most appropriate response to the need for good leadership and this is something we would encourage governors to explore. Governing boards in small schools also experience challenges in recruitment and retention and partnership working would allow them to draw on expertise from a wider pool and allow them to explore succession planning.
- b. **Quality of Education** - through working with partners schools can share curriculum planning, expertise and ensure that teachers feel supported and have opportunities for professional dialogue with colleagues teaching the same age range. These measures help in the delivery of high quality education.
- c. **Personal development** - as a small school, working as part of a federation or trust, the positive relationships and personal development which are often the strength of small schools can be maintained whilst other challenges are addressed.
- d. **Robust safeguarding**- the additional capacity in terms of staffing and resource, which partnership working gives, ensures that systems and structures are maintained when individual staff change.
- e. **Finance, recruitment and retention** - In partnerships, federations and multi-academy trusts (MATs) there can be more opportunities for central functions to be developed and shared, for example shared staffing, bulk purchasing and collective bargaining power. The infrastructure of a stand-alone small school, financially, can be challenging.

These benefits are increasingly likely to be realised when working in larger partnership structures of three or more schools.

## Context of East Sussex

The LA is the champion for children, particularly the most vulnerable, and works in partnership with schools to achieve the best outcomes for all pupils.

- East Sussex has a variety of schools of different sizes and types of location, of the 148 primary schools 33% are currently academies (February 2024).
- There are 50 schools with 150 pupils or less, 50% of these are currently working as part of a federation and 10% are part of academy trusts.
- At secondary 65% of the 23 schools are academies, 100% of all through schools are academies as are 92% of special schools.
- There are 58 local authority maintained church primary schools, 39 are voluntary controlled (38 Church of England and one Methodist) and 19 are voluntary aided (12 Church of England and seven Catholic). The relationship between the LA and both the Catholic and Church of England diocese ensure consistent messaging, regular communication and meetings are key to our way of working.

## Objectives and measures of success

1. Improve Ofsted outcomes with the aspiration that all small schools are at least 'Good' and an increasing number 'Outstanding' under the new Inspection framework.
2. Raise standards, improve school outcomes across all small schools and for all children particularly those that are vulnerable.
3. Ensure value for money and sustainable use of available resources.
4. Eliminate the number of small 'schools in financial difficulty', with no LA maintained schools operating with a budget deficit other than for a very short-term period of time (two years maximum).

## Guiding Principles

Set out below are the guiding principles that will be applied in agreeing the most appropriate model of organisation/proposal for small schools seeking change. Central to the LA's approach is that any changes are based on improving schools, by sustaining and raising standards.

- Prioritise the needs of children.
- Ensure schools have appropriately skilled staff to meet the needs of all children within their local communities, including the most vulnerable.
- Support the work, well-being, and development of headteachers and staff.
- Assume collective responsibility to work together to raise standards.
- Work supportively with communities to develop understanding of the need for change.
- Value the important role that small schools play in their local community.

The LA and the primary, secondary and joint boards are particularly focused on developing existing partnerships which have strong potential for growth.

### **East Sussex Local Authority believes that:**

- Parental preference is a key consideration and the ability to access a school place close to home within the local community is an important factor.
- Securing the sustainability of schools is best achieved working in partnership.
- Solutions and partnerships should not be limited to maintained schools supporting maintained schools and academies supporting academies exclusively. Schools should work together as part of an effective mixed economy of schools whereby the need and focus for change dictates the best provider placed to help deliver the change.
- Good financial health is essential for achieving educational excellence.
- School ethos, vision and values are a key determinate of school-to-school compatibility.
- The quality of education is of paramount importance and closure of small schools which are no longer viable (pupil numbers, financial concerns or factors such as staffing or leadership) is a difficult decision, but one that must be taken when all other options have been exhausted.

### **Structures for working together**

Governors need to be the driving force to ensure future sustainability for their school - all governing bodies should be planning their structure not only for the current year but for the next three to five years.

The LA will work with governing bodies to explore different models for the future through visioning sessions, this is important not only for schools with a headteacher vacancy but for all schools looking at their succession plans. The need to undertake this work is outlined in the Governance Handbook. This states the role and purpose of governance should provide strategic leadership that sets and champions vision, ethos and strategy including making an informed decision on whether to form, join or grow a group of schools. This process must be underpinned by robust due diligence and an awareness of the need to review the effectiveness of governance structures and processes if and when the size, scale and complexity of the organisation changes.

Governor networking and conversations with schools who have already working in partnership is encouraged in order to share learning and expertise.

Arguably the most important consideration is whether the partnerships governing bodies are looking at joining have compatible shared values, expectations and practices that impact on performance.

The following list provides guidance on the types of models of leadership that could be operated when a substantive headteacher resigns. Partnership is seen as a step toward a formalised solution.

- Partnership of two or more schools with an Executive Head (Primary Only)
- Partnership of two or more schools with an Executive Head (Cross-phase)
- Federation of two or more schools with an Executive Head (Primary Only)

- Federation of two or more schools with an Executive Head (Cross-phase)
- School joins or becomes affiliated to a Multi-Academy Trust

### **Hard Federation**

Hard Federation allows two or more schools to work together with a single governing body. This model gives many of the benefits of being part of a larger organisation. Those federations which see the most benefits, in terms of financial sustainability and staff benefits, such as reduction in workload and professional development opportunities, are those with three or more schools, where they share budget and resources and have a shared curriculum framework.

### **Academisation**

Academisation brings the benefits which come from being part of a larger organisation with shared policies, procedures and in many cases access to trust wide support for school improvement, finance, and HR.

Where schools are exploring academy solutions, we will encourage them to communicate with other local schools and will facilitate this through alliance meetings for governors and headteachers. The aim of this communication is to support groups of schools to look at a joint academy solution which would provide an effective hub within East Sussex. We will work with the Church of England and Catholic Dioceses to support the church schools within East Sussex to find an appropriate academy solution.

### **Benefits of a hard federation/academy trust solution**

The benefits of working in partnership as part of a hard federation or academy trust have been outlined above and touch on all areas of school life including leadership and governance, quality of education and finance. In addition to these broad benefits, schools which are part of partnerships of three or more schools can expect:

- Greater opportunity for challenge and review.
- A reduction of duplication and opportunities for 'additional' interventions and tasks.
- An extended and shared pool of expertise, skills, and resources both in the classroom and in the operational management of the school.
- Improved communication between staff.
- Some economies of scale over time.
- Opportunities to dis-invest and re-invest.
- Emphasis on team working with peer to peer and school to school support.
- Recruitment and retention opportunities.
- Opportunities to look at more efficient models of budgeting such as federation budgets.

### **Schools causing concern**

There may be times when the local authority has to step in and use their powers of intervention to ensure improvement in a school. In these situations, it is likely that

the local authority will direct the school to working in a partnership or as part of a trust to bring about the improvements needed.

We strongly believe that moving into the future, all schools should be part of strong partnerships that can ensure their future sustainability.

### **Who is responsible for delivering the strategy?**

The responsibility for delivering the strategy rests with the East Sussex education community of schools and Diocesan partners working together with the LA, the Joint Board and the Primary Board.

Diocesan Boards of Education are an important partner since many of our small schools are faith schools. Working in partnership with Diocesan Boards, the LA will:

- Consult and engage Diocesan Boards at an early stage and understand their preferred model of MATs, federations or other forms of working together.
- Commit to helping small schools find the best MAT solution which retains their church school ethos, in line with its own Diocesan Board of Education (DBE) Academy Strategy. The Diocese's consent is required for any church school seeking to become an academy.
- Respect that Diocesan Boards have advisory rights in relation to the appointment of headteachers and thus are able to advise governors, alongside the LA.

The LA will deliver the strategy by providing information advice and guidance in respect of leadership and governance, school improvement and finance, recruitment and retention as follows:

- Offer advice to existing federations, schools and governing boards who are proactively seeking to develop new partnerships or who have plans to grow an existing partnership.
- Offer advice to schools and governing boards about what to do when a school leadership or administration posts becomes vacant: encouraging small schools to consider the most appropriate arrangements. Specifically, advise Governing Boards to satisfy themselves that their plans to recruit a headteacher, senior/middle leaders and administrators are affordable and sustainable.
- Provide data and information to help broker partnerships and encourage the coming together of schools for training and sharing best practice.
- Provide effective oversight arrangements that give early warning of problems through School Improvement activities and other activities and statutory functions delivered by the LA.
- Provide information to schools and Governing Boards on collaborative ways of working and models of organisation including working with or in a MAT.
- Encourage schools to consider their options both for the short and long term.
- Encourage larger schools to offer support and collaborate with smaller schools as part of a development of a strong family of schools.

- Support federation, collaboration and MAT arrangements. Undertake to work with schools in a federation or collaboration with a view to identifying success factors and supporting headteachers in addressing any difficulties.
- Look at the potential for small schools to join MATs as an option to provide sustainable long-term leadership as an alternative.
- Work with school leaders to develop the mechanisms that need to be developed in order to encourage and support schools to work together more effectively.
- Continue to link decisions about capital investment in the school estate with raising standards, supporting curriculum intent and implementation, remodelling schools to support inclusion and intervention, address security and safeguarding issues in schools, support class organisation models.
- Ensure there is effective financial management of the school.
- Offer finance support to look at different budget models.
- Appendix 1 sets out information for groups of schools of different sizes and maintained schools currently working as part of hard federations.

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## Appendix 1

Schools with fewer than 100 children on roll.

There are currently 26 schools with fewer than 100 pupils.

Schools with between 50 and 100 on roll	NOR
Alfriston School	86
Beckley Church of England Primary School	95
Bodiam Church of England Primary School	68
Brede Primary School	98
Crowhurst CofE Primary School	98
Danehill Church of England Primary School	97
East Hoathly CofE Primary School	90
Firle Church of England Primary School	68
Five Ashes CofE Primary School	54
Fletching Church of England Primary School	71
Framfield Church of England Primary School	90
Frant Church of England Primary School	97
Hamsey Community Primary School	92
High Hurstwood Church of England Primary School	95
Laughton Community Primary School	90
Little Horsted Church of England Primary School	95
Mark Cross Church of England Aided Primary School	94
Nutley Church of England Primary School	82
Peasmarsh Church of England Primary School	72
Phoenix Academy	88
St Mark's Church of England Primary School	79
St Mary the Virgin Church of England Primary School	82
St Michael's Church of England Primary School	96
St Michael's Primary School	77
Staplecross Methodist Primary School	97
Stonegate Church of England Primary School	98
<b>Total number of schools</b>	<b>26</b>

Maintained schools receive a bi-annual due diligence review by the Local Authority that looks at the following aspects of the provision:

- School Improvement
- Finance and Personnel
- Buildings and premises

1. If the headteacher position becomes vacant, there is a presumption against appointing a new substantive headteacher to the school. Governors will be required to look at other models of leadership including joining a Multi-

- Academy Trust, partnership with a local maintained school (Primary, Special or Secondary) or Federation (with partnership as a potential prelude to this).
2. The Local Authority will NOT support the decision of a governing body that recruits a standalone substantive headteacher due to the financial and educational risks involved. There is the potential that the Local Authority will invoke the following policy if there become risks to the quality of education as a result: If the governing board move towards the recruitment of a substantive Head, they need to demonstrate that the structure they are proposing is sustainable for the subsequent three years financially, that the Ofsted judgement of the school is not at risk and that standards will be maintained. If any senior or middle leadership role becomes vacant in the school, the Governing Boards and the headteacher are asked to liaise with the Local Authority in relation to potential shared roles at either a local, cluster or hub level. It is also possible that this tier of leadership is brokered from a larger establishment.
  3. Where there are vacancies in terms of finance or site management, the Governing Board and headteacher are asked to work with the Local Authority in looking at localised options including operating finance and administration from a larger Primary, Secondary or Multi-Academy Trust.
  4. Where schools are not engaging with the local authority to support a financially and educationally sustainable model the local authority would need to trigger intervention to assess the longer-term viability of a school.

Examples of these triggers are as follows:

- The bi-annual review demonstrates serious weaknesses in school performance, safeguarding and infrastructure that place the school vulnerable in terms of the quality of education.
- The school has been in a deficit budget for more than three years.
- The school's first preference and offer data are exceptionally low i.e. well below the Published Admission Number (PAN).
- Area Health Authority and housing growth data indicate that demand for Reception places in future years is likely to be insufficient to sustain demand equal to PAN.
- Less than 50% of children on roll are resident within a school's community area.
- The school is judged by Ofsted to be Inadequate or Requires Improvement.

## Schools with 100 - 150 children on roll

There are currently 22 schools with between 100 and 150 pupils.

	NOR
All Saints' and St Richard's Church of England Primary School	101
Barcombe Church of England Primary School	135
Blackboys Church of England Primary School	131
Bonnors CofE School	114
Catsfield Church of England Primary School	109
Chailey St Peter's Church of England Primary School	110
Chiddingly Primary School	101
Dallington Church of England Primary School	110
Etchingam Church of England Primary School	101
Groombridge St Thomas' Church of England Primary School	149
Hankham Primary School	109
Hurst Green Church of England Primary School	100
Icklesham Church of England Primary School	104
Jarvis Brook Primary School	126
Netherfield CofE Primary School	137
Ninfield Church of England Primary School	146
Northiam Church of England Primary School	114
Park Mead Primary School	101
Plumpton Primary School	137
Punnetts Town Community Primary School	103
St Thomas' Church of England Aided Primary School	130
Ticehurst and Flimwell Church of England Primary School	117
<b>Total number of schools</b>	<b>22</b>

1. If the headteacher position becomes vacant then at the first governing body meeting that discusses headteacher recruitment due consideration should be given to partnerships, Federation and whether there is any traction in joining a Multi-Academy Trust. Where the school is deemed strong and with capacity, the LA may also look with governors at where the school could potentially provide strategic leadership to others.
2. If the governing board move towards the recruitment of a substantive headteacher they need to demonstrate that the structure they are proposing is sustainable for the subsequent three years financially, that the Ofsted judgement of the school is not at risk and that standards will be maintained, this will take the form of a discussion rather than a formal plan. Governors need to have demonstrated that they have considered all options for both the school and community moving forwards.

3. The LA, working with the Governing Board will review the PAN and seek to adjust this to achieve a relevant number that promotes sustainability and appropriate class organisation, while meeting in-area demand for places.

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### **All other schools**

1. There is a presumption that schools with over 150 pupils, will in most cases, be viable in terms of leadership but the LA will always look at approaching schools, no matter what their designation is, in supporting other schools within the system.
2. Governors are asked to be open-minded when a headteacher vacancy arises and look at whether a federation or academy solution would be appropriate.
3. Amalgamation- for separate infant and junior schools serving the same community the LA would encourage these schools to consider amalgamation alongside federation as part of their journey to academisation.
4. We will approach maintained schools and Multi-Academy Trusts to provide strategic leadership for either the short or long term. We will always be mindful though of ethos alignment and geography when making any approaches and ultimately this is a decision for individual governing boards.

## Schools currently working in hard federations (March 2024)

Name of federation	Schools
Bluebell	Chailey St Peter's CE Primary School Fletching CE Primary School Forest Row CE Primary School
Bridge	Salehurst CE Primary School Staplecross Methodist Primary School
Genesis	Beckley CE Primary School Peasmarsh CE Primary School
Oak Tree	Firle CE Primary School Laughton Community Primary School
Pioneer	Chiddingly Primary School East Hoathly CE Primary School Park Mead Primary School St Mary the Virgin CE Primary School
Rampion	Grovelands Community School Hellingly Community Primary School
Riverside	Bodiam CE Primary School Etchingam CE Primary School
Skylark	Barcombe CE Primary School Hamsey Community Primary School Iford and Kingston CE Primary School Plumpton Primary School
South Ashdown Schools	Bonners CE Primary School Buxted CE Primary School
St Thomas a Becket	Blackboys CE Primary School Framfield CE Primary School
Sussex Spires	All Saints' & St Richard's CE Primary School Herstmonceux CE Primary School
Weald	Five Ashes CE Primary School Frant CE Primary School Mark Cross CE Primary School Mayfield CE Primary School
Woodlands	Dallington CE Primary School Punnetts Town Community Primary School

## Useful Links/Information

East Sussex work in partnership with schools, there are two strategic bodies which oversee improvements to education settings in East Sussex.

The Primary Board oversees early years providers and primary schools.

The Secondary Board oversees all secondary schools and post-16 providers.

The Joint Board allows both of these strategic bodies to come together to discuss issues which impact the whole school system across all age ranges.

[Primary and Secondary Boards](#)

[School Organisation Plan 2023-27](#)

[Schools causing concern guidance](#)

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