

Report to: **Lead Member for Education and Inclusion, Special Educational Needs and Disability**

Date: **30 April 2024**

By: **Director of Children's Services**

Title of report: **Small Schools Policy**

Purpose of report: **To articulate the strategy which will be shared with schools to support small schools to remain sustainable as set out in the draft Small Schools Policy ("the draft policy").**

RECOMMENDATIONS:

The Lead Member is recommended to approve the draft policy.

1 Background

1.1 East Sussex has a variety of schools which differ in size and location. Of 148 primary schools, 33% are currently academies (February 2024).

1.2 There are 50 schools with 150 pupils or fewer, 50% of these are currently working as part of a federation and 10% are part of academy trusts.

1.3 Small primary schools in particular 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.

1.4 The draft policy (Appendix 1) is part of the Council's strategy to help small schools remain sustainable and at the heart of their communities wherever possible.

2 Supporting Information

2.1 We defined small schools in the draft policy as those with under 150 pupils, but it also provides guidance for all maintained schools below one form entry. The Council also encourages larger schools and existing federations to make use of this strategy when considering their own strategic growth plan.

2.2 The 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.

2.3 In the same way that a School Improvement Plan achieves a balance of support and challenge, the proposed strategy within the draft policy 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.

2.4 The Council 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.

2.5 The Council believes that it is important for small schools to work together to ensure they have the key attributes that make schools strong and sustainable.

2.6 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 in schools and this is something that the Council encourages 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.

2.7 Quality of Education

Through working with partners, schools can share curriculum planning and expertise and ensure that teachers feel supported, have opportunities for professional dialogue with colleagues teaching the same age range and can deliver high quality education.

2.8 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.

2.9 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.

2.10 Finance, recruitment and retention

In partnerships, federations and multi-academy trusts (MATs) there can be more opportunities for central functions to be shared and developed, resulting in for example, shared staffing, bulk purchasing and collective bargaining power. This may reduce the financial challenges posed by the infrastructure of a small school.

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

3 Conclusion and reasons for recommendations

3.1 The draft policy sets out the benefits of partnership working, objectives and measures of success alongside the guiding principles of partnership working.

3.2 There has been in-depth consultation with a working party of school leaders, the joint board which represents schools across the county and the diocese.

3.3 The Church of England diocese is a key partner in this work.

ALISON JEFFERY
Director of Children's Services

Contact Officer: Nicola Blake
Tel. No. 07803 899386
Email: nicola.blakecs@eastsussex.gov.uk

LOCAL MEMBERS

All

BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS

None