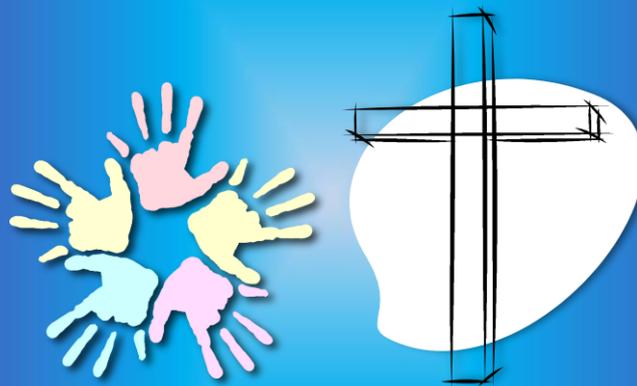


SOUTHWELL & NOTTINGHAM DIOCESAN BOARD OF EDUCATION



Strategy for Small Schools



That All May Flourish



Introduction – Small & Mighty

The vision of the DBE in Southwell & Nottingham is for children and adults in our church schools to flourish. We strive to ensure that every child is ‘loved unconditionally, enabled ambitiously, supported compassionately and championed relentlessly’ (*Our Hope for a Flourishing Schools System*, *CofE Education Office 2023*); each is made in the image of God. We strive for our schools and academies to be beacons of love, inclusion and excellence, that every person will encounter Christ and know life in all its fullness.

Each church school and academy, large or small, is valued. Small church schools are ‘small and mighty’. They are integral to the Diocese Family, often offering quality education, a family feel and a distinctive presence in their local community. In order to thrive, it is crucial to understand the pressures they face, ask courageous questions and face the future strategically.

A central principle of this Strategy is to respect the voice of every Church School, aware that the leaders and governors know the school best and love it the most. At the heart of it are the school’s future sustainability and the flourishing of every child. In pursuit of these goals, the DBE believes that academisation is an obvious and positive choice, albeit not the only one at time of writing.

An Imperative for a Flourishing Future

‘... reimagine what outstanding education should be like in small schools and rural, often isolated, villages.

... Our conviction is that, for the sake of education provision in small and rural communities, such re-imagining needs to happen apace...’

‘Doing nothing is not an option’.

Revd Nigel Genders

Embracing Change: Rural and Small Schools (CofE March 2018)

‘Yesterday’s answers might not work for today’s questions.’

(Anonymous)

‘No school is an island.’

(Adapted from John Donne)

Aims & Outcomes

This Strategy urges leaders and governors to:

- Be thoughtful in seeing what lies ahead, including challenges and potential obstacles.
- Create a Flourishing Future Plan (FFP), revisit it regularly, share and implement it (see Appendix D).
- Be proactive in developing partnerships with others.
- Consider carefully and strategically the potential importance of academisation.
- Be intentional and courageous, taking action to ensure a sustainable future for the school.

Context

- The Diocesan landscape includes over 30 small church primary schools – ie with less than 150 pupils on roll.
- At time of writing many schools are experiencing a demographic dip, as well as challenging, ongoing budget and resource pressures.
- It seems likely, if not inevitable, that the ‘academisation agenda’ will continue.
- In the face of current and likely future pressures, it is clear that academisation must be considered openly; it may be the only way to ensure sustainability and a flourishing future.
- The DBE’s red line is that church schools join church trusts.
- Our Church MATs work collaboratively within The Salt & Light Partnership. Realistically they must balance carefully the number of small and/or financially-struggling schools they accept, so that they are viable themselves and can fulfil their vision.
- Government and County thinking is against the closure of small schools – which does not mean they can never close.
- Under DfE criteria, amended in March 2024, from 1st September 2024 schools will not receive a £25000 conversion grant unless they academise in groups of three or more.
- Regarding academisation where it is sought, we do not want any of our schools left behind – our vision is for all to find the right new harbour so that they may flourish.
- Whatever the outcomes may be, it is vital to ask courageous questions for the future sustainability and flourishing of every small church school.
- As always, at heart, this is about the children and young people.

Working definitions in this paper

- Small = fewer than 150 pupils on roll (while schools with under 210 pupils, ie less than one-form entry, are encouraged to consider this Strategy)
- Very small = 50 or fewer pupils on roll

The Value of Small Church Schools

Qualities of small Church Schools:

- Integral to the Diocese Family
- Shining Christian ethos
- Small and mighty
- Loving family
- Outrageous dedication
- Quality education
- Every child known and valued
- Distinctive presence in the local community

‘Small schools are places for positive and influential relationships between schools, pupils, parents and local communities. Positive and purposeful relationships are central to successful learning, happiness and well-being.’

(Roffey, 2012)

Important Questions for the DBE

- How can we make sure no school is left behind?
- How can we avoid situations where ‘it’s too late’?
- How can we guide / advise small school leaders and GBs?
- What does pre-emptive, preparatory work look like, prior to academisation?

For example:

- Clustering
- Federation
- Shared leadership
- Executive headship
- Shared staffing
- Shared resourcing
- ... And what about the hard messages that come with these suggestions – re-structuring and/or possible redundancy, for instance?
- How can we support the Salt & Light Partnership?
- What does ‘flourishing’ mean in this context?

Hard Questions for Small Church Schools

What about our:

- Demographics current and future?
- Enrolment projections?
- Catchment and new housing?
- Budget current and future?

- Quality of education?
- Curriculum development?
- Staffing, staff recruitment and retention?
- Professional development - including subject and senior leadership?
- Buildings and facilities?

Courageous Considerations for Small Church Schools

- Think creatively and courageously.
- Address sustainability in five key areas; standards, leadership, finance, governance and wellbeing.
- Engage deeply with the questions posed in 'Embracing Change: Rural and Small Schools' (CofE March 2018).
- Create hubs, clusters or families of schools, working together in formal federation or informal groupings.
- Maximise resources collaboratively.
- Share a headteacher to oversee a number of schools, possibly under the title of Executive Head.
- In order to facilitate the latter, ensure strong senior leadership in each school, the financing of this leadership solution and the possibility of a shared Governing Body.
- Share other staffing roles, eg SENDCo or Office Manager.
- Share roles across middle leadership or class teachers, to maximise specialist skills in curriculum areas such as music, PE or languages.
- Deliver joint or collaborative subject leadership and professional development.
- Work in partnership with other small schools to provide quality enrichment for all, thereby preparing pupils for life in secondary school and offering valuable opportunities such as team sports.
- Secure discounts with external suppliers through increased, joint bulk orders.
- As a hub or cluster, consider the potential to deliver services together or employ services jointly.
- Work intentionally so that the financial projections of the school do not become a barrier to future plans.
- Work with the Diocesan Education Team to explore objectively the potential merits of academisation.
- Consider realistically the potential drawbacks of some of the shared leadership options outlined in this paper. One risk is that they would dilute the quality of education and care provided by the school; in which case academisation would be the better way forward.
- Engage with local stakeholders' hearts and minds, especially the Church and parents, so that there is meaningful support for the school.
- Regarding academisation, ask the right questions in the right order:

- What's unique or distinctive about our school – and therefore we will protect and nurture it?
- What's our future vision for our school to be sustainable and to flourish?
- Where - and when - might that vision include joining a good multi-academy trust?
- Due diligence; ask the important questions – for example:
 - 'How will you protect all that's distinctive about our school?'
 - 'How will you help us enhance our Christian values and ethos?'
 - 'How much autonomy will we have?'
 - 'What support will we receive from you?'
 - 'What will it cost?'
 - 'How will you help us maximise the academic progress of every pupil?'
 - 'What back-office support will you provide, such as HR and finance?'
 - 'How will you provide specific support for us as a small school, and create links with other small schools in your trust?'
- Join a Church MAT that will enrich the school's Christian ethos while providing vital services and support.
- Above all, ask and answer courageous questions for the future sustainability and flourishing of your small church school.

Actions From Here

- Headteachers and governors in our small church schools, and the DBE, are urged to consider intentionally the questions and issues covered in this strategy paper.
- Small schools should complete and revisit regularly a Flourishing Future Plan (FFP). Please see Appendix D.
- This includes asking courageous questions in order to ensure the future sustainability and flourishing of every small church school.
- This also includes each school having a definite response to the academisation question and a clear understanding of which 'lane they are in' on the motorway model.
- Consult the DBE and the Education Team – both are available to support all our small schools in any way they can.
- Senior leaders and governors in our small church schools are asked to share their FFP and update the Education Team at appropriate intervals on how this is going, including the challenges faced and the opportunities encountered.

Appendix A

From:

**'Embracing Change:
Rural and Small Schools'**
CofE March 2018

In 'Working Together' we recommended a set of headline questions that might be asked by DBEs and by individual school governing bodies in seeking to understand how any particular school serves its community. These were:

- a. How inclusive is it of the children of the community?
- b. Do all children go to this school or do some choose to go elsewhere? If so, why?
- c. What story do local demographics tell about the future for such a school?
- d. Is the village one where families with children choose (or can afford) to live?
- e. If there are not enough local children, where does the school draw its pupils from: neighbouring villages without a school, or nearby towns from which parents prefer to send their children out to the village school?
- f. And if the latter is the case, what impact does that, in turn, have on those urban schools, and what are the sociological factors in play?

'Working Together' also recommended a more rigorous approach to judging whether a school is truly 'at the heart of its community':

- a. Is the school a focal point where children grow up together and families meet, thus creating social capital?
- b. How often does the community use the school's facilities?
- c. What can or does the school offer to the community beyond the normal school day?

Self-review questions for governing bodies

1. Quality of Education Rating Comments

- a. Does the school provide a high quality sustainable standard of education that is appropriate for the 21st century?
- b. What is the whole educational experience of children attending this school?
- c. What progress do pupils make?
- d. What was the outcome of your most recent Ofsted and SIAMS inspections?
- e. Given that the Ofsted framework has changed, what is your prediction for future Ofsted and SIAMS inspections based on your SEF and three-year projected attainment?
- f. What is the condition and suitability of the school's buildings?
- g. How secure are the school's finances? – are you having to set a deficit budget within the next three years?

2. Leadership and Staffing

- a. How easy is it to recruit and retain high quality teaching staff?

- b. What is your leadership structure, how does it assist your strategy for succession planning?
 - c. How long is it likely to be before your current head leaves? What do you expect to happen then?
3. Governance
- a. How many governor vacancies have you got?
 - b. How easy is it to find capable governors who have time and skill to give to the school?
 - c. Do governors receive regular training and are they suitably equipped to fulfil all of their responsibilities?
4. Demographics
- a. Where do your pupils live?
 - b. How many of your pupils live within the village or catchment area of the school?
 - c. How many school age children live in the village or catchment area of the school but choose to attend other schools instead?
 - d. What are your projected pupil numbers for the next few years, based on an assessment of local demographics (e.g. new housing that is likely to produce new primary aged children, how many?)
5. Links with Community
- a. What is the school's place within the community – how integrated is the school in the life of the community?
 - b. How are the school's facilities used for/by the community?
 - c. How good are the links with the Church?
 - d. Is the school used for worship/ Sunday school/after school clubs/holiday clubs etc?
6. Partnership and Collaboration
- a. What collaborative arrangements are already or should be in place?
 - b. Has the governing body discussed the challenges and opportunities of such arrangements with HT and staff?
 - c. Where are the next nearest / surrounding schools and what is their position re numbers/demographics?
 - d. What are the next steps you need to take to develop effective structural partnerships with other schools?

Appendix B

From:

The NGA's '**The Priorities and Challenges Facing our Schools; School and Trust Governance in 2022**'

'We asked respondents about the measures their schools and trusts are likely to take in the next 3-5 years to ensure financial sustainability. The top five measures chosen were:

- Reviewing contracts for the supply of goods and services
- Income generation strategy
- Collaborate with other schools
- Staff restructure
- Reduce spending on infrastructure'

Appendix C

From:

'Taking the Next Step; A Guide to Forming or Joining a Multi-Academy Trust'

(NGA, ASCL and Browne Jacobson)

June 2022

Likely reasons to proceed with joining a MAT include:

- Support and guidance (from the existing MAT) in the conversion process.
- Working with schools that you have an existing relationship with and have already joined the trust.
- Opportunities to maintain and improve performance from a trust that has a history of improving schools.
- Access to established central services (such as school improvement and financial management) and opportunities.
- To benefit from expertise within a central executive team.
- Safeguarding long-term financial health where a trust has a strong track record on finance.
- Access to progression and development opportunities for staff across the trust.

Appendix D

Flourishing Future Plan (FFP)

Available as a Word document

Senior leaders and governors:

- The FFP is intended to be a record of strategic and reflective dialogue between senior leaders and governors.
- Please use this framework flexibly and in a way that is helpful to you.
- Refer to the following sections of this Strategy:
‘Hard Questions for Small Church Schools’
‘Courageous Considerations for Small Church Schools’
Appendix A
- Refer to your SIAMS SEF.
- Revisit the FFP routinely.
- Reach out.
- Update the Education Team regularly on your thinking, planning and progress.

FLOURISHING FUTURE PLAN

School:

1. Who are we and why are we here?

- Vision
- Identity
- Context

2. What’s our vision for the future of our school?

- Purpose
- Sustainability
- Flourishing

3. Where are we now?

- Strengths
- Opportunities
- Needs
- Challenges

4. What's ahead of us?

Including:

- Projected pupil numbers
- Projected financial position
- Other relevant factors

5. What partnerships are we building with other schools?

Including:

- Hubs, family partnerships, collaboration
- Federation
- Professional learning
- Quality assurance – how and with whom
- Sharing and reducing costs
- Shared leadership – arranged sustainably

6. What's our thinking concerning academisation?

- Why might we academise? Why might we not?
- Where are we on 'the motorway model':
 - Slow lane = considering it with no current intentions
 - Middle lane = carrying out due diligence, including partnership with three or more other schools and engaging with potential MATs of choice
 - Fast lane = approaching academisation

7. What will we do next?

Created / updated by:

Date created:

Date(s) revisited:

Please:

- Review this FFP regularly – at least twice per year recommended.
- Send a copy to the Diocesan Director of Education after each update.
- Ask for support where it would be helpful to you.