

Cambridgeshire County Council's Small School Strategy September 2023

As part of Cambridgeshire County Council's vision to "create a greener, fairer, more caring Cambridgeshire" one of the central ambitions is to ensure "children and young people thrive". This strategy looks to achieve this ambition in our smallest schools across Cambridgeshire.

Our definition of a small school is one with at least a 4-11 age range and a Published Admissions Number of 30 or less, or an infant or junior school with numbers on roll of less than 210. This does not include new schools where numbers are forecast to grow over time. Small schools play a significant role in Cambridgeshire's educational landscape.

Five key facts about Cambridgeshire's children, young people and our smallest schools

1. Cambridgeshire is home to 52,945 primary aged children, 7.8% of Cambridgeshire's total population.
2. There are 210 infant, junior and primary schools in Cambridgeshire. 109 are classed as small schools. 65 of these are maintained and 44 are academies.
3. Out of the maintained 65 small schools, 49 are designated as rural schools by the Department of Education and 31 have a religious designation. 24 are both classified as a rural school and have a religious designation.
4. 9,779 primary aged children are currently educated in Cambridgeshire's maintained small schools.
5. Cambridgeshire maintained small schools are currently graded 8% (18%) outstanding, 89% (70%) good, 3% (9%) requires improvement and 0% (3%) inadequate (national averages in brackets).

Our small schools can offer an outstanding education, be highly valued by parents and play a defining role in the local community. However, the very nature of small schools mean they face several unique challenges to being educationally and financially sustainable.

Challenges facing our small schools today:

1. Recruitment and retention of staff
 - Small schools can struggle to attract and retain staff. Staff are often required to fulfil several roles, for example the Headteacher often carries out caretaking duties and teachers work in mixed year group classes. There are also often less opportunities for promotion and typically staff are more experienced (therefore more expensive to pay).
2. Recruitment and retention of governors
 - It can be difficult to recruit and retain governors with the skills required to govern a small school effectively, particularly in rural areas. Often types of rural employment can adversely affect people's willingness or confidence to volunteer. Schools with a religious designation are also required to have Foundation governors, these can be difficult to recruit.
3. Falling/fluctuating pupil numbers
 - Birth rates have fallen from a peak in 2012. Therefore, some schools have falling rolls and a small school's organisation and funding is disproportionately

affected by this. In many Cambridgeshire villages only low levels of development are included in Local Plans, this coupled with increasing house prices discourages families moving into these villages and results in pupil numbers declining as the populations of these villages age.

- Small schools often organise with mixed age year groups. This can be difficult to organise, particularly in year groups Reception to Year 2 due to Infant Class Size Legislation. It can also mean the school's Published Admissions Number doesn't reflect how the school is organised. Consequently, pupils may be admitted through the appeals process requiring the school to change organisation to a less cost-effective way. There is some evidence that mixed age teaching is less popular with parents and teachers and there are challenges in designing a curriculum for mixed age classes.

4. Education quality

- It has been evidenced that the Education Inspection Framework (EIF) introduced in 2019 is more challenging for smaller primary schools. Small primaries are five times more likely to be inadequate¹. Nationally, no small school was rated outstanding in new EIF between Sept 2021 and June 2022 and 10 small schools received an 'inadequate' judgement.

5. Sustainable budget setting

- As funding is allocated on a per pupil basis small schools' budgets are particularly sensitive to small movement of pupils.
- The current national funding formula (NFF) only allows funding to be allocated via factors defined within the NFF. As a result, there is no flexibility to subsidise smaller schools.

Faced with these challenges this strategy looks to set out how Cambridgeshire County Council will work with our small schools to assess any need for change, what changes may be required and if so, how these are implemented.

Small school guidance

The Department of Education hasn't published any guidance specifically on small schools. However, in 2019 they published a research report entitled "Running rural primary schools efficiently"². South Gloucestershire Council published in June 2020 a "Small Rural Schools Strategy"³. The Church of England published "Embracing Change: Rural and Small Schools" in 2018⁴. Findings from these sources have been used to inform this strategy.

Guiding principles

Our guiding principles that will be used to inform our decision making when change is required are to:

- prioritise the needs of the children
- support the work, well-being and development of headteachers and staff

¹ [Ofsted: Small primaries 5 times more likely to be inadequate \(2022\) Tes Magazine](#)

² [Running small rural primary schools efficiently \(2019\) Department for Education](#)

³ [Small Rural Schools Strategy \(2020\) South Gloucestershire Council](#)

⁴ [Embracing Change: Rural and Small Schools \(2018\) Church of England](#)

- fully understand the local and community context by seeking the views of parents, carers and the community

If a school has a religious designation, views of the relevant Board of Education will also be sought.

Assessment of schools

To assess the vulnerability of our small schools officers have assessed each school using the following information:

- learning outcomes
- learning progress
- leadership and governance
- catchment forecasts
- pupil forecasts
- number on roll versus capacity
- local housing development
- suitability and condition
- forecast budget deficits
- forecast budget deficit timings

Schools can score a maximum of three points in each of these categories. See Appendix 1 for the scoring criteria. These scores will be updated on an annual basis. Schools have then been rated with either a red, amber or green status.

Sharing school assessments

Officers have met with clusters of similarly rated schools during the 2023 autumn term to discuss their rating and how this has been compiled. At these cluster meetings school leadership teams and governors have been given a results sheet with their rating broken down. Officers have also shared the results sheets for the relevant schools with the Diocese of Ely Education team.

Below are the specific actions officers will work through with each small school in Cambridgeshire dependent on their current rating.

Actions

Red rated schools

These are Cambridgeshire's most vulnerable small schools, likely to have education standards concerns, immediate and forecast budget deficits and declining pupil numbers.

- Senior officers and school leadership team will write a formal plan detailing the issues and next steps to take. The options in Appendix 2 will be considered when writing this plan.

Amber rated schools

These are small schools likely to have an issue in one or two of the key assessment areas.

- Senior officers, place planning officers and the school leadership team will look at the areas with issues and work together to see if any of the options in Appendix 2 would be appropriate for further exploration.

Green rated schools

These are small schools likely to have been assessed as having good educational standards, stable pupil numbers going forward, and sustainable budgets forecast.

- Schools will be asked to consider the options in Appendix 2 and whether they feel any of the options would be appropriate for further exploration.

Desired outcomes

Red rated schools

Any crisis situations will be averted, and all suitable options are explored to ensure the school is sustainable. Success would mean that within two years these schools move to an Amber or Green rating.

Amber rated schools

Amber rated schools will be able to consider the options pertinent to their school's areas of risk. Success would mean that within two years these schools move to a Green rating.

Green rated schools

Green rated schools will be able to monitor their risk factors on an annual basis and explore which options may be beneficial for their school. Success would mean staying consistently with a Green rating.

When does a school move from Red status to at risk of closure status?

The Council agrees that schools which are looking to move to a permanent two-class structure would be at risk of closure. At this point officers would detail all the options that have already been explored and consider whether it is necessary to move to the first stage in the statutory process below.

Due to the reasons set out below the Council considered a two-class structure as not educationally viable.

The challenges posed by a two-class structure are enormous in terms of:

- a) the responsibilities which would fall to just two teachers in terms of leadership (including curriculum leadership), safeguarding, training and development, health and safety, finance/budgeting and the role of SENDCo in addition to full time teaching responsibility.
- b) risk jeopardising the pupils' entitlement to a broad curriculum offer and risk poor educational outcomes particularly for pupils at KS2 as:
 - a class across all four KS2 year groups would require a bespoke curriculum for the school and potentially for the individual children
 - the teacher (who may be the headteacher) would have to have extensive knowledge of the KS1, KS2 and year 7 curriculum.
 - planning would need to take account of the sequence and progression of learning across three curriculum frameworks.
 - the developmental needs, physical and emotional maturity and level of independence of the pupils across this age range vastly differ.

School closure consultation process

If a school is deemed as being at risk of closure then officers are required to use the DfE statutory process for closing maintained schools⁵. The process consists of five stages and is outlined below. This process will need to be updated if the DfE change the statutory process.

DfE Statutory Process
<p style="text-align: center;">Stage 1: Consultation</p> <p style="text-align: center;">It is a statutory requirement to consult any parties the proposer thinks appropriate before publishing section 15 proposals to close a maintained school</p> <p style="text-align: center;">It is for the proposer to determine the nature and length of the pre-publication consultation. It is best practice for consultations to be carried out in term time to allow the maximum number of people to respond.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">Stage 2: Publication</p> <p style="text-align: center;">A statutory proposal should be published within 12 months of the initial consultation period being completed. This is so that it can be informed by up-to-date feedback.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">Stage 3: Representation</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Must be 4 weeks long</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">Stage 4: Decision</p> <p style="text-align: center;">A decision must be made within a period of 2 months of the end of the representation period</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Decision Publication</p> <p style="text-align: center;">The decision must be published within one week of making the decision.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">Stage 5: implementation</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Less than 3 years (unless there is a good reason for a longer timescale)</p>

If the proposed school is a school of religious designation then the Council must consult the relevant Board of Education. Post consultation the Council must gain agreement from the relevant Board of Education to proceed with closure.

If the proposed school has rural school designation the Council must consult the following groups during Stage 1 of the process:

- the registered parents of the registered pupils at the school
- any district council for the area in which the school is situated
- any parish council for the area in which the school is situated

The Council must then consult the following groups during Stage 3 of the process:

- pupils at the school
- the governing body at the school
- teachers and other staff at the school;
- the registered parents of registered pupils at the school
- any district council for the area in which the school is situated
- any parish council for the area in which the school is situated
- if a proposal involves, or is likely to affect, a school which has a particular religious character, the appropriate diocese board of education or relevant religious authority
- the trustees of the school
- any local authority likely to be affected by the proposal, in particular neighbouring authorities where there may be significant cross-border movement of pupils;

⁵ [Opening and closing maintained schools \(2023\) Department for Education](#)

- the governing bodies, teachers and other staff of any other school that may be affected;
- parents of any pupils at other schools who may be affected by the proposal including, where appropriate, families of pupils at feeder primary schools;
- any trade unions who represent staff at the school, and representatives of any trade union of staff at other schools who may be affected by the proposal;
- MPs whose constituencies include the school that is the subject of the proposal or whose constituents are likely to be affected by the proposal.

The consultations with these groups would be run in various forms, for example: social media updates, in person and online engagement sessions, website landing page, letters and emails to parents and parish, district and county councillor briefings.

Appendix 3 details the governance structure, officers, project and working groups required to run this process effectively.

Presumption against the closure of rural schools

The DfE also detail that decision makers are required to adopt a presumption against the closure of rural schools. This does not 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. This presumption is applicable to 49 of Cambridgeshire's maintained small schools.

Moving forward

This strategy will be reviewed on a bi-annual basis to ensure that it is increasing the educational and financial sustainability of the smallest schools across Cambridgeshire.

Officers will update Members and Schools Forum on a bi-annual basis with a progress report to Children and Young People's Committee.

As work is undertaken case studies will also be added to future versions of this strategy to allow others to access practical examples of change.

Appendix 1: Scoring matrix for small school assessment

Scoring criteria	1	2	3
Learning outcomes	Ofsted Inspection Data Summary Report Expected Standards in Reading, Writing and Maths are above or not significantly different to national.	Ofsted Inspection Data Summary Report Expected Standards in Reading, Writing and Maths show significant negative progress in only one area.	Ofsted Inspection Data Summary Report Expected Standards in Reading, Writing and Maths show significant negative progress in more than one area.
Learning progress	Ofsted Inspection Data Summary Report Progress scores are significantly above or not significantly different to national across Reading, Writing and Maths.	Ofsted Inspection Data Summary Report progress scores for Reading, Writing or Maths show significantly significant negative progress in only one area.	Ofsted Inspection Data Summary Report progress scores for Reading, Writing or Maths show significantly significant negative progress in more than one area.
Leadership and Governance	Ofsted rating Good or Outstanding for leadership and management or/and Overall Ofsted rating of Good or Outstanding And No letters of concern or final warning notices have been issued.	Overall Ofsted rating of Good or Outstanding and The school have been issued a letter of concern by the Council. In cases of most recent inspection being Section 8: Ofsted have identified that a full Section 5 inspection may downgraded the current 'Good' rating. Or Ofsted have identified leadership and management actions	Ofsted overall grade is Requires Improvement or Inadequate or/and Leadership and management has been rated Requires Improvement or Inadequate by Ofsted. Or/and The school has been issued a final warning notice by the Council.
Catchment forecast	No concerns identified. Forecasts remain stable and reflect the school's PAN / are above the school's PAN.	Some concerns identified. The school will need to continue to attract some children from out of catchment to maintain numbers on roll.	Serious concerns identified. Forecasts show a decline in pupil numbers and/or At least 50% of children coming from out of catchment OR 10 or fewer children within catchment area.
Pupil roll forecast	No concerns identified. Forecasts remain stable and reflect the school's PAN / are above the school's PAN.	Some concerns identified. Pupil numbers close to school's PAN.	Serious concerns identified. Forecasts show a decline in pupil numbers and/or consistently below PAN.
Number on roll v capacity	NOR compared to school capacity. Up to 10% surplus places.	NOR compared to school capacity. 10-15% surplus places.	NOR compared to school capacity. More than 15% surplus places.
Housing development	Significant housing development within the next 5 years.	Some housing development within the next 5 years.	No housing development planned / Minor housing development planned which is not likely to impact on pupil numbers.
Suitability & Condition	No concerns identified. Suitability and condition issues have not been raised.	Some concerns identified. Investment minimal.	Serious concerns identified. Suitability and condition issues will need to be addressed.
Budget position	All budgets positive	Any deficit budgets forecast are less than £100,000	Any deficit budgets are over £100,000
Budget timeframe	Positive budgets forecast	Whilst deficit budget is forecast, it is not until 2025 onwards.	Forecast deficit budget within next 2 years.

Appendix 2: Potential options for small schools looking to be more sustainable

Potential options for increasing a school's viability are listed below. This list is not exhaustive, and we welcome further ideas for inclusion. We understand that each small school's position is unique and that what could work well for one school could have a negative impact at another. Therefore, a tailored approach which fully considers each school's current position and local context will be taken drawing on the options below.

Academisation

Schools can convert to academy status either through joining a multi academy trust or by becoming a stand alone academy.

Amalgamation

School amalgamation is either the closure of two (or more) schools and the opening of a new school or the closure of one (or more) schools and then enlarging/changing the age range/transferring the site of an existing school to accommodate the displaced pupils.

Explore options which will increase the school's income

Review whether there is the option to lease excess space to a third-party provider.

Hard federation

A federation is defined in law as two or more maintained schools (including nursery schools) operating under the governance of a single governing body. The schools can be from different phases and have different statuses, e.g., a community and a foundation school, but non-academies cannot federate with academies. The governing bodies of each school looking to start / join a federation must agree on the decision to federate.

Local Authority led Multi Academy Trust

This is currently not an option but may be an option in the future.

PAN reduction at the small school

Consult to reduce the PAN at the small school so that the PAN can be set to reflect in-catchment demand / trend in pupil numbers in recent years and allow a more suitable class organisation.

PAN reduction at nearby schools

Assess demand across schools within a local area and reduce that of a school nearby.

PAN re-organisation

10 of our small schools have PANs which are not conducive to mixed year class structures. Schools should consider changing their PAN to 15 for two-year mixed age group classes and to 10 for three-year mixed age group classes.

Review catchment areas

An assessment of the catchment areas of the small school and nearby schools could show that adjusting catchment areas would increase pupil numbers at the small school.

School restructure

Ensure that structure and responsibility is appropriate for the size of the school. There may be posts which are no longer required, or that could be combined; either through consultation, or in time, as staff leave.

Work with district councils during their Local Plan preparation

The 0-25 place planning team and senior education officers will work with district councils to promote catchment areas where development would be beneficial to a small school's pupil numbers.

Appendix 3: Governance structure for consultation process for closing a small school

School Closure Consultation Governance Structure
*(SRO: Director of Education / SRO: Assistant Director –
Education Planning and Inclusion)*

Project Group

Frequency: Monthly

Members: Director of Education, Assistant Director – Education Planning and Inclusion, Project Manager, Place Planning Manager, Place Planning Reps, Place Planning Business Support, School Improvement Advisor, Strategic Admissions Manager, Strategic Passenger Transport Manager, Education Capital Rep, HR Rep, Schools Finance Team Rep, Communications Manager, Property Services Rep, Strategic Assets Rep, Property Compliance Rep

Members to be invited if and as needed: Reps from EPM, Reps from Diocese (if a church school)



Working Group

Frequency: Weekly

Members: Director of Education, Assistant Director – Education Planning and Inclusion, Project Manager, Place Planning Manager, Place Planning Reps, HR Rep, Schools Finance Team Rep

If it is agreed a school would close this group would cease and move to the property group to undertake decommissioning works



Property Group

Frequency: Weekly

Members: Director of Education or Assistant Director – Education Planning and Inclusion, Project Manager, Strategic Assets Rep, Facilities Manager, Client Property and Resources Manager