

People's Scrutiny Committee

Small Schools Task Group

Final Report

5 September
2016

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This report can be downloaded from:

http://www.devon.gov.uk/index/democracymunities/decision_making/cma/index_scs.htm

Preface

The Labour Government of 2000 introduced the concept of academy schools to address and drive up the standards of failing Local Education Authority (LEA) schools where pupil attainment at five A* to C GCSE grades was only 35%, against a national average of 51%. Devon saw one school convert to academy status under this regime. Since then successive governments have expanded the opportunity for all schools to convert to academy status, not just those failing Ofsted inspections. In Devon 63 primaries out of 311 and 16 secondary of 37 have converted to academy status by the Department for Education (DfE), reporting directly to the Regional Schools Commissioner (RSC).

The Government believes primary schools should be about 420 pupils and those with 210 are considered small based on an urban model, the County Council has 131 rural schools with fewer than 150 pupils. Alongside the reshaping of the LEA's role, there have been major changes in the way schools are funded. The funds now follow the pupil rather than the previous pooling arrangement managed between school and the LEA. In Devon this means the County Council can no longer provide top up funds for small schools, which has further challenged the financial viability of small schools.

Governors are the body with ultimate responsibility for the future of their school. It is vital they hold the headteacher to account to ensure all pupils are safe, receive good quality education and every child makes progress and reach their potential. In particular, all Key Stage 2 pupils are secondary school ready including pupils in receipt of the pupil premium.

Local communities also need to consider how to keep their school viable and open with a continuous annual supply of children. It is essential headteachers and governors in rural schools are able to achieve Ofsted 'Good' ratings and an attractive offering to persuade potential parents to select their school as first choice.

The County Council's role has changed and will continue to evolve to encourage and facilitate schools to work together across Devon to deliver improved standards for all pupils, share experiences and drive professional development for teachers. Devon is well placed to do this with a strong background in developing partnerships and collaboration which has been recognised nationally.

I don't want rural children being bused to large regional schools, but this report highlights an inevitability that governors will reluctantly elect to close their village school unless they prepare a rolling five year strategic plan to keep their school viable and open.

I would like to thank all those who took part in the preparation of this report for their time and commitment.

Sara Randall Johnson
Chairman, Small Schools Task Group
People's Scrutiny Committee

Introduction

The Task Group — Councillors Sara Randall Johnson (Chair), Christine Channon, Andrew Eastman, Richard Hosking, Mrs Christina Mabin (Church of England) — would like to place on record its gratitude to the witnesses who contributed to the review. In submitting its recommendations, the Group has sought to ensure that its findings are supported with evidence and information to substantiate its proposals.

At Cabinet on 9 March 2016 the People's Scrutiny Committee be asked to examine the issues faced by small schools with the intention of designing a 'toolkit' to help small schools meet the challenges facing them in the future. On 21 March 2016 People's Scrutiny resolved to undertake this review on small schools. The terms of reference for the review were:

1. To review the root causes of recent primary school closures.
2. To consider what information needs to be provided to small schools to assess and strategically plan for their future and what ongoing support, if any, can be provided.
3. To review the process followed before a closure report goes to Cabinet and the information that needs to be provided to Cabinet to ensure all relevant information is taken into consideration before making its decision.
4. To report back to the People's Scrutiny Committee on the findings of the Task Group.

Time and resources necessitate that this report provides a snapshot approach to highlight significant issues relating to small schools in Devon.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1

That the County Council:

- (i) provides a clear set of recommendations for small schools below 150 as to their way forward, which includes consideration for an executive head model through partnership;
- (ii) further strengthens its relationships with all schools including academies;
- (iii) continues lobbying government for fairer funding for Devon's pupils.

Recommendation 2

That best practice in small schools in Devon is shared and celebrated.

Recommendation 3

That support from Babcock is strengthened to ensure:

- (i) the message is conveyed that small schools in Devon do not stand alone but are in formal partnership arrangements;
- (ii) governing bodies recruit skilful governors to fill vacancies;
- (iii) governor training policies and approach are strengthened.

Overview

Devon has a total of 369 schools. A significant proportion of Devon schools are rated 'Good' or 'Outstanding' by Ofsted and educational performance overall remains above the national average. The schools vary significantly in size, from primary schools with fewer than 20 pupils to one of the largest secondary schools in the country. Schools also vary in governance with at the time of writing, approximately 70% of schools maintained by the Local Authority.

At a national level, schools with 210 pupils or less are considered small. However Devon has 32 very small schools (fewer than 50 pupils) and 221 with a rural school designation serving our extensive rural areas. The smallest school in Devon has 15 students on roll as at summer 2016.

The County Council supports the principle of local schools for local children for community and environmental reasons. There are good partnerships among many schools who work together in Local Learning Communities. There are a total of 41 federations, totalling 106 schools within a federation, 4 in management partnerships and 81 schools in multi-academy trusts and co-operative trusts.

There was only one school closure in Devon between 1982-2007, however since then there have been 8 school closures and consultations on the future of Musbury Primary School and Burrington Primary School. A change in the funding formula by Government resulted in the County Council not being able to underwrite school funds to 52 places. New guidance was drawn up in 2010 to ensure that schools were aware of the strict considerations that are undertaken in proceeding to consult on the future of a school, and following the 2005 Task Group on the Organisation of Schools in Rural Areas.

A lump sum of £65,000 is given to each primary school and £147,000 to every secondary. Schools also receive an element per pupil with the Age Weighted Pupil Unit which is £2964 for KS1 & KS2, £4021 for KS3 and £4647 for KS4. There is also a tapered amount up to £60,000 in terms of sparsity based on where the child lives rather than the location of the school up to a maximum cohort of 60 for primary schools. In secondary schools there is a lump sum amount of £100,000 for those schools with less than 600. In a federation each school is treated independently in terms of its finances. Schools also receive extra funding for SEN/pupil premium children. Schools of a similar size may therefore have very different funding streams. School funding formula is no longer about protecting institutions, but is centred around the type of child a school has and where they come from.

It takes at least £250,000 to £300,000 to maintain a small two class primary school. Anything less than this squeezes the potential to invest in development of the quality of teaching and thereby learning.

Summary

Both the County Council and small schools face huge challenges in this unprecedented time in terms of structural and financial change. It is not just about protecting rural schools viability, but also ensuring small schools can achieve good educational outcomes. Some small schools are in a very difficult financial position; yet it is always about achieving the best educational outcomes for all children and young people in their care. Otherwise, should schools be allowed to 'wither on the vine'?

For schools to offer good, sustainable education outcomes, it is crucial that they collaborate to give themselves sufficient resilience and provide pupils with the depth of learning opportunity, to mitigate risk of falling demographics, parental popularity, changes to budget, leadership and issues relating to staff recruitment and retention. It is about building communities of learners, not just learners in individual schools.

The quality of a school is not in its buildings but leadership both from the headteacher and its governors. Some small schools have struggled to recruit quality leaders and teachers, unless in formal partnership arrangements with other schools. The challenge of partnerships is finding the right partners to work together, as well as these partnerships needing to be of a certain size for them to be viable. The County Council has historically taken a proactive stance encouraging schools to federate and needs to continue this work, utilising expertise from successful federations to try to support other schools. It is particularly pertinent following some uncertainty with the *Educational Excellence Everywhere* White Paper, where some schools may feel that they are still able to stand alone and therefore is less of an imperative to see strong partnerships.

There is a risk to the quality of pedagogy with over 250 maintained schools in Devon with the possibility that the schools improvement function may move away from the County Council and into schools. However, the Local Authority retains a statutory responsibility for standards in schools and whilst there are proposals to change this, it is not clear when this will happen and the DfE recognises that schools do not yet have the capacity to improve others. The County Council, having spoken to its maintained schools, will retain a strong school improvement function as many schools wish to stay within the Local Authority. There is however still a significant risk with a change to the funding flow. The County Council will though continue its role of championing children and challenge schools no matter their governance.

Key Issues

School Partnerships

In terms of the sustainability of schools in the next stage of the educational landscape, partnership working is the key. Devon has a strong record on supporting schools to form strong partnerships, in particular through the federation process and has been nationally recognised for its innovative and collaborative approach in this field.

Schools need to continue to form effective partnerships and collaborations to deliver excellent outcomes for the County's very small schools, for them to survive and be sustainable into the future. Pedagogically it makes sense for closer working between schools, as it also does as a business model as a vehicle for efficiencies. Federations offer more opportunities for teaching staff in terms of leadership and so forth which is a huge attraction recruiting and retaining staff. Small schools are no longer educationally or financially viable as stand-alone schools with one headteacher. There are not only financial benefits for schools in partnership working but also in sharing expertise.

Smaller schools in a federation can still benefit from the close family ethos of being a small school but have all the support that the partnership can bring but does need a step change in delivery. The federation is able to bring a breadth of resource, opportunity and education that a standalone small school would not normally be able to access. For pupils in small schools there are often fewer opportunities for extra-curricular activities.

Small schools deficit budgets can be turned around quickly through intervention at the right time, with the right partnership, such as at Brixton and Heathfield through being part of successful federations. It should be an altruistic model where strong federations and MATs can bring poorer performing schools into their partnership to help them to improve and attract pupils and therefore funding. The Task Group spoke to headteachers who would welcome any school that wants to come into their partnership. However the Task Group are aware of schools that have been refused admission to federations as they were considered to add too great a burden to the existing collaboration.

There is a huge amount of logic in schools working in partnerships but there remain some communities that are resistant to this change. There are also a number of smaller schools who do not want to enter a partnership with bigger schools for fear of losing their identity, but actually small rural schools can offer a lot to a partnership. There is an issue with the CEO or Executive Headteacher role in a MAT and who takes that responsibility, as well as a reluctance about losing headships.

In terms of the geographical distance between schools in a federation and MAT, while the RSC does not currently advocate a preferred distance, the further apart the less they are able to benefit from joint working and get the outcomes for children that good partnerships can help to deliver. There also needs to be a certain pupil numbers within a MAT and federation in order to realise economies of scale. Schools within a partnership can jointly commission services or employ staff for example a business manager or speech and language therapist across the partnership which would be an impossibility for many small schools on their own. Some of the smallest school partnerships are also vulnerable and do need to expand, but conversely there is a limit to the number of schools that make a partnership effective.

There is a risk where MAT's and federations pick and choose schools, while the less successful or those with specific governance arrangements may be left on their own. Where a school has had a poor Ofsted, other schools in a federation may have concerns about their joining and this can lead to difficulties. The RSC or the Local Authority have an important role here. The number of schools in a partnership arrangement provides diversity and the pupil numbers give the necessary volume. There should however be a diversity of school providers in an area. Where better outcomes can be achieved for children if a school moves to become a MAT or federation, then this brokering should happen.

School Closures

Schools do not tend to be closed purely on demographics but many smaller schools have 'survived' on parental preference. If a school is causing concern, its viability is examined which will focus on pupil numbers, leadership, budget and Individual School Review. A common factor with all school closures is their falling roll, and the schools tend to be in areas where there are low numbers of local children. There is a size, around 25 pupils or less, where a school have made the decision to close due to financial constraints and not being able to deliver good educational outcomes for the children involved. In Sutcombe 16 pupils left in a short period of time out of 42 (circa 40%). Usually parents choosing to remove their children from a school relates to concerns about the leadership and performance. A lack of parental confidence in a school impacts inevitably on student numbers which impacts on the educational offer, which impacts on parental preference. It is a vicious circle. As highlighted previously, many schools are reliant on parental preference and this can be eroded either by the school itself by non performance or by improved performance by neighbouring schools.

School Place Planning

Predicted population growth is far from straight forward, coupled with new developments being delayed or houses not selling at the expected rate. Decisions on school planning in urban areas will impact on the rural areas and planning of places endeavours to balance the need to provide locally for children versus falling demographics elsewhere. Devon has an over capacity of school places to pupils (approx. 12%), often though not in the areas where they are most needed. In many urban areas, place planning relies on some parental choice to smaller schools. In long term place planning, officers work on the assumption that schools will be 'Good' or 'Outstanding' and that local children will want to go to their local school. The County Council knows the number of children in each catchment area and estimates how many will choose any given school. Parental preference guides the system; with parents having the freedom to choose schools where there is capacity and is the key factor in school population size. In a small school, the sudden move of a family with 3 or 4 children can destabilise numbers, creating budgetary problems and start a downward spiral of loss of pupils.

School Finance

Finance is a major issue for small schools as the wage bill increases and central funding does not and their funds are in the main reliant on pupil numbers. Recent changes with the funding formula reduce the ability of the County Council to protect small rural schools in terms of funding. A 12% reduction in real terms schools' funding is forecast between now and 2020. Schools do not know what their exact budgets are from one year to the next, which makes it extremely difficult in terms of long term financial planning. Federated schools can pool their budgets which allows them to pump prime those schools in need. Devon has been at the forefront of pressing central government to ensure its schools receive fair and sufficient funding, this work must continue as we continue to move towards a new national funding formula.

Case Study: Holsworthy Federation

The Holsworthy Federation started too big with 6 primary schools. It was difficult having 7 schools and 4 headteachers. For a MAT to work the structure as advocated by the RSC of having 1 CEO is the ideal. Lessons have been learnt the hard way, and Holsworthy College is now less able to support other schools. The Holsworthy Federation has started to save some money but it has taken 3 years to restructure to this position. Holsworthy College needs a bigger partner within the Federation in order to move into a MAT.

School Governors

School Governors are one of the largest volunteer forces in the country and have an important part to play in raising school standards. The role of the governing board is absolutely key to the effectiveness of a school and carries significant responsibility for what is a voluntary role, often by people who have full time careers.

The most successful schools have governors and headteachers working together, demonstrating effective leadership and management. Governors are key to driving school performance, and ensuring high quality teaching and leadership. Good governors can recognise where something is wrong, think strategically, and have the skill, strength and supportive challenge to the headteacher to help to remedy the situation. Schools can have a dynamic headteacher but if the governing body is not forward thinking the headteacher can be blocked.

The essential role of a governor is to ensure the best possible outcomes for children and in order to do so how they can receive the best possible education. Governors must not allow a school to fail its children through a lack of leadership. Sadly, there are governors in Devon who may not be clear about their role on governance and leadership. Babcock undertakes governance reviews as part of their school improvement package and work to challenge governing bodies and support them. The main issue that Babcock has in term of governors is about governing bodies performance monitoring the headteacher and holding them to account.

It is vital to build up the governors skills set and the quality of those involved to avoid their being emotional and subjective. Governors need ongoing training to understand the threats and weaknesses as the school system changes. It would appear that there may be issues in the County with some governors' level of engagement. In March 2016 only 40 governors from the whole of Devon attended the Bi-Annual Governors Conference.

Governors also need to have performance data on a school presented independently of the headteacher. In addition, governors should be considering a range of data including from Public Health on births and future pupil numbers, understand their school roll including looking at the migration from rural areas, to understand where pupils are going and why pupils are not attending their local school. Most importantly, governors need to speak to children within a school to understand their experience. This type of information should be shared routinely by the County Council with governing bodies.

Exeter Diocese works alongside the County Council trying to support governors to fulfil their important role. Exeter Diocese appoint foundation governors and have the authority to remove governors if they are not acting appropriately. While the Diocese has these powers to remove school governors, phase associations such as Devon Association of Governors (DAG) do not. The Diocese will endeavour to prevent unsuitable school governors blocking the way of more appropriate candidates and will act on intelligence from Babcock if a governor has been identified as not being as strategic as they might. The door needs to be open to the most skilful prospective governors. Babcock have only once had to go to the Secretary of State to have a governing body removed. There may also be 'CV governors' who may not be undertaking the role with the best intentions and governing bodies must be proactive in removing governors who are not committed to the very best intentions for the children, staff and community.

Headteachers

What makes a difference in schools is the quality of the leadership and the teaching and learning. It is however a challenge attracting quality headteachers to small schools. There are issues nationally in terms of headteacher recruitment and succession planning not being as developed as it might be (33% of headteachers will retire in the next 5 years) and these problems are exacerbated in rural areas with Torridge and North Devon being a particularly challenging area in terms of headteacher recruitment.

There has been an issue with headteachers leaving and governors appointing a replacement before considering the school's long term future. Succession planning and developing a long term vision of the future for the school is a primary role of the governors. When a headteacher leaves their post it is essential that governors think beyond the traditional model, in particular in smaller schools, and explore the options for shared leadership with another or group of schools before appointing a replacement. Arguably, schools need to be planning for the potential loss of their headteacher. Governors need to access appropriate training to support and challenge headteachers which is part of the offer from Babcock. The Church of England will undertake an assessment of a headteacher's capacity for leadership if the governors have concerns.

Teachers may consider the movement into a partnership arrangement could limit their opportunities to secure leadership roles in the future. However, partnerships of schools provide opportunities for teachers and leaders to move around and gain the necessary experience to further their careers which supports not only recruitment but retention as highlighted below. Teaching Schools are supposed to talent spot and nurture future leaders but this appears to be patchy across Devon.

Teacher Recruitment & Retention

Devon has both coastal and rural challenges in the County in terms of leadership and recruitment. Recruiting to small primary schools in isolated areas has become difficult for several reasons. Staff in small schools typically have a lot of responsibility, teach across year groups and have less opportunity for professional development. Often the uncertainty over the viability of the school discourages applications; there may be a dislike of working in isolation, with little opportunity to get out of school, because of pressure on supply budgets. Housing is often prohibitively expensive in these areas and the attraction of urban areas means applicants prefer to take jobs in more populated areas.

It is difficult for small schools to sustain improvement with a high turnover of staff. This can have a serious impact where for instance a member of the school's senior leadership team is lost, it can leave a significant gap, which can be exacerbated by sickness or maternity leave and the school can find itself in a difficult position. In larger schools there are often staff waiting in the wings to fill these vacancies. It also makes continuing professional development (CPD) difficult as the school needs to pay for supply teachers. Schools are not required to promote CPD and in many cases there are limited opportunities in small schools. Schools then have this cycle of low funding, small number of staff and a lack of training. MATs and federations can provide a more robust structure given the vulnerability of small schools in terms of their leadership and staffing. The formal partnership model enables the potential for leadership development, putting them into positions of greater responsibility and supporting them appropriately with CPD. MATs and federations can provide all the opportunities so staff enjoy their role and are not lost to other schools.

Case Study: Great Torrington School

Great Torrington School deploy an innovative model of CPD funded at about 2% of their overall school budget currently. It was not easy to create this culture of CPD, but is vital in term of teachers' professionalism. Great Torrington School link in with local primary schools to allow their children to do sport and drama, while their school staff can undertake CPD. It is not a one way relationship, as Great Torrington School is also able to learn from primary schools. CPD also is provided and encouraged for governors as well as staff. It creates an important positive message for young people to see that learning does not stop.

Community Role of Rural Schools

Schools broad community role should be celebrated, as rural schools have a significant benefit in terms of bringing communities together. Communities need schools but schools need to be viable and sustainable. Data shows that the larger a school is, the more able they are to sustain themselves. Schools in local communities are affected adversely if they are not 'Good' or 'Outstanding'. Devon has a Victorian distribution of small schools based on agricultural employment which has ceased to exist and now too often they are not in an ideal location, being situated outside of the population centre, expensive to maintain and unable to expand. In many rural areas there is a falling school age population. The attractive nature of Devon's landscape pushes house prices up and makes it difficult for young families to afford to live in the villages. In many villages the school is the last community hub with the closure of post offices, pubs etc. It is essential local communities recognise that the importance of providing housing for local young families will help make their village sustainable and that they need to work with the County Council and district authorities to deliver affordable homes. It is not a coincidence that schools which have closed have not seen sustained housing development. Good transport links and access to employment are other key challenges.

School Performance

The County Council is aspirational for all children in Devon including vulnerable groups. *Excellence for All – Devon's Strategy for School Effectiveness* aims to help to get all schools up to 'Good' or 'Outstanding'. 92% of primaries in Devon are currently 'Good' or better which makes the County Council the second highest performing shire authority with the national average 86%.

Governors need to be empowered to triangulate performance data to challenge headteachers effectively. A school's last Ofsted is not necessarily a good measure of their current performance, nor whether they are meeting the statutory requirements around leadership, safeguarding etc. In making decisions on schools future, it is apparent that governors need to understand whether the schools' Ofsted assessment reflects the current position. If there are less than 10 pupils in a year group national outcomes are not reported in league tables. It is often something of a misnomer that it is good educationally where there are such small year groups.

Case Study: Primary Academies Trust

The Primary Academies Trust (PAT) will shortly be joining up with a secondary school. The Trust is a deliberate mix of large and small, church and non-church primary schools. The PAT does not brand the schools within the MAT and draw to the centre in that way. The schools are joined up in terms of good practice, but otherwise the schools maintain their autonomy. Where a school is in special measures then systems of delivery will be put in place. The structure removes duplication of back office support for HR and finance.

There is a huge difference to joining a small school with a handful of teachers, where their training and support to NQTs is likely to be limited. The PAT is able to offer staff all sorts of opportunities. The PAT wishes to employ people who are not just great teachers, but future leaders, who by joining the PAT do not have to move from one school to the next in terms of finding opportunities for career development. Teachers can instead move between schools in the PAT. This creates stability within the structure and allows staff to garner experience in middle/senior leadership as well as subject development.

Things are unlikely to go too far wrong with the robust structure that is in place. Where a school's performance dips, the PAT is able to move quickly to improve the school. This rapid approach to school improvement is one of the strengths of this robust model.

Headteachers, governors and parents alike should question the educational quality provided by having classes of mixed key stages in very small schools. There are also issues about combining the leadership of a school and a teaching role which is often required in smaller schools where budgets are tight. Other challenges include managing absence and staff performance as well as funding and keeping up to date with IT and technology.

The Government has previously highlighted its intention to challenge schools that are deemed to be coasting however the definition has yet to be confirmed. The intention is these schools will in future be issued with warning notices and work will be undertaken with the school in collaboration with the RSC. If the degree of concern is of sufficient seriousness the school could be moved into forced academisation. Before it gets to this point the RSC carefully examines performance data as well as gathering local intelligence about the school. Small schools in particular are vulnerable to their next Ofsted judgement. There is pressure on all schools, but headteacher's jobs are on the line if their data dips and they receive a poor Ofsted. Devon proactively monitors and supports its schools which have resulted in a continued increase in schools being judged 'Good' or 'Outstanding'.

Regional Schools Commissioner

The South West Office of the Regional Schools Commissioner (RSC) was set up in September 2014 covering 16 LAs and is based in Bristol. The work of the RSC includes intervention, performance and oversight; supporting schools to become academies; increasingly the setting up of MATs and the finding of sponsors. The RSC also works with MATs helping schools at threat to try to encourage them to take them on board. The RSC does a lot of work supporting free schools. There are now 18 free schools open in the RSC's South West region. Free schools were previously opening as stand-alone schools but now the model is that they are part of a MAT from the onset. The RSC has an advisory board of headteachers, Diocese representatives etc with great experience in terms of supporting schools setting up federations.

The RSC wants to protect small schools, but has to make sure they provide an outstanding offer, with a broad and balanced curriculum with high standards of teaching. The Government announcement which retracted on the intention to force the academisation of schools also included reference to the dedicated support from DfE experts to help primary schools through the process of conversion and a £10 million fund for small schools to secure expert support and advice.

Academisation

The County Council was reported to be 'swimming against the tide' in terms of its approach to academisation and it should be looking at a consistent message on MATs alongside the Exeter Diocese. Schools reported that since their conversion to an academy they had had little or no contact with the County Council despite excellent exam results, which represents a significant loss, as academisation should not cease schools relationship with the County Council. Devon offers support for academies through their school improvement service and has included all academies in the Excellence for All Programme and hub meetings.

There should be a mixed economy, with the County Council having a positive relationship with both maintained schools and academies. Exeter Diocese continues work with their church schools regardless of academisation, and the County Council should not be dismissing schools expertise because of their academy status. The Cabinet Member for Children, Schools and Skills advised that while not opposed to academisation, he is not in favour of mass academisation. Schools have been proactive in contacting Devon as they wish to remain maintained and did not wish to be forced in academisation and as such Devon will continue to deliver its statutory responsibilities in particular in regards to school improvement.

Schools need to work collaboratively to enable those poorer performing institutions can learn from best practice. A view was presented that the County Council are not utilising the

expertise that is available from successful MATs, and this needs to be reviewed as to how it can most effectively be encouraged. An essential part of the role the LA should be helping schools move into partnerships. The County Council has a wealth of local knowledge and could be an effective local broker alongside the RSC. It should be recognised however that Babcock, the County Council and the Teaching Schools all work together as part of the Devon Schools Alliance to support school improvement.

The [statement on 6 May 2016](#) by Nicky Morgan MP suggested that there would be no decision about small academies without LA and DfE consultation. The Head of Education and Learning has advised schools not to rush into decisions as a result of the *Educational Excellence Everywhere* White Paper but that schools similarly cannot sit back and do nothing as brave decisions do need to be made.

Exeter Diocese

Exeter Diocese covers the whole of Devon, and 131 schools, mostly primaries. Nationally 57% of Church of England schools are based in rural situations of less than 210. 32% of all schools are below 210 and 65% of those schools nationally are Church of England. A close partnership with the Diocese and ruralities is essential in securing provision for communities. The Diocesan Board of Education have been involved in consultation with the DfE and the RCS about schools being put into a MAT and developing a memorandum of understanding. There needs to be agreed collective criteria between the County Council and the Exeter Diocese to help to jointly sustain small schools.

Babcock

Babcock is commissioned by the County Council to deliver school improvement on its behalf. Most, if not all, primary schools in Devon buy into Babcock's support services for school improvement. Babcock undertakes work on effective teaching and training, as well as on leadership. As a way of trying to drive up standards Babcock undertake day long school inspections where they feedback on the same day, and invite all governors to take part. Babcock will provide support to schools wherever needed, particularly in terms of governor services. If gaps in performance are too great Babcock can also go into academies to work with them to raise standards. An issue may be that whilst Babcock or the teaching school may advise a school that it needs to improve, unless the school is seriously underperforming they do not always have the mechanisms to insist the improvement actions take place, but with 92% of Devon schools 'Good' or 'Outstanding' Babcock do have a strong track record of effective work on school improvement with capacity to support commissioned and traded work across the region and beyond.

Small Secondary Schools

Secondary schools in most areas have experienced significant falling demographics. There is very little cushion now within secondary budgets with particular pressures at KS5 and Sixth Forms are being downsized as a consequence. There are a number of secondary schools that are living off contingencies and deficits of £1,000,000 - £2,000,000.

Case Study: United Schools Federation

The 'United Schools Federation' (USF) is formed of five primary schools, St Michael's C of E Nursery and Primary School in Kingsteignton, St. Catherine's C of E Nursery and Primary School in Heathfield, St Mary's C of E Primary School in Brixton, Marlton Primary School, and Ipplepen Primary School. The large leadership team of the USF can address issues in quite a straightforward way when starting to work with a school, where a single headteacher might struggle. Good practice and expertise is shared across the partnership. When working with a new school, it is important that teachers are challenged and that they are encouraged to reflect on their practice.

The USF were asked to work with a school by the County Council. There issues to overcome including the school being some distance from the rest of the partnership in. The school also had a budget deficit of £100,000. The USF put in a new Head of School and then utilised the experience of the USF senior leadership team. FIPs provided some funding when they could see that there was the potential there to turn this school around, otherwise FIPs do not give money to failing schools. The school had got very isolated and had a poor reputation with parents. The USF set about improving the quality of teaching and learning at the school. The process was helped by the governing body of the school resigning as they would have been a hindrance to the change necessary, as the governors were not making the right decisions for the school. The school had been haemorrhaging pupils and had gone down to 33 pupils at the lowest point. The USF is willing to work with these vulnerable schools, as a development opportunity. All the USF schools were 'Requires Improvement' and now have an 'Outstanding' rating within 2 years.

Councillors

Sara Randall Johnson (Chair)
Christine Channon
Andrew Eastman
Richard Hosking
Mrs Christina Mabin (Church of England)

Copies of this report may be obtained from the Democratic Services & Scrutiny Secretariat at County Hall, Topsham Road, Exeter, Devon, EX2 4QD or by ringing 01392 382232. It will be available also on the County Council's website at:

http://www.devon.gov.uk/index/councildemocracy/decision_making/scrutiny/taskgroups.htm

If you have any questions or wish to talk to anyone about this report then please contact:

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Appendix 1 - School Closures Case Studies

Sparkwell Primary School (Voluntary Aided) (Ivybridge Local Learning Community)

Closed end of Summer Term 2009. Governing Body took the decision to consult on the future of the school.

- 19 pupils on roll and falling (net capacity 56)
- Unable to attract suitably qualified and experienced staff, including Head
- Unable to retain a full governing body
- Difficulty in providing continuity and consistency in teaching and learning
- Budget shortfall
- Formal warning notice from LA – serious breakdown in governance; limited progress made on Action Plan; performance of pupils unacceptable; budget shortfall; falling school roll.

Considered:

- Federation – but Schools approached did not have capacity to support
- Collaboration with Broadclyst Primary School, which was not legally compliant
- Advertise for substantive head.

Following successful application to the DfE, Sparkwell Free School (co-ed 4-16 for 105 pupils) opened in September 2013. Admissions are undertaken by Plymouth City Council and majority of pupils from that area. Current numbers on roll 51 and the school has moved into a new building.

Schools within Holsworthy Local Learning Community (Broadwoodwidge, West and East Putford, Pyworthy and Sutcombe)

Area Review undertaken: 21 October 2010 – Issues raised – significant fall in pupil numbers and surplus places high and will continue to remain so.

Following closure of Broadwoodwidge Primary School in 2011 and West and East Putford Primary School in 2013 a follow up review was requested, which the Local Learning Community (LLC) declined. A document on the strategic Review of School Places was sent to the LLC in January 2014 raising concerns on the impact of the new funding formula and the loss of the small school funding protection together with falling demographics. The LLC responded that they had discussed the document but no further action despite reminders on follow up meeting. Due to vulnerable budgets at a number of schools within the LLC and concern on falling demographics, a meeting of all the schools was arranged for 5 October 2015 led by Head of Education and Learning.

Broadwoodwidge Primary School

Closed end of Summer Term 2011. Governing Body took the decision to consult on the future of the School.

- 16 pupils on roll and falling – dropped to 9 (net capacity 52)
- Insufficient pupils within the community/future sustainability
- Cost of educating pupils three times higher than Devon average
- Difficulty in providing continuity and consistency in teaching and learning
- Budget shortfall

Considered:

- Federation – but would not address underlying issue of low pupil numbers
- Equality considerations
- Impact on community – no objections or responses received to consultation and few people attended consultation event
- Impact on transport – four schools within 5 mile radius

West and East Putford Primary School

Closed at the end of Summer Term 2013. DCC and Federation Governing Body (part of Holsworthy Federation) took the decision to consult on the future of the School.

- 8 pupils on roll and falling (net capacity 52)
- Insufficient pupils within the community/future sustainability
- Effect of funding formula and small school funding protection
- Difficulty in providing continuity and consistency in teaching and learning
- Leadership (shared Head leaving)
- Budget shortfall

Considered:

- Split of KS1 and KS2 with Sutcombe Primary School – not considered viable
- Equality considerations
- Impact on community – no objections to consultation and very few people attended consultation event
- Impact on transport – area split between Bradworthy and Sutcombe – a number of pupils in this area (Milton Damerel) already attending Bradworthy.

Pyworthy Church of England Primary School

Closed at the end of the Summer Term 2015. Federation Governing Body (Holsworthy Federation) took the decision to consult on the future of the School.

- 10 pupils on roll and falling (net capacity 42)
- Ofsted category – (Special Measures) and need for Academy sponsor
- Insufficient pupils within the community/future sustainability
- Difficulty in providing continuity and consistency in teaching and learning

- Budget shortfall/unable to set balance budget

Considered:

- Approach received from St. Christopher's Academy Trust but related to all schools within Holsworthy Federation and Federation Governing Body not willing to consider this option.
- Equality considerations - Nearest C of E school – Bridgerule 2.3 miles away
- Impact on community – loss of school and effect on village but serious concern on impact on teaching and learning with so few pupils. Consultation event well attended.
- Impact on transport – 7 pupils affected

Sutcombe Primary School

To close at the end of the Summer Term 2016. Governing Body took the decision to consult on the future of the school.

- 21 pupils on roll and falling (net capacity 56)
- Unable to appoint Leadership
- Safeguarding issues with no leadership
- future financial sustainability - budget shortfall/unable to set balanced budget
- Ofsted category with no leadership

Considered:

- Partnerships – but unable to secure including federation, joining multi-academy trust, federation or academies in neighbouring authority.
- Equality considerations
- Impact on community – 37 objections received and consultation event well attended
- Impact on transport – already a route from Milton Damerel

Chawleigh Primary School (Chulmleigh Local Learning Community)

This was the first school to close in Devon for 25 years and closed in August 2007, following extensive consultation. The proposal was considered by the then School Organisation Committee which gave the School 6 months to produce a viability plan. The position was then further considered by SOC but a unanimous decision could not be reached and the matter referred to the Schools Adjudicator [School Organisation Committees were abolished in May 2007]. The School's Adjudicator approved the proposal following a series of meeting at the School in April 2007. The Governing Body took the decision to consult on the future of the School.

- 23 pupils on roll and falling
- Drop in parental confidence in School (53% of in-area pupils in other schools)
- Departure of Head Teacher
- Pre-school closed due to lack of children
- Financial and educational viability
- £14k per pupil, more than 4 times DCC average
- £70k subsidy, £20k more than additional transport costs

Considered:

- Viability plan
- Partnership/federation arrangements
- Impact on community – objectors produced representations, all of which referred to Schools Adjudicator
- Impact on transport – At closure 10 pupils affected

Clovelly Primary School (Bideford Local Learning Community)

Closed at the end of the Summer Term 2011. Local Authority and Governing Body took the decision to consult on the future of the School.

- 12 pupils on roll and falling (net capacity 45)
- Surplus places at the School approaching 76%
- Ofsted report - Satisfactory
- Financial and educational viability
- Cost per pupil 3 times Devon average
- £82k subsidy top-up funding
- Effect of funding formula and small school funding protection
- Lack of progress on federation/partnerships

Considered:

- Federation/partnership but not secured.
- Impact on community – consultation 4 responses received, two in support of closure and two objections, but not materially significant
- Impact on transport – 7 pupils affected and transferred to Woolsery (2.5 miles away)

The DfE approved the Free School application from Route 39. The School opened in September 2013 in temporary accommodation at the former Clovelly Primary School and is proposing to move to permanent accommodation shortly, despite a number of delays and objections regarding planning.

Appendix 2 - Contributors / Representations to the Review

Witnesses to the review (in the order that they appeared before the Task Group / members)

| Witness | Position | Organisation |
|--------------------------|---|--|
| Simon Niles | Children's Services Strategic Manager | Devon County Council |
| Eileen Barnes-Vachell | School Improvement Consultant | Integrated Services, Support Services, Babcock International Group |
| John Searson | Director of Education, Diocese of Exeter | Devon County Council |
| Sue Clarke | Head of Education & Learning | Devon County Council |
| Debbie Clapshaw | Lead Professional – Governor Support Team – Babcock LDP | Devon County Council |
| Adrian Fox | Senior Accountant (Schools) | Devon County Council |
| Martin Harding | Head | United Schools Federation |
| Alison Calvert | Head of Office | Regional Schools Commissioner for the South West |
| Jamie Stone | Headteacher | Denbury Primary School / Chair of DAPH |
| David Fitzsimmons | Principal | Holsworthy College / DASH |
| Dave Black | Head of Planning, Transportation & Environment | Devon County Council |
| Amanda Blewett | Area Officer | Devon Association of Governors |
| Tony Callcut | Executive Headteacher | Link Multi Academy Trust |
| Jennie Stephens | Strategic Director People | Devon County Council |
| Tracey Amos | Headteacher | Great Torrington School |
| Gary Chown | Chief Executive Officer | Primary Academies Trust |
| Councillor James McInnes | Cabinet Member for Children, Schools and Skills | Devon County Council |

Appendix 3 - Bibliography

Championing All Our Children – A strategic vision for vulnerable children and young people in Devon

<http://www.devon.gov.uk/championing-all-our-children-2014.pdf>

Cracking the code: how schools can improve social mobility

[https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/360753/Cracking the code Final.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/360753/Cracking_the_code_Final.pdf)

Ofsted on the Pupil premium

<http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/pupil-premium>

Education Endowment Foundation – Toolkit.

<http://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/toolkit/>

Education Matters in Care

http://www.thewhocarestrust.org.uk/data/files/Education_Matters_in_Care_September_2012.pdf

Improving the attainment of looked after children in primary schools. Guidance for Schools, DCF 2009

https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/190244/01047-2009.pdf

Leaders' Briefing - Making the right choices for Children in Care

<https://www.rip.org.uk/resources/publications/leaders-briefings/leaders-briefing--making-the-right-choices-for-children-in-care>

Working Together – The Future of Rural Church of England Schools

<https://www.churchofengland.org/media/2088313/future%20of%20rural%20schools%20report.pdf>