

Worcestershire County Council

Directorate of Children, Families and Communities

Policy on instigated a review on Small Schools in Worcestershire 2018

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Background

The education environment is changing quickly, for example as more schools become academies and funding mechanisms change. The latter change in particular could make small schools particularly vulnerable. This strategy identifies the small schools in Worcestershire, sets out the context and reasons for their potential vulnerability, and within a policy context offers a strategic direction for the County Council.

Context

In 2003 a review was undertaken by Worcestershire County Council to determine a local definition for a small school. The output was a series of thresholds or triggers per phase for further investigation. This was within an overall policy position related to quality of educational provision and pupil attainment determined by the school's ability to deliver the curriculum with an appropriate number of suitably qualified staff.

Each year in the autumn term the pupil data collection, or census, is scrutinised to identify any school below or near the thresholds to then undertake a more detailed examination of the school.

Thresholds for a small School Review

First and Primary Schools

- Any school which is unable to employ a minimum of 3 teachers not necessarily on a full time basis.
- A First school with fewer than 50 pupils.
- A Primary school with fewer than 70 pupils. (For both b) and c) the NOR is taken from the first School Census in the academic year.)
- A school whose numbers are expected to fall below that level within the following five years.

For information and tracking the following are also included;

- First School with fewer than 80 pupils
- Primary Schools with fewer than 100 pupils

Middle Schools

- Less than 2 forms of entry in any year group.

High Schools

- Less than 3 forms of entry in any year group.

High Schools with a Sixth Form

- i) Where a High school has less than 160 pupils in the sixth form
- ii) Middle Phase

School Organisation

The Area Reviews undertaken from 1997 onwards resulted in the removal of some small schools. The areas with continuing small first and primary schools were scheduled for 'Area Reviews' after the Wyre Forest review but these were postponed and then cancelled. Two of the small Middle schools are in the Pershore area.

Demographics.

Pupil numbers in rural areas are not increasing and in many areas are falling. Housing plans being published by the District Councils focus new housing in the urban or larger market towns. This is to ensure access the necessary infrastructure and therefore the more remote rural areas will see little benefit from new housing.

Finances

The move to a national funding formula has removed the protection for the small schools previously provided in the Worcestershire local formula. Some reserves built up by these schools may support them for a few years but without increased numbers or more efficiency in terms of expenditure this will not last.

However as part of changes to the 2015-16 local schools formula the primary sector lump sum has been increased from the original sum of £42,000 to £111,000 together with there now being a tapered sparsity factor. These changes are a much bigger proportion of the overall budget in small schools and will in particular support their fixed costs more readily compared to larger schools.

Policy Position

a) National

More centralised control over revenue and capital resources removing the ability for local protection. Encouragement for schools to become academies and opportunities for free schools removing many of the constraints operating locally to manage supply or organisation of school places.

b) Local

Worcestershire supports the national agenda and has always had a very strong local focus in terms of determining solutions. There has been a policy on federations and collaborations since 2006 which has had limited take up but has provided to be successful when pursued. The council is supportive of schools converting to academy status, and it is probable that there will be greater encouragement in the future. The DfE believes that Multi-Academy Trusts (MATs) are the way forward, especially for primary schools. This is now their preferred method for schools converting to academy status, though they will consider other options such as Umbrella Trust or stand-alone.

In respect of sponsored academies, the council's policy remains that each school below floor standards and / or in an Ofsted category will be considered on an individual basis.

Strategy

Worcestershire has a responsibility to secure sufficient school places and for the education provision to be of a good standard for the pupils. To meet that good standard is a balance of financial security, good leadership and management, well qualified and competent staff.

To meet these statutory duties in the context of small schools the recommended strategy is to:

- a) Be more proactive in approaching schools individually or collectively in the areas of the county with high numbers of small schools to promote more collaborative working either as federations within the maintained sector or Multi Academy Trusts in the academy sector. Ideally, schools collaborating should, where possible, be in the same pyramid or area and the same phase of education.
 - b) Encourage collaboration around the pyramid structure because:
 - i) It links small schools with bigger schools for greater financial security;
 - ii) Is in line with current DfE thinking about local support networks;
 - iii) Encourages joint planning within a pyramid for pupil progression; and
 - iv) Allows in the longer term the ability to rationalise the phasing between the two and three tier structures if this is the preferred local model.
 - c) Present the rationale for this as:
 - i) The ability to present good leaders with opportunities for wider influence and to facilitate the growing of new leaders who can be mentored and encouraged;
 - ii) Providing strength in numbers to share staff and expertise;
 - iii) Generating the potential for economies of scale in purchasing especially with the potential for the loss of County support services and the need to purchase services from another provider. The bargaining power is easier and allows a stronger voice in the negotiations.
 - d) Use Worcestershire existing models and other national models to facilitate discussions at a local school, or area level.
 - e) Work with the Worcester Diocesan Board of Education to resolve the issue of VA church and non-church schools being able to collaborate or join a similar Trust.
1. As part of the local discussions raise the potential need to close some schools because long term viability is uncertain due to low pupil numbers. The closure of one or two schools could secure the longer term viability of the other schools in the area.