Strategy for Small Schools

Current Position
Derby Diocesan Board of Education's (DBE) vision for our church school family is that it may **Transform, Grow & Build** through offering:

- life-giving, life-changing learning through excellent education, shaped by a distinctively Christ-like vision and ethos
- inclusive and inspirational Collective Worship, inviting all to grow in faith
- excellent Religious Education, enabling children and young people to reflect critically and explore faith, belief, and Christian responses to life's big questions
- hospitality, hope and love to children, young people, and households
- a sense of belonging to those of all faiths and none, building community near and far, local and global

Small, rural schools make a unique and distinct contribution to the work of the wider diocese and the national church. Schools can, and many already do, reveal the **Kingdom of God: Good News for All**. Our small schools are places of transformation, inspiration, hope and welcome.

Indeed, many of our small, rural schools deliver an education of the highest quality. Service to their communities is exemplary. They are treasured and valued by all those who are part of them, and the DBE is proud of all that they achieve. Our aspiration and commitment are to celebrate these achievements and enable them to be enjoyed by the generations to come.

However, we must face current pressures if we are to succeed in this aspiration. The challenges of our time mean that the ability of all our schools to deliver this is at risk. This is most marked for our small, rural schools. Facing the challenges of delivering excellent inclusive provision, enabling an holistic education that goes much further than Ofsted would ever require and serving the community, our small schools are all increasingly hamstrung by a range of issues.

One of the issues is decreasing budgets. It is important though, to recognise that the difficulties facing school communities are not simply financial. Issues around securing leadership and governance are also acute. Rural school buildings are often old and challenging to maintain. This, along with fluctuations in pupil numbers, make for precarious school communities. In these instances, it is important that we ask ourselves whether our schools are serving the needs of the children or the adults. Yet, although precarious, our schools are also life-giving and joyful places which act like 'community glue'.

Derby DBE's view is that small, rural schools are best placed to withstand current and future pressures by joining a Multi-Academy Trust (MAT). There are examples of the benefits of MAT partnerships emerging across the diocese and particularly for small, rural schools. However, some school leaders and governors fear that by joining a MAT they cede control, lose autonomy and local identity. They are anxious that what is special about their local church school will be lost. Derby

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DBE understand this anxiety and will work with schools to explore these issues as schools consider the options available to them.

What is clear is that church schools and church must face up to these challenges. The Church of England's Chief Education Officer, Rev'd Nigel Genders has made this point many times: 'doing nothing is not an option'.

Our Strategy

Derby DBE's aspiration is to support all small, rural schools to continue to offer a thriving presence in their communities; offering an holistic curriculum where children achieve excellence. Derby DBE's policy is not one of closure.

Sustainability of small schools rests in four key areas: standards, leadership, finance and governance. These all inform the ongoing risk assessment of diocesan schools, with particular emphasis being placed on standards. Whatever the size of school, Derby DBE's ambition is that all schools offer transformational education as evidenced by Ofsted and SIAMS.

Derby DBE, its governing bodies, and MAT directors will maintain a focus on sustainability of small schools as highly effective educational establishments. Where standards, leadership, finance, or governance are a cause for concern, Derby DBE will work with our strategic partners to explore all possible means of improving the school's position. Consideration of closure would be a last resort. Derby DBE will seek the views of the communities concerned but will always prioritise the needs of children and young people.

The preferred model for primary education is 1 form of entry per year group giving a number on roll of 210 pupils. However, we recognise in rural communities this is not always possible. Where accommodation allows, we will work towards a half form entry model with 4 classes giving a number on roll of 105 pupils. There will though, be many schools with fewer pupils than this. Any school with fewer than 105 pupils should be in a collaborative arrangement with executive leadership and shared governance. Some larger schools may still find benefits in such arrangements.

Derby DBE's view is that the strongest model for collaboration is a MAT but recognise that other models may also support sustainability. Executive leadership, either within a MAT or within other collaborative partnerships, brings about considerable benefits to schools, not simply financial.

Derby DBE is committed to the success of smaller schools with mixed year group classes. We will showcase good practice for staff and governors working in small schools. We will ensure that our training and development programme supports executive leaders and staff working across more than one school. Different successful staffing models will be documented to share examples of useful practice.