

## Review of Small Schools and Surplus Capacity

- 2.23 The Audit Commission's advice, in the national report referred to in paragraph 3.18, recommends that primary schools with fewer than 90 pupils, and high schools with fewer than 600 pupils aged 11-15, should be identified to "determine whether these small schools should be retained or expanded/closed". (Trading Places: 'The Supply and Allocation of School Places'). Herefordshire Council believes that such figures provide a useful general guide. However, some adjustment needs to be made for rural areas, as the DfES recognises in its draft guidance (received 3<sup>rd</sup> August, 1999) to SOCs –

*The Secretary of State is concerned that in considering statutory proposals School Organisation Committees and Adjudicators have regard to the need to preserve access to a local school for rural communities. There should therefore be a presumption against the closure of rural schools. This does not mean that no rural school should ever close, but the case for closure should be strong and the proposals clearly in the best interests of educational provision in the area. The transport implications of rural school closures should also be carefully considered, including the welfare of the children, the recurrent cost to the LEA of transporting pupils to school further away, the effects on road traffic congestion, and the environmental costs of pupils travelling further to schools. The overall effect on the community of closure of the village schools should also be taken into account. Detailed guidance on particular factors that need to be considered in deciding such proposals is given at the end of this section.*

- 2.24 Having considered the Audit Commission and DfES advice, it is accepted that, other things being equal, there are significant educational advantages for a 5-11 primary school to have at least 3 teachers. Under Herefordshire's funding arrangements, schools with 60+ pupils can normally afford 3 teachers on a full-time basis, whilst schools with 50+ pupils can normally fund about 2½ full-time teachers, making possible 3-teacher class arrangements for the mornings or afternoons. It is below such levels, therefore, that the educational viability of small schools should be reviewed. Similarly, the Council accepts that the ideal minimum size for an 11-16 secondary school is 3 or 4-form entry (450–600 pupils). Where such ideal sizes are not practical, however, the Council ensures that its arrangements for funding for schools provide reasonable levels of teaching resources (see paragraph above), so that a good range of curriculum options can be offered.
- 2.25 Herefordshire Council is committed to maintaining a good level of support for small primary and secondary schools, and advocates the maintenance of existing funding levels for sixth forms in schools, where such arrangements are appropriate. It believes that surplus space should initially be addressed through seeking alternative use rather than closure. At the same time, however, the Council does recognise that there comes a point at which the maintenance of an individual school or sixth form may need to be considered in the interest of ensuring that resources are used efficiently to achieve good value. Accordingly, the Council looks carefully at the annual return of surplus capacity in schools to decide whether or not fundamental review of particular schools or areas is required.
- 2.26 The Council also provides for thorough review of the circumstances when pupil numbers

drop below defined levels at individual schools, though the Council also believes that small schools should be able to operate with a degree of reasonable certainty about their medium term future. The Council's overriding aim is to provide schools of a high standard, always seeking improvement, and it would undermine that objective if schools were distracted by continual uncertainties concerning their future existence. Any decisions concerning the future of particular schools would need to take account of community, transport and environmental factors as well as educational considerations.

2.27 The Council would normally review schools in the following circumstances.

### **Primary schools**

- (a) a school with fewer than 36 pupils in the September of a school year, or a school whose numbers are expected to fall below that level within the following 5 years, would be reviewed by the Council, in consultation with the relevant Diocesan Education Authority where a Church school is concerned.
- (b) schools with 36-45 pupils, which would be monitored by the Director of Education, with the relevant Diocesan Director of Education where a Church school is concerned, to assess whether or not numbers are likely to drop below 35 pupils within 5 years, and to determine whether or not there are other grounds for concern about the future of the school;
- (c) where a pyramid of primary schools has unused capacity at a level that could accommodate the closure of the smallest school, with up to 15% unused capacity still remaining if such possible closure were to occur; or
- (d) where a school is identified by Ofsted either as having serious weaknesses or in need of special measures;

2.28 If, following such review, a school is judged to be currently viable, then no further review of that school would be undertaken for at least 5 years, unless pupil numbers were to fall by a further 25% below the level considered during that review.

### **High schools**

- (e) where a high school has fewer than 200 pupils on roll at the start of a school year; or
- (f) where a high school has sufficient unused capacity for all the existing and projected pupils to be accommodated in the nearest alternative school with up to 15% unused capacity still remaining if such possible closure were to occur; or
- (g) where a school is identified by Ofsted either as having serious weaknesses or in need of special measures;