

## **SUSTAINING THE VIABILITY OF SMALL SCHOOLS**

**Report By: Head of Inspection, Advice and School Performance Service**

### **Wards Affected**

Countywide

### **Purpose**

1. To inform the Committee of the local and national activities related to sustaining the viability of small schools.

### **Financial Implications**

2. None directly at this stage as the funding of all schools (including an LMS weighting for very small schools) is contained in the 2004/2005 Education Budget. In the longer-term the falling roll across the County will, inevitably, impact upon school and LEA budgets.

### **Report**

3. The issue of how to sustain the viability and quality of small schools at a time of falling rolls is one that has, from time to time, been a challenge to many rural authorities over the last two decades, and possibly for much longer. The Education Directorate is currently engaged in a number of research and action based projects designed to inform the development of a local strategy for managing the situation within the County. These projects include:
  - Monitoring and evaluating existing cluster working arrangements, such as those operating in the Golden Valley.
  - Using the extended schools initiative in 2003/2004 to pilot the idea of extended school clusters in five different areas of the County.
  - Organising a series of Conferences specifically targeted at small primary schools.
  - Working with Beacon Schools (such as Little Dewchurch Primary) on cluster related training opportunities.
  - Using a retired headteacher and primary inspector to research what is happening nationally on this issue.
  - The Head of IASPS attending a termly meeting of Statistical Neighbours, largely composed of rural counties such as Lincolnshire, Norfolk and Cornwall where a standing agenda item is the discussion of how these authorities are responding to the challenge of sustaining small schools.

4. The picture emerging nationally is that no authority within the UK (or internationally) has a single or simple solution regarding how to sustain the viability and quality of small school's particularly in a rural area. Indeed, pragmatism appears to be the main driver for change and LEAs are often finding different solutions within their own County.
5. What can be said with a degree of confidence is that:
- All LEAs have a small schools policy where schools are reviewed when they reach a critical size (often around 20 pupils or less) and that, from time to time schools are closed.
  - Schools are sometimes re-organised, closed and re-opened, amalgamated or merged.
  - Schools are sometimes 'Federated' either permanently or temporarily, and the term federation is used to describe many different models of school organisation. However, the federation model where one headteacher manages a cluster of 2, 3 or even 4 small schools only works if the headteacher is capable to performing the role and the school communities absolutely support the process. It is a model that can be very problematic and resource intensive.
  - ICT can help link schools together but is not yet, by itself, a solution.
  - Some authorities seek to 'Federate' because of recruitment and retention difficulties and have a rule that where a school has tried to recruit a new headteacher twice, and has failed, the Governing Body must consider linking directly with another school.
  - There appears to be a developing consensus that (provided a political commitment for small schools remains) a 'one size fits all model will not work and that the best solutions are locally determined by the circumstances existing in a particular geographical area or community. Hence the idea that counties such as Herefordshire, Shropshire, Norfolk and Cornwall may have different models operating within their borders.
6. Herefordshire does not have any history or current example of a 'Federated' school. It does, however, have a very successful tradition of clusters of schools working together, sharing resources, sharing teaches and broadening the learning opportunities for all pupils. It seems sensible that, unless local circumstances determine a different approach is necessary, Herefordshire should build on the existing policy of schools increasingly working together in clusters as the preferred response to the need to sustain the viability and quality of small schools over the next few years.

## RECOMMENDATION

The Committee note the context of the report.

**BACKGROUND PAPERS**      **None**