



Leicester Diocesan Board of Education's Strategy for Small Church of England Schools

Background

The Leicester Diocesan Board of Education's (LDBE) vision for our Church school family is that by providing education which is **effective, distinctive, rooted** and **inclusive**, our schools can be places where the lives of children and young people can be transformed. Small, rural schools make a unique and distinct contribution to the work of the wider diocese and the national Church. Our small schools can be places of **transformation, inspiration, celebration** and **welcome**.

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 is 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'.

LDBE's view is that our small, rural schools are best placed to withstand current and future pressures by joining a Multi-Academy Trust (MAT) as identified in LDBE's MAT Strategy.
There are examples of the benefits of MAT partnerships 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. LDBE understand this anxiety and will work with schools to explore these issues.

The DBE's Academisation Strategy should be read alongside this document.

Leaders and Governors are encouraged to read and discuss the Church of England's Education Office publication: ['Our Hope for a Flourishing Schools System'](#).

Our Strategy

LDBE's aspiration is to support all Church of England small, rural schools to continue to offer a thriving presence in their communities; offering an holistic curriculum where children achieve excellence. LDBE, as the religious authority, has a responsibility to make sure that the trust deed of each Church of England school is upheld. This means that schools should be serving their local communities by providing a distinctively Christian education. Schools seeking to offer flexi-schooling, nursery/pre-school or alternative/Special Educational Needs (SEND) provision may do so, only where this provision remains ancillary to the main purpose of the school and only with the consent of LDBE.

LDBE's policy is that schools remain open where possible. LDBE recognises that, in this present climate, some schools may need to close because they are no longer viable. As small schools are at the heart of their communities, this would be a difficult, painful decision. LDBE will offer care and support in these instances.

LDBE's view is that the strongest model for the success of small Church of England schools is partnership within a Church MAT. Additionally, executive leadership brings about considerable benefits to schools; financial, strategic and educational. For instance, best-practice models can be shared through increased leadership capacity. Professional development is generated for all and there are greater opportunities to retain and nurture talent.

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, LDBE's ambition is that all schools offer transformational education as evidenced by Ofsted and SIAMS.

LDBE, 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, LDBE will work with our strategic partners to explore all possible means of improving the school's position. Consideration of closure will be a last

resort. LDBE 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 one 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 four 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.