

CANTERBURY DIOCESAN BOARD OF EDUCATION RURAL AND SMALL SCHOOLS STATEMENT

1. Introduction

- 1.1 *'In the bible, God consistently raises up the small and places the outsider in the centre of the narrative of salvation... It is not simply that the small and humble are given equal weight as the great and mighty. The message is far stronger, God chooses the small, the little, the despised and the humble and reveals them to be more significant than the things the world praises for being great and mighty'*¹
- 1.2 The Canterbury Diocesan Board of Education (CDBE) recognises the uniqueness and value of small and rural schools and acknowledges the particular challenges they face, endorsing a strategic objective that wherever possible they should be given the support they require to continue to thrive into the future.
- 1.3 *Embracing Change: Rural and Small Schools* (The Church of England Education Office, 2018) urges us to think about the context and challenges for these schools; in particular, the educational experience of children, sustainability and collaborative partnerships, and how they fit into the diocese's rural strategy and wider mission for schools.
- 1.4 According to 2018 Department for Education statistics, 43% of our diocesan church schools are categorised as being located in a 'rural village', 'rural town and fringe' or 'rural hamlet and isolated dwellings'.
- 1.5 The definition of a small school varies somewhat; for the purposes of this document, the definitions in *Embracing Change* are used. Accordingly, 34.6% of our church schools are considered small (111-209 pupils) and 26.9% very small (≤ 110 pupils) [Census data January 2021].

2. Characteristics

- 2.1 Rural and small schools are significant for their communities, often delivering a valuable social function and service. They usually provide an education for children in the immediate locality and in neighbouring villages.
- 2.2 Where there is excellent leadership, teaching and an imaginative curriculum, rural and small schools deliver a high-quality education. A small-scale model of education can provide a supportive environment; many successful smaller schools are highly cohesive school communities where pupils of all different ages learn to work and play together.

¹ From Appendix 1, 'A theology of small' - *Embracing Change: Rural and Small Schools* (The Church of England Education Office, 2018)

- 2.3 Furthermore, outstanding small and rural schools have good internal and external relationships, are not complacent, demonstrate a combination of individual pupil attention and a tailored curriculum and feature rapid progress in all pupil groups.

3. Quality of Education

- 3.1 The CDBE believes that quality of education is about the whole educational experience of the children attending a school and the ability to sustain high-quality leadership and teaching. Church schools exemplify distinctively Christian communities of learning that are underpinned by values sourced in the Gospel narrative; we hope that in these schools, children will encounter a real experience of God's love for all humanity and receive affirmation that they are a beloved child of God.
- 3.2 We recognise that both rural and small schools often employ innovative thinking, using the school's location to develop a curriculum and pedagogy to suit the local community. As technological teaching resources develop, rural schools could be at the forefront, pioneering with local parishes to connect them into global communities.
- 3.3 Successful small and rural schools require a supply chain of highly skilled people and will need to tackle the challenge of recruitment and retention of teachers and leaders; unique expectations in small and rural schools need the most talented and resilient staff.

4. Partnership and collaboration

- 4.1 The CDBE is proactive in encouraging and supporting schools to develop collaborative arrangements. Schools can work together in formal groupings, whether under Executive leadership arrangements, federations or academy structures, whilst reflecting the importance of the 'local' through governance. Groupings such as this enable cross-school functions, career progression opportunities and resource efficiencies.

5. The role of Canterbury DBE

- 5.1 The CDBE commits to strategic planning for its small and rural schools to provide clarity as to where they fit into the diocese's wider vision for its rural communities. Officers will work closely with those engaged in developing strategies for rural ministries in the diocese.
- 5.2 Thus, the CDBE affirms the importance of the availability of education provision in rural areas, noting also that demographic forces will dictate that much of that provision will be in small schools.
- 5.3 As part of its Strategy for School Organisation, the CDBE will focus on structural collaboration between small and rural schools. Any policy/processes for decision making on the future distribution of schools in rural areas will always ensure that decision-makers focus on the educational interests of children.

6. School Viability and Closure

- 6.1 Any conversation about school viability should be considered as part of a wider strategic discussion about maintaining a quality of education in an area as a whole. There is also an interdependency between services in rural communities; if the closure of a small school is proposed, the CDBE must consider the likely impact on these services and community resilience.
- 6.2 The CDBE therefore has a significant role to play in facilitating discussions between the local authority, its church schools, local communities and clergy about structural collaboration and viability. Sometimes this will involve proposals and consultations to close a church school, which may be a necessary step to enable another school to flourish.

Questions for small and rural schools

A. Characteristics

- To what extent:
 - is the school and local church at the heart of the village/area of population?
 - are church and school working together in ministry and for the community?
 - are parents/carers involved in the life of the school?
- How integrated is the school in the life of the community; how are the school's facilities used for/by the community, and vice-versa?
- How does the school contribute economically to the community including using local contractors and providing employment?
- Where do children live – within the village or beyond? In relation to other schools?
- How many children live locally but choose to attend other schools instead – and how do hubs/groups of schools in a geographical area share this information?

B. Quality of Education

- What is the whole educational experience of children attending this school; how do you ensure that the school's distinctive Christian vision enables pupils and adults to flourish?
- What is the condition and suitability of the school's buildings – and is the school moving towards 100% renewable electricity, with a costed plan to achieve a Net Zero carbon target?
- How secure are the school's finances?
- What is your experience of recruiting and retaining high quality teaching staff?
- How does your access to external support (professional advice, staff development, support for pupil/student needs) compare to schools in other areas and contexts?
- How straightforward is it to find capable governors who have time and skills to give to the school? Are they representative of the community you serve in age and diversity?

C. Partnership and Collaboration

- What are the features of your current informal or formal partnerships and what positive outcomes do you see for staff and children, i.e., how do they impact on the quality of education and support for vulnerable children?
- How are you engaging with local secondary and independent schools?
- What is the local need and capacity for nursery/after-school provision? What steps do you take to help parents/carers access high quality care – and are there any opportunities to collaborate with other partners to enhance/develop local provision?