

## **Small Schools**

A representative group of small school headteachers met with Anthony May at their request to share their concerns about the significant issues facing small schools primarily as result of the changes to the funding arrangements for schools in April 2013. This meeting took place on 3<sup>rd</sup> December 2013, when the primary school headteachers from Walkeringham, Sturton Le Steeple, and Ranby Primary schools identified key issues facing small schools at this time. These primarily focussed on 3 key areas:

- Finance – particularly the impact of the changes to the lump sum allocation to all schools
- IT – particularly in relation to the ICT cost of broadband to small schools
- SEND – particularly in relation to the funding arrangements for pupils with SEND:
- Governance – particularly in relation to exploring alternative leadership models in relation to partnership working, collaborations and federations

Anthony May confirmed a commitment to small schools in Nottinghamshire, recognising the unique role these schools play, mainly in small rural communities. As a result, he agreed that a task and finish group would be established to consider the issues raised and to explore the possibility of developing shared solutions. The meeting recognised that a particular challenge was to ensure that this 'review' was owned and driven by small schools, in partnership with the County Council.

## **Small School Review**

All small schools were invited to nominate in areas, representative small school headteachers to be part of the small school task and finish group to ensure that the needs and concerns of small school headteachers were the key drivers. Whilst it had been initially intended to limit the representatives to between 6-8, in the event, every small school headteacher who 'volunteered' was invited to the initial meeting. As a result of this invitation, the following headteachers volunteered to be part of the review:

- Paul Higginbottom – Everton Primary
- Jane Mellor – Costock C of E Primary
- Mark Elliott – Sturton-Le-Steeple C of E primary
- Adrienne Alcock – Walkeringham Primary
- Joanna Hall – North Wheatley C of E Primary
- Nadine Lacey – Sutton-cum-Lound C of E (VA) Primary
- Helen Woodward – Newstead Primary
- Tracey Burn-Smith – Kirklington Primary
- Alan Guilder – Willoughby Primary
- Claire McKinder – Ranby C of E (VC) Primary
- Sharon Patton – Mattersey Primary

- Kathryn Thompson – Southwell Holy Trinity C of E (V?)Primary
- Andy Pullin – St Peter's C of E (V?) Gringley on the hill
- Samantha Bradbury – Halam Primary
- Elizabeth Moore – Beckingham Primary

Representatives from the Church of England and RC Dioceses were also informed of the review and invited to participate.

Key NCC officers who supported the group included:

- Emma McGeown – HR
- Andy Wilson – HR
- Leonie Meikle – Governing Body Services
- Jane Mansell – Governing Body Services
- Adam Crevald – ICT
- Steve Dennis – ICT
- Charles Savage – SEND Policy and Provision
- Pat Somerset – Education Improvement Service
- Katie Adamson – Finance
- Jayne Littlewood – Place Planning and Admissions (review coordinator)
- Marion Clay – Group Manager Support to Schools

Following an initial scoping meeting on 27<sup>th</sup> February 2014, a series of focus groups met with relevant officers during March and April 2014 to explore in depth, the issues and concerns shared initially with Anthony May and subsequently expanded by the small school headteacher representative group at the February meeting. (Minutes of the focus group meetings are attached as appendices)

A feedback and reflection day took place on the 1<sup>st</sup> May 2014. This was attended by small schools and officers. to share and reflect on the information that had been discussed during the March/April focus group meetings. This day also offered the opportunity for the small school headteachers to prioritise those issues that were felt to pose the greatest challenge to small schools at this time.

## **Summary of Discussions of 1<sup>st</sup> May 2014**

### **Leadership, Governance and HR**

Key issues raised by the Leadership, Governance and HR focus groups were around:

- Financial implications and cost effectiveness of Executive headship role across small schools
- Strategies to prepare aspirant leaders/ support existing Executive headteachers in small schools
- Models of governance models to facilitate formal partnerships across small schools (federation, collaboration, amalgamation)
- Governing Bodies knowledge and understanding of the current challenges and opportunities available to deliver good and outstanding education

Small schools headteachers are increasingly aware of the challenges of the current traditional leadership model of one headteacher in one small school. Their greatest concern is that, whilst they recognise the need for consideration of new governance arrangements as opportunities, some governing bodies perceived this as a threat to the existence of the small, village school.

Outstanding challenges faced by small schools in this area were identified and included:

- The understanding of some headteachers and staff that new ways of working in partnership and collaboration can be advantageous to the continued delivery of high quality education in a small community.
- The understanding of Governors that new leadership models can provide significant opportunities to enrich curricular provision and secure a sustainable future
- The need for a clear and unambiguous vision for small schools in Nottinghamshire provided at County Council level developed in partnership with small school communities.

### **Admissions and Place Planning (including Early Years Place Planning)**

Key issues raised by the PPA focus group were around

- Concerns by small schools in relation to their medium and long term viability
- Place Planning data, its interpretation and use.
- The need to clarify current funding streams to determine the sufficiency of school places as well as early years provision.

The geographical location of most small schools ensures that families living in villages can access a local school. In addition, it provides families, primarily living on the outskirts of larger conurbations, the opportunities to access a small school in preference to their larger catchment school. Almost all of the small schools have surplus places which contribute to the financial and educational provisional challenges. However, these small schools provide essential places, not only to catchment families but increasingly to out of catchment families, who are expressing a preference for a smaller setting. The increase in population across the county, as well as the expansion of rural housing developments, mean that small primary schools will continue to be an key part of the County Council's strategic place planning for statutory school and early years into the foreseeable future and beyond.

### **Outstanding challenges faced by small schools**

- The need to develop the understanding of small school heads and governors of place planning data and projections.
- The need to address in the first instance, the impact of surplus places within their school.
- To consider the medium and long term implications on budget and quality of provision if there continues to be a challenge to balance the budget.

### **SEND**

Key issues raised by the SEND focus groups were around:

- A perception that small schools have a disproportionate high number of SEND pupils in the context of national and local guidance that the school must evidence the spending of £6K before seeking additional family funding.
- The role of the SENCO and whether there was a possibility of a shared SENCO role across a group of small schools
- The use of AFN/HLN moneys and the possibility of family money to be used more flexibly in

This was a contentious area for the SEND focus group. This was driven by their view a small number can impact negatively on provision and resourcing within small cohorts and across the school. There was recognition that in particular, if SENCOs could be shared across schools, economies of scale could be achieved. It was the view that parents with needy children, unable to access special school provision were looking to small schools to provide tailored and personalised provision. Whilst skilled at meeting the needs of small and diverse cohorts, it is a challenge to provide adequately when faced with a small number of SEND admissions.

Outstanding challenges faced by small schools are:

- The diseconomies of scale faced by small schools who are expected to allocate £6K of funding to the provision of pupils with high needs, prior to any request being made for AFN or HLN funding
- The staffing implications particularly in regards to capacity, cover and employing high quality support staff for longer than 2 years
- How long it sometimes takes for a school to access additional funding (AFN/HLN), the consequence in some cases of having to take resources away from other children in order to cater for new children with complex needs.

## **Finance**

Key issues raised by the finance focus group were around:

- The lump sum allocation to all schools being the same as for small schools
- The implications on setting deficit budget as a strategic tool to support small school sustainability in relation to staffing and provision
- The DSG guidance to distribute funds on the basis of the October headcount

It was the view of the small school headteachers that they have not benefited sufficiently from other funding streams such as Pupil Premium, SEND Allocations and AWPU. As a result, their dependence on the lump allocation was higher than that of a larger primary or secondary school. In addition, there was a particular challenge as economies of scale could not easily be achieved within a small school setting. In addition, the impact of this limited budget militates against the negotiations of a deficit budget as their yearly budgets are entirely spent on the current staffing and provision within the school. The particular challenge around the once yearly headcount directing budget decisions cannot be addressed through a local solution as the current arrangements comply with national prescribed guidance.

Outstanding challenges faced by small school include

- Supply cover for teaching headteachers in small schools
- Pupils with additional needs including Pupil Premium and SEND

- In year fluctuation in numbers e.g. movement of a sibling group of 3 cannot easily be absorbed by a small school

## **ICT Provision**

Key issues raised by the ICT focus group were around:

- The cost of broadband and the costing mechanisms by NCC sold service which has resulted in schools essentially paying the same almost regardless of size (£6K or £12K)
- The investigation by schools about the need to find more cost effective providers has been complicated by the existing partnership arrangements between NCC and BT
- Operational concerns around speed, high volume of signal failures resulting in no broadband provision for periods of time
- Inability of the service desk to provide tailored support to small schools seeking support

It was the view of the ICT focus group that the current delivery of broadband was neither cost effective nor reliable. The geographical remoteness of small schools has added a greater level of complexity to providing broadband connectivity which has been compounded by a perception that the NCC service desk has been unable to respond in a timely manner to problems and questions as they arise. The overriding issue has been a sense of injustice that the costing mechanism has not acknowledged the particular challenges of a small school budget.

## **Emerging Conclusion**

Within Nottinghamshire, small schools are highly valued and play a fundamental role in ensuring that every child has a school place. Effective small schools provide high quality personalised education, appropriate to the need of individual pupils.

Small school headteachers have accurately identified key challenges at this time. Finance, creates the most significant challenge because it impacts on the ability to:

- recruit high quality leaders and teachers.
- sustain effective provision for particularly vulnerable pupils,
- provide choice and flexibility in relation to curricular provision.

In addition small school headteachers have begun to recognise the impact of surplus places within their schools and the importance of place planning projection data which could support them to engage with the current challenges as well as informing leadership options that could secure a successful future for small school communities.

Out of these adverse challenges a unique opportunity is offered for governing bodies to think beyond 'traditional' school models to future proof educational provision in localities that are fit for purpose in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. In order to achieve this, brave leadership will be necessary at all levels from elected members, strategic leadership and governing bodies along with a clear vision that can inform both policy and practice.

## **Key next step**

This paper is an adaptation of the summary paper sent to all small school headteachers who participated in the task and finish groups. A key action agreed is the need to ensure that Chairs

of Governors share the understanding of their headteachers in relation to sustaining vibrant and successful small schools into the future. As a result 2 small schools workshops are being led by small school headteachers on the 25 March 2015 and 5 May 2015. Officers will provide support to the small school headteachers during these workshops. Headteachers and Chairs of Governors in schools with less than 105 pupils on roll will be initially invited. If places are available, interested others in schools of 150-200, will be welcome.

## **RECOMMENDATION/S**

That the Schools Forum:

- Note the contents of this report

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