



THE CHURCH
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EDUCATION OFFICE

Embracing Change: Rural and Small Schools

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Foreword

by **Nigel Genders**, Chief Education Officer

The Church of England has set out a bold vision for education that is deeply Christian, serving the common good. Our purpose in education is to enable the children, young people and communities we serve to flourish as they experience education for wisdom, hope, community and dignity and discover life in all its fullness which Jesus offers.

Such an education is primarily about people not structures, and it is fundamentally about people in community. One of the pressing challenges for the education system is to understand how to serve all our communities most effectively with the resources available.

The privilege we have as the Church of England, the largest single provider of schools, is that we are located in communities the length and breadth of the country. Such is our commitment to the whole country that, whilst the majority of our pupils are in larger urban schools, we nevertheless provide over seventy percent of all the very small schools in rural communities. That brings a responsibility to rise to the challenges facing such provision and to re-imagine what outstanding education should be like in small schools and rural, often isolated, villages.

Our first report on small rural schools was published four years ago and since then the challenges of recruitment and pressure on resources has increased. Our conviction is that, for the sake of education provision in small and rural communities, such re-imagining needs to happen apace. This is something which requires a holistic response from all the stakeholders in the rural environment.

Our report sets out the context and the challenges for small and rural schools. I am grateful to all those who have contributed to it and enabled its production. We recognise that it is only the beginning and what it now calls for is wider engagement to enable us to embrace the change that is required to ensure the children in our rural communities truly flourish.



Revd Nigel Genders
Chief Education Officer

Executive Summary

The Church School of the Future Review of March 2012¹ highlighted the preponderance of Church of England schools amongst the many small schools in rural areas and recommended that a working party should explore 'the specific issues of rural schools and... set out recommendations for dioceses on a way forward'. The report of this working party, *Working Together: the future of rural Church of England Schools* was published in 2014.²

Since the publication of *Working Together* there has been considerable change in the political and education landscape and it seemed timely to re-emphasize the conclusion of that report that small rural schools could not continue to operate as stand-alone units. The nature of the challenge for those schools (and for many small schools not classified as rural) has also become increasingly clear.

A further working group drawn from a mix of Dioceses with a large number of small schools - Durham, Newcastle, Truro, Carlisle, Bath and Wells, Exeter, Leeds, Chichester and Norwich - came together to look at two questions: what do we need to have in order to deliver an excellent 21st century education and equip children to flourish? And how does the current distribution of Church of England schools serve God's mission?

Our analysis continues to emphasize the need for small schools to come together in formal groupings but also highlights the challenges of:

- identifying what 'outstanding' looks like in a small school context and the need for more research in this area;
- recruiting, supporting and retaining highly skilled people to work in these settings;
- maximising low levels of funding;
- working with physical resources that may not meet 21st century demands.



This report also stresses the need to work supportively with communities while developing an understanding of the need for change and for the needs of children to be prioritised in any decision about the reorganisation of schools.

Introduction

Background: Working Together report 2014

1. In 2014 the Church of England Education Office published *Working Together: the future of rural Church of England schools*. This was written by a task group which involved the Dioceses of Durham and Newcastle, Hereford, Norwich, Truro, Worcester and York. There was also some consultation with Jill Hopkinson, the Church's National Rural Officer.
2. The report collated statistics on rural Church of England schools which established the scale of Church of England involvement in education in rural areas and highlighted key issues around funding, the ability to deliver high quality education and the role of these schools within rural communities. Importantly it also established that the high number of Church of England schools that are small and rural meant that it was necessary to have a more detailed understanding of what constituted a 'small' school. In the past, the Department for Education (DfE) had used schools with fewer than 210 pupils on roll to determine funding for small sponsored academies. This is the equivalent of a one form entry school with 30 places per year group. To capture the reality of Church of England schools in rural areas any examination of small schools needed to acknowledge that in practice substantial numbers of Church of England schools have fewer than 100 on roll and many fewer than 50.
3. The key message for governing bodies of these schools, which has been reinforced many times since in presentations by Revd Nigel Genders, is that 'doing nothing is not an option'.³ The principal way forward envisaged by the report was structural collaboration (either through federations or multi-academy trusts) but the option of some kind of specialism, for example forest or agricultural schools, was also mentioned and there was a brief reference to 'virtual schools'.⁴
4. Diocesan Boards of Education (DBE) were recommended to use a list of self-review questions in the report to develop a policy for rural schools in their Diocese. A set of self-review questions was also recommended for governing bodies to assist them in planning their future.⁵
5. In the light of rapid and fundamental policy shifts since the publication of the report the time is right to pick up the key questions and challenges that the report identified



and engage further with the DfE and other Departments and levels of Government on the subject of education in small schools (fewer than 210 pupils on roll) both in rural settings and more generally.

Developments 2015-2017

6. The academic years 2014/15 and 2015/16 saw the settling into post of the Regional Schools Commissioners (RSCs) and an accelerating pace of development of the Government's 'academies agenda'. It became increasingly clear in every RSC region that one of the major challenges was the provision of good education in rural communities at a level of cost that the Government is prepared to meet. Some RSCs tried to set a minimum pupil number for schools to remain viable but have often struggled to put any consequent reorganisations into effect. Such proposals frequently meet the same level of local and political opposition that can greet proposals for change.
7. The DfE, to some extent, recognised that the financial challenges of small rural schools make them inherently unattractive for academy chains or multi-academy trusts (MATs) and sought to counter this with a series of one-off grant programmes each targeted in slightly different ways. In 2016, the White Paper *Educational Excellence Everywhere* was clear that small schools must come together in formal collaborations, preferably MATs, in order to survive.⁶ In many places the existing reduction of LAs support services to schools and DfE's emphasis on



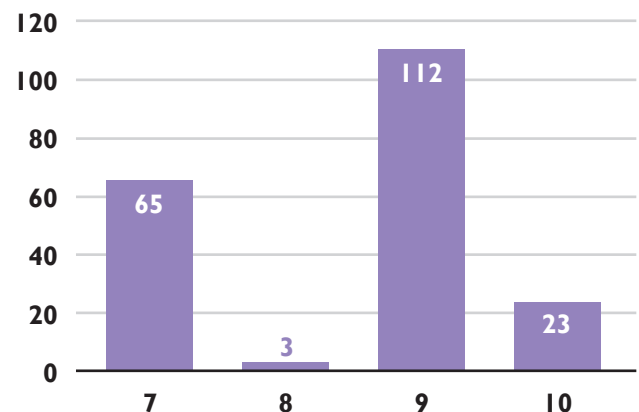
school to school support began to persuade schools that the status quo had to change.

8. From Autumn 2016 the Government's focus shifted somewhat from structures to a commitment to deliver a national funding formula (NFF) that would address what were seen as unfair disparities in the system. These disparities were characterised as being a concentration of funds in cities such as London and away from rural areas. As a result, there appeared to be hope among some in rural communities that the new NFF might lead to a reinvigoration of rural schools and a return to the funding levels of the first decade of this century.
9. However, in the context of reduced funding for all public services and rising costs, it is challenging for any NFF to deliver sufficiently significant increases to provide the financial security that small schools would wish to see. The concept of a 'sparsity factor' to support those small schools where pupils would have to travel a significant distance to the next school has been included but, as previously, 'significant distance', in the case of primaries is 'more than an average of 2 miles to the second nearest school'. This means that at least some small rural schools in some Dioceses will still not be eligible for funding based on 'sparsity'. Importantly it also will not capture small schools in or on the fringes of the market towns that act as hubs for rural communities. Even in times when state funding as a whole looks healthy, successive governments have struggled to ensure funding for small schools in rural communities that will sustain anything more than minimal staffing levels because of the low numbers on roll. That in itself reduces both a school's ability to cover all aspects of the curriculum and specialist areas and, because of the need for headteachers to also have a teaching role, there is a corresponding lack of time for strategic planning.

Data and definitions

10. There is no nationally agreed definition of what constitutes a small school. *Working Together* categorised schools as small if they had fewer than 210 pupils on roll. This was in line with DfE guidance on academy funding and was used for practical reasons in the report. *Working Together* created a further category of 'very small' schools, which included schools with fewer than 110 pupils on roll. The reason for this was that, at the time, the median number of pupils on roll in Church of England schools with fewer than 210 pupils was 110. Using this figure, schools were subdivided into 'very small' (<110); 'small' (111-209) and '210+'. This report continues to use these subdivisions.
11. As with the previous *Working Together* report, this report categorises schools as 'rural' or 'urban' based on the rural/urban classification used by a range of government agencies, including the Office of National Statistics (ONS) and the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra). This is also the classification used by the DfE on the 'get information about schools' website.⁷ The classification is based on the Output Area (OA) in which the school is physically situated. OAs are treated as 'urban' if they were allocated as a built-up area with a population of more than 10,000 in the 2011 census, while all the remaining OAs are classed as 'rural'. The urban and rural domains are then subdivided into six broad settlement types and whether they are sparsely populated or less sparsely populated.⁸
12. 10% of small and very small rural schools (5.6% of all Church of England schools) are infants or first schools and the impact of infant/junior amalgamations or reorganisations from three to two tier schooling is another factor for DBEs to build into their strategic planning as they look at their local situation.

Small and very small rural schools with high age below eleven:



Very small urban schools

13. As well as very small rural schools, there are a few Church of England schools that are both very small and urban. Using data from November 2017, there were 81 very small Church of England schools that were categorised as being in an urban setting. 20% (17) of these schools are very small because they are infant schools that in practice work with junior schools in their areas. 30% (24) have capacity for more than 110 pupils (making it possible for them not to be categorised as very small when at capacity). Seven of these schools have capacity for 210+ pupils. Some of these schools are new schools, still growing to capacity. Of these, three were free schools and one a sponsor-led academy opened between 2014 and 2016.

14. Some of the schools that are categorised as very small urban schools are still in rural contexts where they face many of the same challenges as rural schools. These include market towns or towns serving a primarily agricultural community. In these circumstances, isolation, deprivation, recruitment and retention can be as difficult as in very small rural schools.

15. Other schools are in urban settings but are restricted by the physical capacity of their school buildings. These schools do not tend to have the same issues as rural schools and are often oversubscribed. Broadly where schools are in towns that themselves are not in rural settings they are unlikely to have the same suite of issues that occur in rural circumstances. For an idea of the range of circumstances that can apply for very small urban schools see Appendix 4.

What is our vision for small and rural schools?

16. Published in Autumn 2016, the Church of England Vision for Education rearticulated our deeply Christian foundation and commitment to serving the common good.⁹ At its heart is Jesus' promise of 'life in all its fullness'. In the context of our schools it seeks human flourishing that embraces excellence and academic rigour while setting them within a wider framework. The vision explicitly seeks 'the common good of the whole human community and its environment, whether national, regional or local.'¹⁰ The vision articulates this through the following four elements: wisdom, hope, community and dignity.

17. Wisdom is used advisedly as a reminder of the wider context for the academic knowledge and skills that are essential for a good education. Good schools foster academic habits and skills at the same time as nurturing



emotional intelligence, virtue and creativity. One element of this is ensuring that a broad curriculum conveys the message that all academic subjects are valued and, while this can be difficult in a rural context, it is an essential element in ensuring that children are able to flourish.

18. In areas of isolation and deprivation, especially, educating for hope and aspiration is important for the whole community. This is not hope articulated at the level of the individual and at the expense of the community to which he or she belongs. Hope opens up horizons for all members of the school community and the school guides its pupils into ways of fulfilling them.¹¹ This can be especially difficult for rural communities where a lack of resources could lead to a lack of aspiration. This highlights the need for a hope that is realistic, that challenges injustice, uses its resources imaginatively and works for a better future.

19. Our lives are relational and a good education must have a focus on relationships and commitments, guiding pupils to participate in their communities and institutions. Each school should be a hospitable community that seeks the flourishing of teachers, other staff and governors as well as pupils. Management practices should be considered in a wider ethical context and the place of the school within its community and its neighbouring institutions will be of value in rural contexts where isolation can make the bonds of community even more important. It also means that schools in rural areas have a responsibility to ensure that their pupils love and respect those with whom they do not often come into contact.

20. Jesus paid special attention to the 'disadvantaged, excluded, despised and feared.'¹² Ensuring that all pupils know that they are inherently valuable means paying attention to those areas where people can experience



diminishment. 'Among issues especially relevant to dignity in education are safeguarding, prevention of bullying, special educational needs and disabilities.'¹³ This means that children must know that they are made in the image of God that is in all people, regardless of their religion, race, social or economic status, nationality, gender or sexuality. Teachers need to be supported in challenging any behaviour that undermines this.

21. In addition to the theological underpinning provided by our vision it is also relevant for us to consider the theology of what it is to be small. Some reflections on this are set out in Appendix 1.

Embracing change

22. As mentioned, *Working Together* set out two sets of self-review questions, one for school governing bodies and one for Diocesan Boards of Education. The first list opened with the question 'does the school provide a high quality sustainable standard of education that is appropriate for the 21st century?' This is still a key question – we need to be certain that our schools provide an excellent education that enables the children they serve to flourish. This is an underpinning principle of the Church of England's vision for education. If we are to achieve this, we must have a clear sense of what needs to be in place to provide this in rural contexts.
23. Another key question for the Church and for Diocesan Boards of Education in their strategic planning, must be 'How does the distribution of schools in the Diocese serve God's mission?'
24. In this report we will look in more detail at these two points, building on the conclusion of *Working Together* that small and rural schools must work together in order to enable children to flourish in the modern world. In

looking at the challenges that face small and rural schools however it is clear that there is no single straightforward solution.

25. Rural schools are only one part of the rural communities that they serve. We would argue that ideally the question of small and rural schools should be addressed as part of a cohesive Government approach to rural communities. How are those communities to survive and flourish in the future? Withdrawal from the European Union makes a reassessment of the future for rural life in Britain a necessity. The corollary of the argument for a cohesive approach from Government is that the Church must also look at rural schools and rural communities as parts of the same whole.

Recommendation 1

It is still our firm recommendation that every Diocesan Board of Education should use or revisit the questions for DBEs in *Working Together*. These questions are to assist in the development and review of their policy for rural schools. The questions are reproduced in Appendix 3.

Recommendation 2

We recommend that every small school Governing Body and Academy Board use the checklist provided for them in *Working Together*. These questions are for self-review and are a way to consider their own school's future. Governing Bodies and Academy Boards should share the outcomes with their Diocesan Board of Education. These questions are reproduced in Appendix 2.

Part I: Delivering an excellent education and equipping children to flourish



1.1 What does outstanding look like in a small school context?

The nature of the challenge

26. *The Church of England Vision for Education* makes clear that ‘for us, the overall orientation is to life in all its fullness, enabled by excellent education’.¹⁴ This can be challenging when there are so many different interpretations of what constitutes an excellent education. If we are ‘equipping children to flourish’ we need to offer an education that provides children with the skills and knowledge they need for life in the 21st century in the fullest sense possible.
27. Any inquiry into standards of education in small rural schools meets the inherent difficulties generated by the fact that the schools are so small. Simply processing data on small schools is unlikely to yield reliable answers because of the size of the cohorts involved. Luke and Cade suggest that Ofsted reports are more useful as these look at what is happening at child level and relate it to systems and teaching within the school.¹⁵ However, the infrequency of Ofsted inspections means that it can still be difficult to make realistic assessments of how groups of schools are performing.

Looking at the Ofsted reports

28 small rural schools rated outstanding by Ofsted were analysed. There were 15 Church of England schools and the majority were community schools or voluntary controlled. The schools all had fewer than 100 pupils with 36% having fewer than 50 pupils.

18 schools with 51-100 pupils were examined, of which 11 were Church of England. The schools were inspected in 2015-2016. 10 schools with fewer than 50 pupils were examined, of which 4 were Church of England schools. To have sufficient number of schools with fewer than 50 pupils we included schools inspected in 2014-2016.

Establishment Type	No.
Community	12
Voluntary Controlled	10
Academy Converter	3
Voluntary Aided	2
Foundation	1

Pupil No.	2014	2015	2016
0-30	1		
31-50	5	2	2
51-100		8	10

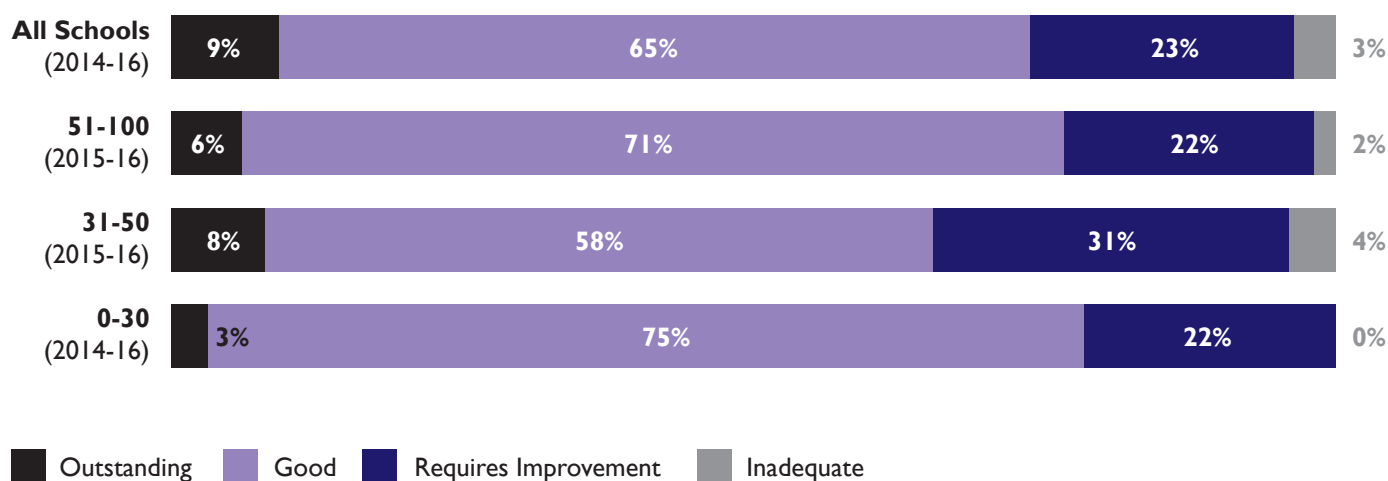
28. Our analysis of 28 small rural schools rated outstanding by Ofsted in the period 2014-2016 shows common threads to begin to identify what an outstanding education can look like in small rural schools. We also analysed seven small schools in urban settings that were rated outstanding. They did not differ in the provision of an outstanding education from their rural counterparts



and the same themes were present in their reports. None of the recurring themes will come as a surprise; they are markers of an outstanding education whatever the setting. The capacity of small schools to deliver this through excellent leadership, teaching, and an imaginative curriculum means that there is no intrinsic reason for children not to have an outstanding education, whatever the school setting, but it is essential that this excellence can be and is delivered.

29. There is a repeated idea of the school as a 'family'. There is a strong emphasis on teachers knowing pupils as individuals and fitting their teaching to the needs of each child so that they make rapid progress. There is a common thread of good relationships with the local authority, parents, church, and community. Although the reports did not focus on them to any great extent, parents were uniformly portrayed as having a positive view of the schools and often being integral to the school community.
30. Safety was a recurring theme in outstanding small schools. Students feel safe and do not experience bullying. Often this is accompanied by a clear understanding of what to do if bullying occurs. One primary school governing body had an e-safety committee that included a pupil representative. Pupils being given roles of responsibility was a common theme. Behaviour was often described as 'impeccable' with teachers requiring high standards. This was a part of a broader picture of excellent spiritual, moral, social and cultural development (SMSC) within the school where pupils were able to express feelings.
31. A clear theme emerged in outstanding small schools: they are not complacent. They focussed on previous areas of weakness to ensure that they did not deepen, had regular quality checks and were clear and well-informed about their school. This included the use of data to track pupils and the governing body being in a position to challenge the headteacher. Good quality leadership was an unsurprisingly common denominator in every outstanding school. The governing body (or equivalent) was skilled, informed and sought training for any skills gaps. They had a clear overview of their school and could monitor and challenge effectively.
32. Teachers have high expectations for their pupils, are imaginative and creative in their teaching, have a thorough subject knowledge and marking is used effectively to increase pupil progress. Even though many of these schools are in rural settings there is a strong emphasis on the variety and breadth of the curriculum. This often included activities and clubs outside of the classroom teaching. Outstanding small schools were marked by a combination of individual pupil attention and a tailored curriculum that fitted pupils' needs.
33. 'Rapid progress' was a phrase used throughout the reports and while applied to specific subjects and key stages, it was most often highlighted as being a feature of 'all pupil groups', showing that an outstanding school ensures that all students, including those with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), are encouraged to make rapid educational progress and those who start behind are given attention to ensure that the gap is closed. This leads to achievement across all groups of learners.
34. Comparing the Ofsted reports with School Performance data¹⁶ shows just how volatile small schools can be. Eight of the Ofsted inspections mentioned high pupil mobility as a feature of the school and small numbers of pupils mean that the school population can vary enormously year by year. One school had an average number of pupils with SEN statements when it was inspected in 2014 but in the 2015-16 performance data it had 13.3% of pupils with SEN statements against the national average of 2.6%. This means that schools can face very varied cohorts year by year.
35. Although there is a high level of volatility and mobility around the pupil population in small schools in rural settings, most of them are below the national average on the percentage of free school meals (FSM), pupils with special educational needs (SEN) and pupils with English as an additional language (EAL). The teacher to pupil ratio was lower than the national average in all but one of the analysed schools.

Small Rural Schools - Ofsted Results (%)



36. Small rural schools seem to perform less well in Ofsted inspections compared to other schools. This is particularly the case for the middle category of small rural schools (with between 31-50 pupils). However, all of these statistics are vulnerable to the weaknesses generated by the small sample size and small cohorts referred to above.

What are the expected components?

37. In March 2016 the white paper *Educational Excellence Everywhere* highlighted the need for a curriculum that balanced skills and knowledge. The paper states that 'education should prepare children for adult life, giving them the skills and character traits needed to succeed academically, have a fulfilling career and make a positive contribution to British Society.'¹⁷

38. The National Curriculum for primary schools expects that children will be taught reading, writing, maths, science, art and design, computing, design and technology, geography, history, music, PE, and from KS2, languages. There is also a statutory requirement to teach religious education and, from 2019, relationships education. Many of these subjects clearly develop skills as well. For example: history enables children to learn how to think critically, weigh evidence, sift arguments and develop perspective and judgement; in science pupils can learn how to test theories via experiments.¹⁸

39. Ofsted inspections look not only at pupils' attainments in academic subjects but also make a judgement about how well a school supports their personal development, behaviour and welfare. Ofsted's new chief inspector Amanda Spielman speaking in June 2017 seemed concerned that there should be a broad curriculum not curtailed by a narrow focus on attainment and exams: 'What we measure through inspection can counteract some of the inevitable pressure created by performance tables and floor standards'.¹⁹

40. Demonstrating the breadth of expectations, a quick comparison of the comments in a handful of recent Ofsted reports on both outstanding small schools and those rated as requiring improvement suggests that, in order for a school to be seen as outstanding, Ofsted's expectations include that, amongst other things:

Staff will:

- use their analysis of assessment data to challenge high ability pupils and less able pupils to catch up;
- plan inspiring and challenging lessons;
- ensure pupils are using and applying knowledge, skills and understanding typical of their age and stage;
- measure the impact of their approach;
- have strong subject knowledge;
- have strong questioning skills and be able to introduce new ideas with clear succinct explanations; and
- teach basic skills well.



Governors will:

- be able to interpret and interrogate data; and
- understand and operate performance management procedures.

Pupils will:

- develop resilience and independence, knowing how to use appropriate resources and find a way to work things out for themselves;
- learn to improve their work;
- develop tolerance and respect and be able to define and discuss racism, homophobia and inequality;
- have access to modern technological resources and understand how to operate safely online;
- through access to high quality PE, develop healthy lifestyles; and
- have access to a qualified Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCO).²⁰

Character education

41. *The Fruit of the Spirit* published by the Church of England Education Office in partnership with the Jubilee Centre in Autumn 2015 ‘underlined the centrality of the formation of pupils’ character within the core moral purpose of a school, re-iterating the importance of character within the Church of England’s concern for education’.²¹ Another recent report *Leadership of Character Education* describes character education as follows:

*Character education seeks to develop and celebrate the flourishing of individuals, communities, families and societies, through the cultivation and encouragement of an expansive range of moral, spiritual, intellectual, civic and performance character virtues. It is central to a Christian vision of ‘life in all its fullness’ and is concerned with developing virtues seeing them as ‘character in action’, grown through experience and demonstrated over time in word and deed.*²²

Bound up in the notion of human flourishing embodied by character education, the *Church of England Vision for Education* also emphasizes the role of excellence and academic rigour.

42. It is beyond the scope of this report to provide a detailed pedagogical analysis of what the best education in a small school context should look like but we cannot allow the constraints of that context to limit the quality of the education provided to children. In practice it seems likely that, in order to consistently meet the expectations summarised here, schools will need to work collaboratively. However, the unreliability of data based on such small cohorts makes it difficult to assess what small schools can really achieve. Understanding with greater clarity what our aspirations for children’s education can be in this context is an area where research is urgently needed.

Recommendation 3

The Church of England Education Office encourages universities and others (including the Department for Education and Ofsted) to develop research on what ‘Good’ and ‘Outstanding’ looks like in a small school setting.

43. If we are to see that the ‘excellent 21st century education’ to which we aspire can be delivered in small and rural schools, what are the key components required? We set out some of the ingredients and potential stumbling blocks in the next section.

1.2 What do we need to deliver our vision for small and rural schools?

A supply chain of highly skilled people

44. The single biggest factor in ensuring high standards in a school is the quality of teaching and leadership. However, there is a major challenge for small schools in the recruitment and retention of teaching staff and leaders. Most sources would acknowledge that this is a national issue,²³ not limited to small schools and rural areas, nevertheless the situation is exacerbated in this context. Small schools do not have sufficient funding to support more than a skeleton staff, frequently no more than a teaching head, a part-time teacher and an administrator. In these circumstances it can be a struggle for headteachers to be strategic as well as operational. The situation also demands that staff are teaching across multiple age groups at all times and there is little opportunity to develop or access specialisms. It is more difficult for staff at any level to develop as interaction with peers is limited and any time out of school for CPD purposes incurs the cost of cover from budgets that are already very tight. Even the opportunities for informal sharing of ideas in a staffroom setting are reduced through the small number of staff in the school. In the very situation where, arguably, we need the most talented and the most resilient staff, the odds are stacked against both their recruitment and retention.

45. How can this be addressed? In other countries with remote communities like Australia and Norway, and in other sectors, like healthcare, this has been addressed in many ways.²⁴ The following points have been used in a variety of countries and sectors to try and enhance recruitment and retention:

- Get the 'right' students: recruiting from rural backgrounds increases the chance of teachers returning to teach in rural communities.
- Train students closer to rural communities: ensure students have positive experiences of rural schools. Australia and Canada have 'situated major teaching and research units in rural areas... a policy which has had success in increasing recruitment.'
- Exposure to rural practice during teacher training.
- Specialty training schemes: 'rural track' training and the possibility of bursaries dependent on going to work in a rural area.
- Match curricula with rural needs: ensuring that curricula include rural topics to enhance the competencies of professionals working in rural areas, increasing job satisfaction and retention.

- Suitable professional development: designing professional development programmes that meet the needs of rural teachers and are accessible from where they live and work. Facilitate experienced teachers being able to move to rural areas mid-career, ensuring they have specific training to succeed in that change.
- Support rural schools in mentoring newly qualified teachers.²⁵



46. One of David Cameron's campaign pledges in the 2015 election was the 'National Teaching Service' which was to support blackspots for teacher recruitment, including rural areas. This proved challenging to resource²⁶ as many of the young people targeted were reluctant to move to rural areas. If this is to be improved new strategies must be developed. This could include encouraging more people at a variety of stages in life, who already live in or close to rural communities, to become involved in teaching, as well as national recruitment campaigns that highlight some of the lifestyle benefits of working in rural environments combined perhaps with offers of year-long secondments. Other strategies arise from creating larger groups of schools that can share staff across several sites permitting a wider network of colleagues and opportunities for wider experience, CPD and career development. These schools would be able to develop a model CPD entitlement for staff to aid with recruitment. Part of preparing staff for these settings should be developed through specific Teaching School provision. Once in post additional pastoral support should be considered. Many Dioceses have historically operated systems of pastoral support for new heads in isolated schools. A similar model adopted by LAs, RSC offices and MATs and extended to a wider group of staff would be beneficial. The Church of England Foundation for



Educational Leadership has recently piloted a system of peer to peer support networks across different regions with the aim of meeting some of the challenges for staff in small and rural schools.

Recommendation 4

The Church of England Foundation for Educational Leadership should make continuing support for the needs of leaders in rural and small schools a key focus of its work, supporting the development of networks and professional development programmes tailored for this sector.

Recommendation 5

Teaching Schools and other providers of ITT and CPD for school staff should be encouraged to develop specific modules that reflect the needs of staff in small schools.

Peer Support Networks

The Church of England Foundation for Educational Leadership's Peer Support Networks are encouraging leaders to work together on shared leadership priorities, empowering one another to engage deeply with the Church's vision for education and to learn from each other. Our experienced network facilitators guide this exchange, and ensure it combines a focus on practical leadership issues in school with rich personal development for participants.

Key Statistics

65 participants joined the Peer Support Network; nine in ten respondents said participation had increased their confidence as a leader and helped them identify and develop a support network.

Initial Findings

There was increased collaboration between schools:

- Often this was in cases where they had previously seen each other as competitors.
- Schools particularly exchanged practical ways to make the Church's vision for education reality.
- Participants in the network felt stimulated to consider innovative approaches to shared challenges across their schools.
- New connections made between schools have equipped their leaders to be better informed to carry out their roles, both within Dioceses and through significant connections made across diocesan borders through our regional approach.

Lessons Learned

- Participants would value greater use of online communication in between face-to-face conversations, and also to make links with schools in similar contexts across the country.
- Continuing to grow the network would enable clusters to be located closer together, making reciprocal school visits more practical.

Next Steps

The Peer Support Network in Year 2 will be:

- More consistently structured across the country, focusing on themes such as leading teaching and learning, leading vision and ethos, and leading character education. This will enable sharing on a local level, but also national level exchange of ideas and development.
- Enhanced with a greater input of leadership theory to promote the personal development of participants. The network will be grown, providing a greater range of schools to work with nationally, and to visit locally.

Case Studies

Anil Gand

Headteacher, Sundridge and Brasted Church of England Primary, Rochester Diocese

Developing our School Improvement Plans

“We were grouped by both geographical criteria and a number of factors including our experience, ensuring exposure to different school types. This helped to broaden my learning within the network. We visited each other’s schools, in the network, with the Church of England vision for education and ethos at the forefront of our discussions. One of the areas that I focussed on was our school improvement plan and how we could incorporate the Church of England vision and values into it. I sat down with the leadership team and we re-drafted our plan to incorporate the vision including, in particular, how the children are valued. The network assisted me in doing this as I was able to examine what other Church of England schools were doing with their improvement plans and how they were incorporating the Church of England vision and values within them.”

Duncan Nelmes

Headteacher, Littleham Church of England Primary School, Exeter Diocese



Being a Good Neighbour

“As a result of the network focus group we created a network with local schools which wouldn’t have otherwise existed. In this network we worked on a shared learning focus for the term. Previously there has been a narrative of competition between the schools – working collaboratively with schools next door has not always been straight forward due to the competition for student numbers - this can distract from acting out our Christian values in leadership. The Peer Support Network enabled these barriers to be broken down. We created a sharing network and very quickly we were sharing everything, and planning all sorts of ideas which previously we would not have done. This enhanced the Christian style of leadership in the school and had a direct benefit to both pupils and staff.”

Innovative thinking

47. In *Working Together* we showcased Barrow 1618 Church of England Free school, in the Diocese of Hereford, as an example of an innovative approach based on the school’s rural surroundings. Barrow’s curriculum is grounded in reflecting the rural and agricultural community it serves. Along with other similar schools it has found that its location makes it suitable to work in the ‘Forest School’ tradition of outdoor learning. We also are seeing the development of schools in places like Cornwall and Sussex that take their coastal locations as a way to develop a curriculum and pedagogy to suit the local community.

Schools working together in formal groupings

48. The demographic challenge for rural schools extends from the scarcity of pupils and staff to the availability of governors. Recruiting governors with time, energy and, crucially, the right skills is difficult even in urban settings, so in areas of low population it becomes even more of a challenge. Inevitably the same small group of people find themselves overloaded with a multiplicity of roles as they seek to support their communities.
49. Applying the same approach as for the staff and seeking to maximise resources available again supports the logic of schools working together in formal groupings. Such groupings take the form of a 'hard' federation for maintained schools and a multi-academy trust for academies. The essence is that a single overarching body takes responsibility for the governance of a group of schools. MATs have tended to develop into larger groups than federations and to include schools over wider geographical areas. This structure will usually (and in the case of Church schools should always) also include a local committee established by the MAT board which is often referred to as the local governing body or 'LGB'. It is important to recognise that this body is not independent of the MAT board and can only take on such tasks and responsibilities as are delegated to it by the MAT board. Nevertheless, it is an important local dimension to the structure and affords the opportunity for local parents, clergy and staff and other members of the local community, if appropriate, to be involved in local governance. Large MATs may also have a tier of regional governance (often referred to as 'hubs').
50. One of the main drivers for the development of federations was the emergence of the 'Executive Head' role. In this model a single headteacher takes responsibility for more than one school. The model is applicable, of course, in the MAT structure and the growth of MATs has led to the emergence of the Chief Executive Officer generally operating at a strategic level across a large number of schools. The role will vary and some CEOs do not themselves have teaching experience.
51. The advantage of the emergence of these new roles (and other parallel cross-school functions such as shared subject specialists, teachers, SENCOs and shared business managers/finance officers) is that it provides career progression opportunities which can be key to attracting new staff. However, as these structures become more common across the country it is also clear that, particularly in rural areas where schools in any grouping may be widely distributed, these roles bring different demands and challenges from those headteachers have



traditionally faced and the operation of Executive Heads and CEOs needs to be carefully supported both practically and pastorally.

Maximising resources

52. As this report is published a new national funding formula has been developed by the Government. The NFF will operate as a 'soft' formula in 2018-19 and 2019-20, to work out notional individual school budgets only. These will then be aggregated; it will be up to local areas to then determine how to share out overall core funding between schools.²⁷ Headteachers and governors planning the future for their schools will want to be able to see what flexibilities a multi-school grouping such as MAT or federation could permit. With this in mind, we have provided a simple financial planning toolkit.²⁸ It is recommended that schools use this or a similar resource to review their financial planning. DfE is currently developing model budgets for schools of different sizes to assist schools with benchmarking. These will be accessible via the DfE website.
53. Schools should also take advantage of the efficiencies that can be achieved through joint procurement. The Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA) are taking a lead in promoting joint procurement and efficient purchasing; many LAs still undertake joint procurement and negotiate beneficial arrangements for schools as do Diocesan Education Teams and groups of MATs; the National Institutions of the Church of England have also supported the development of 2 Buy 2 (www.2buy2.com) which provides businesses, charities, schools and churches with the purchasing power of a large membership to make financial savings on day-to-day costs.

54. In some parts of the country schools are experimenting with 'flexi-schooling'. Pupils are registered on the school roll and are in full time education but part of that education is delivered off site. This 'off site activity' must be supervised by a person authorised by the school and could, for example, include parents. Where there are parents who wish to home school their child for part of the time a link with a school can work advantageously for both the child and the school. It can be in the school's interest as it can allow a higher number on roll than would otherwise be possible. A report by CfBT Education Trust reviews this system in operation at Hollinsclough in Stafford LA area.²⁹ It is in use in some schools in the Peak District. While it is dependent on parents who seek an alternative approach.



Physical resources

55. The condition of school buildings is a national issue. For our small rural schools it can be a major challenge. Nineteenth century buildings from the original waves of church school building are often an awkward size and shape for modern education provision. High ceilings make them difficult to heat and expensive to run and high costs of maintenance in the context of what are, sometimes, listed buildings are all issues. Later generations of building also have their drawbacks: metal frame windows and asbestos to name but a couple of examples. Where numbers on roll are low there can be little money for routine maintenance and public funding is usually focused on larger premises when it comes to major capital projects.

56. Where a school's budget is under pressure and numbers on roll are low it can be difficult to justify a decision to keep a school open when significant investment would be required to bring the building up to standard. Part of 'an excellent 21st century education' must include the delivery of that education from premises that are fit for purpose. One very current issue for many of these rural schools at the time of writing is the requirement for all schools to have high perimeter fences for safety reasons. This can be a challenge to implement in rural surroundings. Local communities may well object from an aesthetic point of view or because there is a strong community feeling of ownership of the school and the use of security measures is seen as exclusive of the community. The reality is that schools must have adequate safeguarding precautions in place while working with the community to ensure that it still feels engaged with the school.

57. Another increasingly important resource for schools in the 21st century is internet access. This might also provide a way for widely distributed schools in formal partnerships to work easily together, for example, meetings or shared lessons by video link. It is one of the ironies of our times that those areas that could perhaps benefit most from good broadband services are those where the geography makes broadband difficult to supply. In the Diocese of Norwich, an alternative to the national infrastructure has been developed, 'WiSpire uses parish churches across the Diocese as the platform to deliver speed reliable wireless broadband internet access to local communities (especially to areas where current speeds are very poor) supporting both business and residential customers as well as the potential for the delivery of services.³⁰ Working with smaller suppliers using fibre optic and siting transmitters on Church towers has led to an improvement in services in Norfolk. It is possible that some schools could also host transmitters. Public Health England (PHE) have said that there is 'no reason why wi-fi should not continue to be used in schools and in other places.'³¹

58. It is also clear that, as technological teaching resources develop, small schools could be at the forefront of taking advantage of these resources. In an isolated community the ability for audio-visual real-time interaction with schools in other parts of the world enables the children in our schools to be part of global communities. The British Council is already working with schools to make links like these and broaden children's understanding of the world. Increasing research into new teaching resources that utilise artificial intelligence in order to tailor learning to individual children also raises other possibilities that could be pioneered in areas where remoteness and small populations make conventional teaching more challenging to deliver.



Diocesan leadership

59. As the education landscape evolves, DBEs increasingly find themselves as one element amongst many in education across their Diocese. Whereas previously a typical range of key relationships for Diocesan Education Teams encompassed school governing bodies and heads, clergy and LAs, the complex map of local relationships and networks now also embraces teaching schools, universities, local RSCs and their teams as well as other MATs whether local, regional or national chains.
60. Dioceses need an overall strategic plan for their small schools and a clear idea of where they fit into the Diocese's vision for its communities. This will inform and be informed by work with the RSC's team, Ofsted and LAs amongst others.
61. The way in which the Church is embedded in and cares for communities means that it has the ability to consider questions around its schools in a holistic way. Parish churches and village schools have long sat at the centre of rural communities and many fear their closure or removal seeing them as key building blocks of community life, along with the post office, the pub and the village shop. This will be discussed further in part two below. It is a reminder at this stage that any strategy developed for rural Church schools will of course need to be balanced with the diocesan strategy for its engagement with communities.
62. In *Working Together* we recommended a set of headline questions that might be asked by DBEs and by individual school governing bodies in seeking to understand how any particular school serves its community. These were:
- How inclusive is it of the children of the community?*
 - Do all children go to this school or do some choose to go elsewhere? If so, why?*
 - What story do local demographics tell about the future for such a school?*
 - Is the village one where families with children choose (or can afford) to live?*
 - If there are not enough local children, where does the school draw its pupils from: neighbouring villages without a school, or nearby towns from which parents prefer to send their children out to the village school?*
 - And if the latter is the case, what impact does that, in turn, have on those urban schools, and what are the sociological factors in play?*³²
63. These remain challenging questions for small schools but represent the kind of hard edged approach that is required in order to take objective decisions in the interests of children. We know that many DBEs as well as many governing bodies may struggle to apply this objective focus as there is potential for outcomes that could feel unsettling for the community both within and outside the school. If Church of England schools are to provide the education the Church aspires to, those difficult decisions must be embraced as opportunities to re-imagine what rural communities can be.
64. In order to implement a diocesan-wide strategy and engage school governing bodies in finding a way forward together, it is helpful to bring together both clergy and education staff at the highest level in order to give a clear and united message. One example of such an approach being employed to great effect is from the Diocese of Bath and Wells. The endorsement of the DBE's strategy by the Diocesan Bishop and the joint delivery of a series of roadshows across the Diocese has enabled genuine progress to be made in establishing groups of schools working together in formal collaborations.

Diocesan Strategic Lead

In the Diocese of Bath and Wells 126 out of 183 schools are under 210 in number on role and 46 of those are under 100. In 2015 some of these schools had already begun to form or join various kinds of structural collaborative arrangements and the Diocesan MAT (the Bath and Wells Multi Academy Trust or BWMAT) was in its second year, with 10 schools already in. Concerned that schools needed advice and support on the way forward, the DBE agreed that its officers should be proactive in finding effective local solutions that best served its schools and children, structured within an overall strategic framework for all church schools within the Diocese.

The DBE Chair and the DDE met with the Bishop and were given a clear direction to pursue. This was followed by meetings between the DDE and the CEO of the Bath and Wells MAT with the Regional Schools Commissioner to share their plans.

With no school big enough to stand alone, schools were offered a number of collaborative options underpinned by a Christian ethos. This stance committed the DBE to maintaining and developing the family of church schools while recognising the very real changes that were taking place including reduced budgets, increased floor targets and demographic shifts. The options were:

1. Hard Federate – although this is likely to be on the basis that this is just the starting point for change
2. Join the Diocesan MAT
3. Join an existing MAT or single academy converting to a MAT
4. Form a new MAT

These were discussed at a series of 5 roadshows during June 2015 offering Heads, Chairs and Parish partners the opportunity to hear about the diocesan view of partnership working. In addition to its church schools the DBE's staff team welcomed the Bishop of Bath & Wells, all 3 relevant LAs, the RSC, DBE members and a number of other interested parties. The presentations and pack were all available on the

diocesan website to download and share for more than a year afterwards.

The attendance rate was over 84% showing that the timing was right to interest a large number of schools in the Diocese. Feedback in general was positive. Further meetings took place with a number of schools. Several of these were groups of schools that could potentially form a hub in the hub model introduced at the roadshow. The DBE's staff team also offered a series of 10 follow-up sessions before the feedback forms needed to be returned on 31st October.

Following replies from all the schools, the DBE's team gave thought to how some potential clusters might be developed and took steps to broker some of these partnerships where appropriate. The team has continued to work closely with the BWMAT to ensure that these clusters make strategic sense for the Diocese as a whole.

As of November 2017, 60 of the church schools in the Diocese are now in a MAT. 19 (rising to 30, shortly) are in the Bath & Wells MAT and the rest are in 15 other mixed MATs across the Diocese. There are now 26 schools in 15 federations. Roughly a third of the remaining schools have taken minuted resolutions to join various Multi Academy Trusts and some of the rest of the schools (approximately 60 out of 183) are actively exploring their options.

Recommendation 6

Diocesan Boards of Education should work closely with those engaged in developing strategies for rural ministry in their Diocese.

65. The challenge for any DBE is that, in promoting the development of Church of England education across the Diocese, they operate with limited formal powers when it comes to intervention. The Church of England's structure allows for much local autonomy and, as a result, DBEs and their staff must achieve results through influence and persuasion rather than through the powers afforded to RSCs and LAs. Some DBEs have been able to strengthen their staff teams with experts in a variety of areas. This has been particularly valuable in enabling teams to support and promote the raising of standards of achievement in schools. This support is often a key factor in enabling Dioceses to continue to engage with their whole diocesan family of schools. The knowledge that there is a strong team available to support structural moves by schools can also be a factor in encouraging schools to move into hard federations and MATs.



66. In this section we have explored some of the key elements required to enable schools to provide an education consistent with the Church of England's vision. It is important that we focus and refine our work and our strategies to deliver that vision where it is needed most. In our next section we consider the distribution of our schools and their links to communities.

Part 2: How does the distribution of schools serve as God's mission?

How did we get here?

67. The Church of England's early ambitions in education were around providing a school in every parish that any child could attend. The population at that time was more widely distributed across the countryside and there was a need for schools for that population. Since that time the emphasis has changed and, subsequent to the development of compulsory education and the greater involvement of LAs from the end of the nineteenth century onwards, there has been less need for the Church to make provision for those who could not afford to pay to go to school.
68. Since 1944, there has been a greater focus on the expansion of Church of England school provision in urban environments and a perception that those populations in greater need and where the Church would naturally see the call upon its mission to combat the effects of deprivation, are largely (but not exclusively) urban. The nature of the countryside and rural communities has also evolved quite radically in some parts of the country. Some schools built to serve the children of agricultural labourers are now largely catering for those from more affluent backgrounds. There is a question to be asked therefore around where the Church should be focusing its energy.

Where should we go now?

69. Diocesan Education Teams will be aware of small schools where provision is weak for one reason or another: long term struggles to recruit and/or retain staff; school buildings are unsafe and beyond repair; rolls are declining. Unless there is an overwhelming reason why such a school must remain open (for example, there is no other school within the specified distance or the school is located in challenging terrain and local children could not reasonably reach other schools), it can be difficult for a

MAT, governing body or an LA to justify keeping the school open.

70. The closure of any school is contentious, but it is particularly so in rural settings where other local facilities are often much reduced. Parents (whether living locally to the school or not) and campaign groups as well as local MPs are also often drawn in to lobby against closure. In these situations it can be difficult to keep the focus of decision-makers on the interests of children. It is important to keep in mind that if it is not possible to supply an excellent 21st century education in the school in question, then keeping the school open is unlikely to be in the best interests of children.

How do concepts of place impact on communities and schools?

71. *Working Together* also recommended a more rigorous approach to judging whether a school is truly 'at the heart of its community':
- Is the school a focal point where children grow up together and families meet, thus creating social capital?*
 - How often does the community use the school's facilities?*
 - What can or does the school offer to the community beyond the normal school day?*³³
72. Rural communities in England could perhaps be categorised into two broad groups: tight knit communities with strong social ties where attendance at the village school may well be a signifier of being local; and those more fluid communities with more transient populations where there has not been the opportunity for them to develop close ties over generations. Research contrasting the role of the school in an example of each type of community drew a distinction between communities

where the school 'did things with rather than for the community' and the reverse.³⁴ Their conclusion was that schools that were integral parts of tight knit communities were more likely to generate social capital than those in communities where there were few links between community and school and the community itself was not characterised by strong social ties.

73. A clear-eyed view of the type of community in which the school sits is essential. If a conclusion has been reached that it is not possible in that setting to provide the quality and breadth of education to which children are entitled it becomes even more important for the Church to look at its engagement with that community and to support it through the process of preparing for and adjusting to change. There will not be a standard set of parameters to apply in every case. It will need careful consideration of each community and each school to reach the right conclusion, but this should form part of the strategic development of a new pattern of education delivery that better reflects the likely future demographic of the wider area.
74. Part of that new pattern could include new schools targeting groups of communities, supported by appropriate transport provision. In the 19th century the Church worked productively with local land owners to provide education for local people. As population patterns change and develop, necessitating the closure of some schools, it may be that there is still a need for new rural schools, albeit in different locations. A cluster of villages may not be able to sustain a school in each centre but could benefit from a shared new school in a neighbouring location. LAs, central Government and the Church as well as landowners and developers seeking to sustain and grow rural communities can all work together to fund and/or provide sites for new schools and ensure the development of strong sustainable education provision. While that may in some instances require some children and families to travel further to school this additional environmental challenge should be balanced by ensuring that there is also good provision in rural towns for local children who might otherwise be travelling unnecessarily to schools outside the town.

Community and the role of the church

75. The close working together of church, school and community can exemplify some of the strengths of rural communities. Good models of these relationships in the Diocese of Bath and Wells appear below.



Headteachers from two small rural schools in the Diocese of Bath and Wells share their experience of how schools and communities can work together:

All Saints East Clevedon Church of England VC Primary School

"All Saints Church of England VC Primary School is located directly opposite All Saints Church, and the two have a long history of working together. Due to the school being small it uses the Church Hall as the 'school hall', using it daily for PE lessons, as a learning space and also as a school dining hall. We have accessed funding to upgrade the pathways to the hall and also to improve the seating and dining tables which is in turn used by the community during the evenings and weekends. We also use the glebe field as a sports area, ensuring the children remain active during PE lessons and lunchtimes (weather permitting.) The children are used to walking through the graveyard respectfully to access this play space.

The school's daily act of worship is held in church with the incumbent being a school governor and involved in all aspects of the school's improvement, policies and procedures, with the support of foundation governors. We also seek the support of the church during times of great sorrow- national and international disasters; as well as when members of our school community experience personal loss of an immediate family member.

The church community has also supported the recent major redevelopment of the school's buildings, selling to the local authority a house, belonging to the church and adjacent to the school, in order to enhance the site. The church has further supported us by permitting a storage container to be located in the church car park, the school library in the baptistery and regular access and use of the vestry, church rooms and church buildings for meetings and Ofsted inspectors to occupy. Access to build 4 new classrooms was also facilitated by the Rector and diocese permitting the Rectory garden to be used as storage, and a builder's access route.

We meet termly with the incumbent and church wardens to ensure clear communication. Our annual School Christmas Fayre is held in the church as well as our Christmas performances. As a small Church school we could not provide the children of our community with such high quality learning experiences if it were not for the support of All Saints Church and we believe that the church has benefited from our use of its facilities and the daily life of each pupil at the school. We believe that we are 'better together' and that we can offer children a really valuable experience in their primary education which better equips them for their future."

Swainswick Church of England Primary School

"On the first day of each academic year in September you will see the whole community of Swainswick preparing to welcome the children. At 9.20am, dressed in their smart new uniforms, the pupils and the teachers gather on the playground in their new class lines and listen for the church bells to ring.

The local bell ringers then give their call - three single bells. The school responds by ringing its own bell three times. This signals that church, school and the whole community are ready for the procession to begin. To the sound of church bells ringing across the village, the school then walks, with its banner held high. Parents, members of the community and local congregation line the church path and clap as the children walk inside. Once settled - readings, prayers and hopes for the new -year are read by the children and members of the community. The children position their banner in its resting place overlooking the congregation and songs are sung in an atmosphere of togetherness.

In this small village, the local vicar's determination, generosity and support enables the establishments to intertwine. Due to the school's limited facilities many school activities and events are held in the church or on the vicar's lawn. The children write for the Parish Magazine and are given a reflection corner in church to decorate and express their thoughts for the local community to view.

It does sound idyllic - but as with every community, support and love is always needed. It is here that the vicar plays an integral role in and around the school community. Relationships of trust and care are established where children, parents and staff are listened to. In this unique setting, these strong relations and reflections, both private and public are key to the richness of the Swainswick community of acceptance - that inspires people to be themselves, to contribute and to value each other and their Christian values."

Whole community solutions

76. Research on issues faced by the NHS in rural areas shows that many of the issues faced by rural schools are being faced by other services in rural areas. *Being Rural: exploring sustainable solutions for remote and rural healthcare*, a policy paper for the Royal College of General Practitioners Scotland, pointed out that rural areas are not always experiencing unique difficulties but, rather, the crisis point of difficulties that are hitting the whole system. As such, it is necessary to ensure that national policies are 'rural proofed' to ensure that they do not have a disproportionately negative impact on rural areas. The areas considered of most significance in rural areas were:

- Connectivity (mobile phone/broadband)
- Transport
- Fragility of support services
- Workload
- Professional development
- Education and Training
- Professional and social isolation, including
- Adverse effects on family life.³⁵

77. A key point was that the loss of one service in a rural environment has a knock-on effect throughout the community and, therefore, needs to be planned for effectively across the whole community. The fragility of



support services means that because of the ‘interdependence between services... if one service fails it has a marked knock on effect on the others.’³⁶ This means that the viability of rural communities is dependent on a range of different services. It is important to pay attention to this when considering the closure of small rural schools to ensure that it does not lead to further impacts on the wider community. The provision of rural services needs to take place within a wider conversation about community resilience.

78. Other areas that *Being Rural* identified as having a significant impact on rural provision:

- Family life: appropriate housing, employment for spouses or partners, access to good schools, and mobile/broadband coverage were all mentioned as deterrents for recruitment.
- Social isolation: rural isolation is not just professional but social and this needs to be acknowledged.
- Perceptions of rurality: overcoming negative perceptions of remote and rural careers.

Diocese of Derby

The Diocese of Derby is currently addressing some of the challenges in its rural areas by appointing some clergy to employ their gifts more widely outside their parish work and across the Diocese as a whole. Reverend Nicky Fenton, whose varied roles encompass being the priest for four rural churches, supporting the Diocesan Bishop as his Chaplain as well as acting as diocesan schools missionary (looking at how churches and schools work together across the Diocese) writes about her work:

“I collected 100 questionnaire responses from people we had asked to suggest areas they thought my role could usefully focus on. The main aspects we have identified through that listening were:

disseminating good practice through networking, visiting schools, contributing to training events and meetings, producing leaflets, info on the website, promoting resources, problem solving and conflict transformation in individual settings;

- training and developing people through creating a new diocesan model for governor training, recruiting foundation governors, organising an annual conference for Christian volunteers and organisation working in schools, offering mentoring to clergy identifying school's work as an area for development in their ministerial development review;
- being part of something bigger through auditing who is working in which schools and identifying and responding to gaps in provision, working with deaneries to help churches and schools engage together missionally;
- implementing a diocesan ‘Schools Value of the Year’ community (which includes launching an annual Bishop’s Badge award ceremony to give awards to church schools for pupils who best live out the Value of the Year as well as projects delivering that value in their community and schools contributing to the Bishop’s harvest appeal); and

- delivering outstanding collective worship through creating, resourcing and training teams to go into schools.

In addition, through 11 in-depth interviews between schools and churches I was able to identify different aspects of what a good relationship between a church and a school might look like in practice. I found the following approaches in operation:

- supporting one another in bringing about cultural change within their institutions
- working together as community pastors
- being part of something bigger
- an ethos of generosity, hospitality and mutuality
- distinctive leadership and governance.”

Diocese of Carlisle

In the Diocese of Carlisle, Michael Mill, Diocesan Director of Education comments:

“Dioceses are looking to respond to the challenges facing local congregations in largely rural dioceses: falling numbers with a loss of revenue, fewer full time clergy and many old buildings. In a diocese like Carlisle the diocese is seeking to develop a model not dissimilar to that which we are encouraging in schools. By working ecumenically mission communities across several parishes are being created with a mission community leader supported by a range of (fewer) stipendiary posts, lay ministers and house for duty but with the aim of empowering local lay people to be envisioned into ministry. The opportunity exists for such communities to engage strategically with all the schools, perhaps as their ‘learning communities’. Teaching governance skills or other supportive activity with schools will have an equal place with other ministries and individual parishes will no longer have to stand alone in supporting schools. There are many mutual benefits of supporting each other to promote long term sustainability for the community. A key strand of the strategy is to look again at the purpose and use of church buildings and how school buildings play into this.”

Supporting communities as patterns of school and church change

80. The Bishop of Leicester has recently established a Rural Commission in the Diocese.³⁷ This has yielded many insights including that there is an acceptance amongst many that the nature of rural communities and rural services is changing. Along with that acceptance there is a strong sense that the depth of change needs to be acknowledged and that communities can suffer a collective sense of bereavement that must be recognised and supported.
81. Occasionally the only way forward in the interests of children will be for a small school to close. In these circumstances it is important that the church both at parish and diocesan level supports the community. Handling the closure sensitively, providing as much clear information as possible up front and acknowledging that some elements of formal and informal reconciliation may need to take place subsequently (and then ensuring that they do) will be key.

Recommendation 7

The statutory process for decision making on the future distribution of schools in rural areas should be reviewed to ensure decision-makers focus on the educational interests of children.

Recommendation 8

All stakeholders in the rural environment should work together to re-imagine how effective education will be delivered in this context in the 21st Century.

Part 3: Conclusion and recommendations



79. It will be apparent from this report that we continue to believe in the importance of the availability of education provision in rural areas and that demographic forces will dictate that much of that provision will be in small schools, often with fewer than 100 on roll. We cannot accept that the standard of education in this provision should be anything less than the same excellent education that we aspire to in all Church of England schools, whatever their size or location. In order to provide the education that children deserve, small schools must work together in formal alliances to enable sharing of resources and expertise. Where small schools serve isolated communities and there are no other schools within a suitable distance, such schools may need additional support in order to make appropriate provision. In other situations schools will need to look at the future realistically, taking into account projected demographic developments in the best interests of children and the education they deserve to receive. Through this process new patterns of education in rural areas can develop across the country to serve the rural communities of modern England.

Recommendations

1. Diocesan Boards of Education should continue to review and update their strategy for rural schools using the checklist in Appendix 3.
2. School Governing Bodies and Academy Boards should review their future plans using the checklist in Appendix 2 and share the outcomes with their Diocesan Board of Education.
3. The Church of England Education Office encourages universities and others (including the Department for Education and Ofsted) to develop research on what 'Good' and 'Outstanding' looks like in a small school setting.
4. The Church of England Foundation for Educational Leadership should make continuing support for the needs of leaders in rural and small schools a key focus of its work, supporting the development of networks and professional development programmes tailored for this sector.
5. Teaching Schools and other providers of ITT and CPD for school staff should be encouraged to develop specific modules that reflect the needs of staff in small schools.
6. Diocesan Boards of Education should work closely with those engaged in developing strategies for rural ministry in their Diocese.
7. The statutory process for decision making on the future distribution of schools in rural areas should be reviewed to ensure decision-makers focus on the educational interests of children.
8. All stakeholders in the rural environment should work together to re-imagine how effective education will be delivered in this context in the 21st Century.

Appendix I: A theology of small

- 1.1 In the bible, God consistently raises up the small and places the outsider in the centre of the narrative of salvation. The youngest son is called to be a king, the smallest town is the setting for the greatest of events, and a small group of people bear faithful and continuous witness to God. 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 that the world praises for being great and mighty.
- 1.2 Not only is Israel itself a small place but Bethlehem and Nazareth are rural towns that are singled out as places in which salvation is being worked out. 'And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.' The humble origins of Jesus remind us that God sanctifies the particular, as well as showing that our origins ultimately lie in God and not in our geographical location.
- 1.3 This love of the small and humble extends to people as well. It is David, youngest of all the sons of Jesse, who defeats a great warrior and goes on to become King of Israel. It is the young girl captive from the land of Israel who speaks up and tells the 'great man' Naaman who can heal him. It is the small boy with loaves and fishes whose generosity is turned by Jesus into a sign of the coming Kingdom.
- 1.4 God does not only choose the smallest and the youngest, but also picks the counterintuitive person. The one who has internalised the idea that they are no good and not capable of leadership or achievement. Moses is not the obvious choice for a leader. He himself asks, 'Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?' When this is not a sufficient excuse he says, 'O my Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor even now that you have spoken to your servant; but I am slow of speech and slow of tongue.' God does not accept this as a reason for a person to be cast off as unworthy and instead makes Moses a deliverer of a nation out of slavery. Throughout the Bible, God sanctifies the small, the particular, the insignificant and the unimportant ensuring that no person and no place is seen as unworthy.
- 1.5 Although all of the above are small, God's grace is such that each one can be a part of God's purposes. David uses the skills he has learned in keeping his father's flock. The servant girl remembers her origins as an Israelite and the boy responds to Christ's message with his own limited resources. Matthew's reference to Bethlehem comes from a prophecy in Micah: 'But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days.' It has been significant for centuries and is being called to fruition in the Gospel story.

Appendix 2: Self-review questions for governing bodies

- 2.1 These self-review questions are intended to help governing bodies build a picture and analyse the context of the school dispassionately, and then to consider their options on the basis of that analysis. It is recommended for use by governing bodies to help them continue to reflect on their strategic plans and their need to work in partnership with other schools.
- 2.2 DBEs encourage self-determination and respect the autonomy of individual governing bodies, at the same time seeking to work with you at an early stage, to ensure that the wider good of the whole family of Church of England schools can be promoted. The DBE therefore has an expectation that the governing bodies of all rural schools will conduct this review of their school's strategic position each year.
- 2.3 The checklist is not intended to provide a formulaic approach that determines how and in what ways schools should collaborate, but it does identify some key issues for consideration. It is vital to understand the context for any school and for the DBE and local schools to work in partnership to provide a secure future for education.
- 2.4 As indicated in the body of this report, all schools are encouraged to complete the review. Schools with less than one form of entry must use the self-review every year and completed forms should be returned to DBE to assist it with its responsibility for strategic planning. This is not intended to be a further burden for schools but a helpful tool to enable the DBE to have a dialogue with governing bodies. It is intended to be proactive and should lead to a discussion about next steps and a suitable action plan. The DBE will be happy to facilitate this discussion with governing bodies.
- 2.5 With each question grade yourself red, amber or green and add comments to explain your judgement.

1. Quality of Education	Rating	Comments
a. Does the school provide a high quality sustainable standard of education that is appropriate for the 21st century?		
b. What is the whole educational experience of children attending this school?		
c. What progress do pupils make?		
d. What was the outcome of your most recent Ofsted and SIAMs inspections?		
e. Given that the Ofsted framework has changed, what is your prediction for future Ofsted and SIAMS inspections based on your SEF and three-year projected attainment?		
f. What is the condition and suitability of the school's buildings?		
g. How secure are the school's finances? – are you having to set a deficit budget within the next three years?		
2. Leadership and Staffing		
a. How easy is it to recruit and retain high quality teaching staff?		
b. What is your leadership structure, how does it assist your strategy for succession planning?		
c. How long is it likely to be before your current head leaves? What do you expect to happen then?		
3. Governance		
a. How many governor vacancies have you got?		
b. How easy is it to find capable governors who have time and skill to give to the school?		
c. Do governors receive regular training and are they suitably equipped to fulfil all of their responsibilities?		

4. Demographics

- | | | |
|---|--|--|
| a. Where do your pupils live? | | |
| b. How many of your pupils live within the village or catchment area of the school? | | |
| c. How many school age children live in the village or catchment area of the school but choose to attend other schools instead? | | |
| d. What are your projected pupil numbers for the next few years, based on an assessment of local demographics (e.g. new housing that is likely to produce new primary aged children, how many?) | | |

5. Links with Community

- | | | |
|---|--|--|
| a. What is the school's place within the community - how integrated is the school in the life of the community? | | |
| b. How are the school's facilities used for/by the community? | | |
| c. How good are the links with the Church? | | |
| d. Is the school used for worship/ Sunday school/after school clubs/holiday clubs etc? | | |

6. Partnership and Collaboration

- | | | |
|--|--|--|
| a. What collaborative arrangements are already or should be in place? | | |
| b. Has the governing body discussed the challenges and opportunities of such arrangements with HT and staff? | | |
| c. Where are the next nearest / surrounding schools and what is their position re numbers/demographics? | | |
| d. What are the next steps you need to take to develop effective structural partnerships with other schools? | | |

Appendix 3: Towards a policy for rural schools

Ten questions for the DBE about their rural schools

Whilst acknowledging the distinctiveness of each diocese and the need for local context to be taken into account, the working group offers these questions as a starting point for each diocese to consider as it forms its own policy for rural schools. Such a policy needs to be set within a wider framework of ensuring that there is high quality sustainable education for all of the children in its schools?

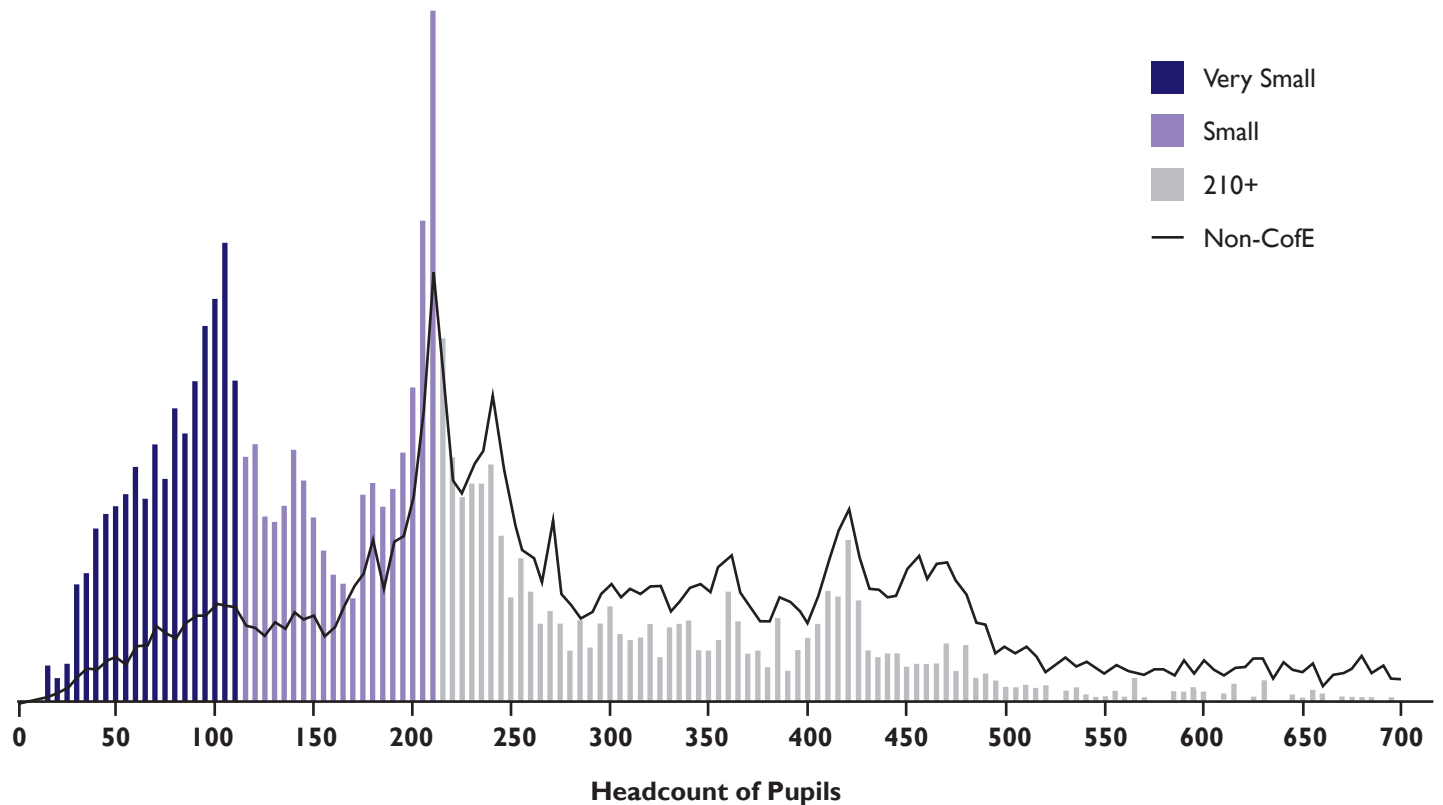
1	How do schools fit into the diocese's wider vision for its rural communities?
2	How does the DBE determine where its own resources are deployed (is it based on number of schools, number of pupils, Ofsted outcomes, SIAMS, something else)?
3	What criteria are used to determine the future sustainability of individual schools? How should this be developed?
4	How will the DBE use the school's self-review to weigh the quality of provision and whether the school is viable, sustainable and essential as part of the diocese's education offer?
5	How does the DBE develop and maintain the distinctiveness of its school provision in rural communities and are the foundation governor places filled with suitably equipped people?
6	What mechanisms exist/need to be developed in order to encourage and support schools to work in formal collaborations?
7	Does/should the DBE offer preferred models for collaboration: MATs, LCTs, Federations etc.?
8	How does the DBE encourage larger schools to offer support and collaborate with smaller rural schools as part of its development of a strong diocesan wide family of schools?
9	What would the likely impact of a national funding formula or the removal of the sparsity allowance be on the funding for small schools within the LAs that the diocese serves and how is the DBE planning for such scenarios?
10	How does the diocese maintain its influence and connection with communities where there is no school or where the Church of England school may need to close?

Appendix 4: Church of England primary schools data

School size

In keeping with the previous *Working Together* report, which included data from August 2013 this data is from August 2017 and provides a snapshot of the educational landscape at that time.

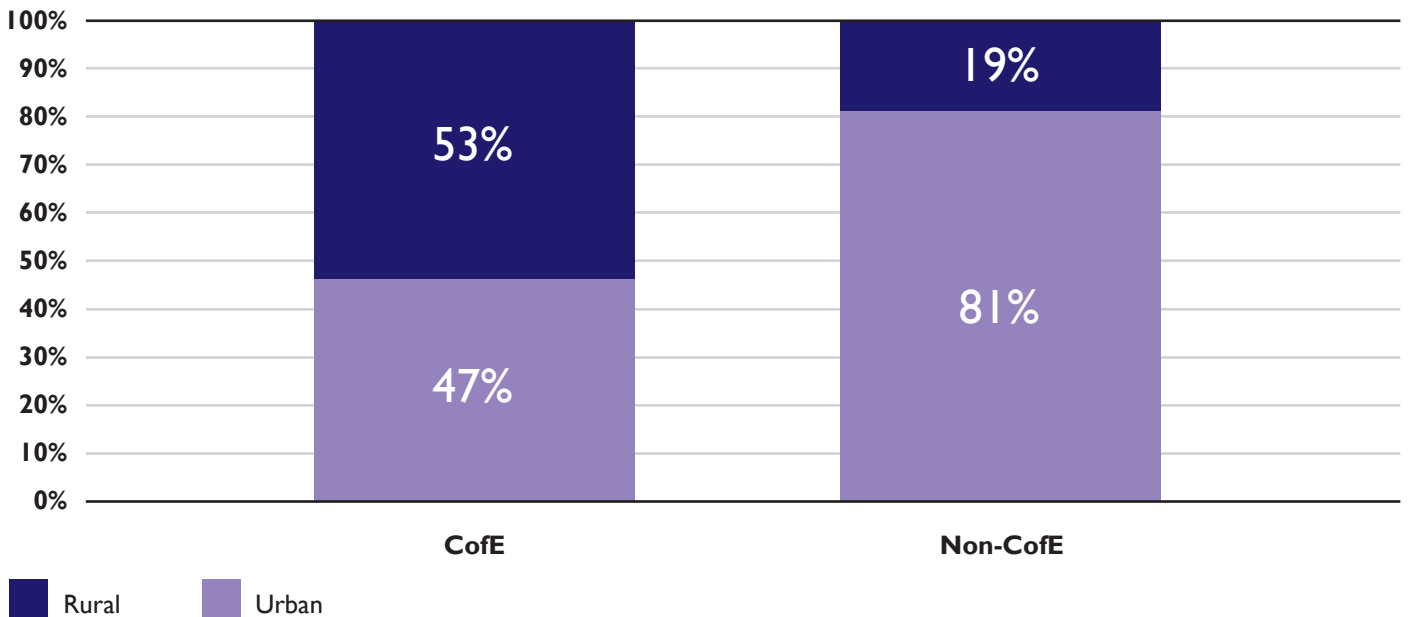
The following figure compares the distribution of Church of England primary schools against non-Church of England primary schools according to the number of pupils on their roll.³⁸ As with the graph published in the 2014 *Working Together* report, it is the shape of the graph that is most important, rather than the details of the numbers. There are still two peaks in the distribution of Church of England schools. One at just under 100 pupils, and another at 200. The higher peak matches a national trend whereas the lower peak is peculiar to the Church of England distribution, and shows the many schools with less than one-form entry.



Rural Urban Classification

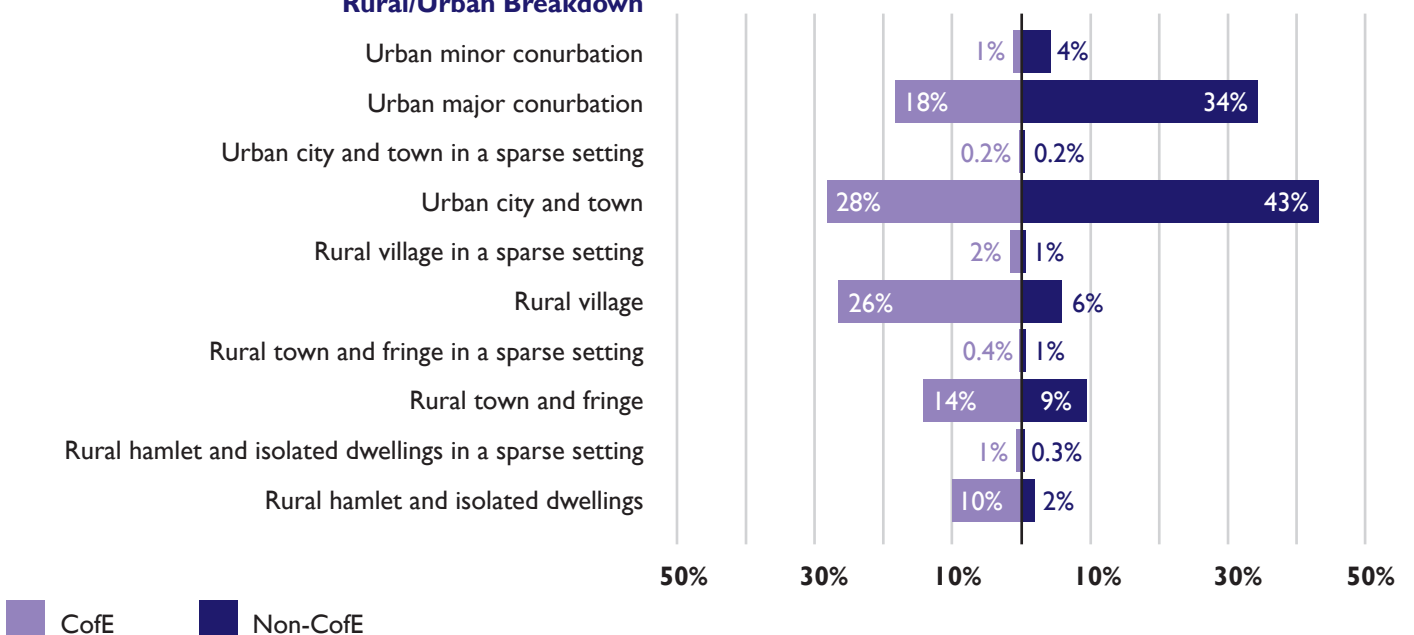
As with the 2014 *Working Together* report, we have categorised schools as rural or urban based on the rural/urban classification used by a range of government agencies, including the Office of National Statistics (ONS) and the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra).³⁹

Using this classification, 53% of Church of England primary schools are situated in rural areas (down from 57% in 2014) compared to only 19% of non-Church of England primary schools (down from 21% in 2014).



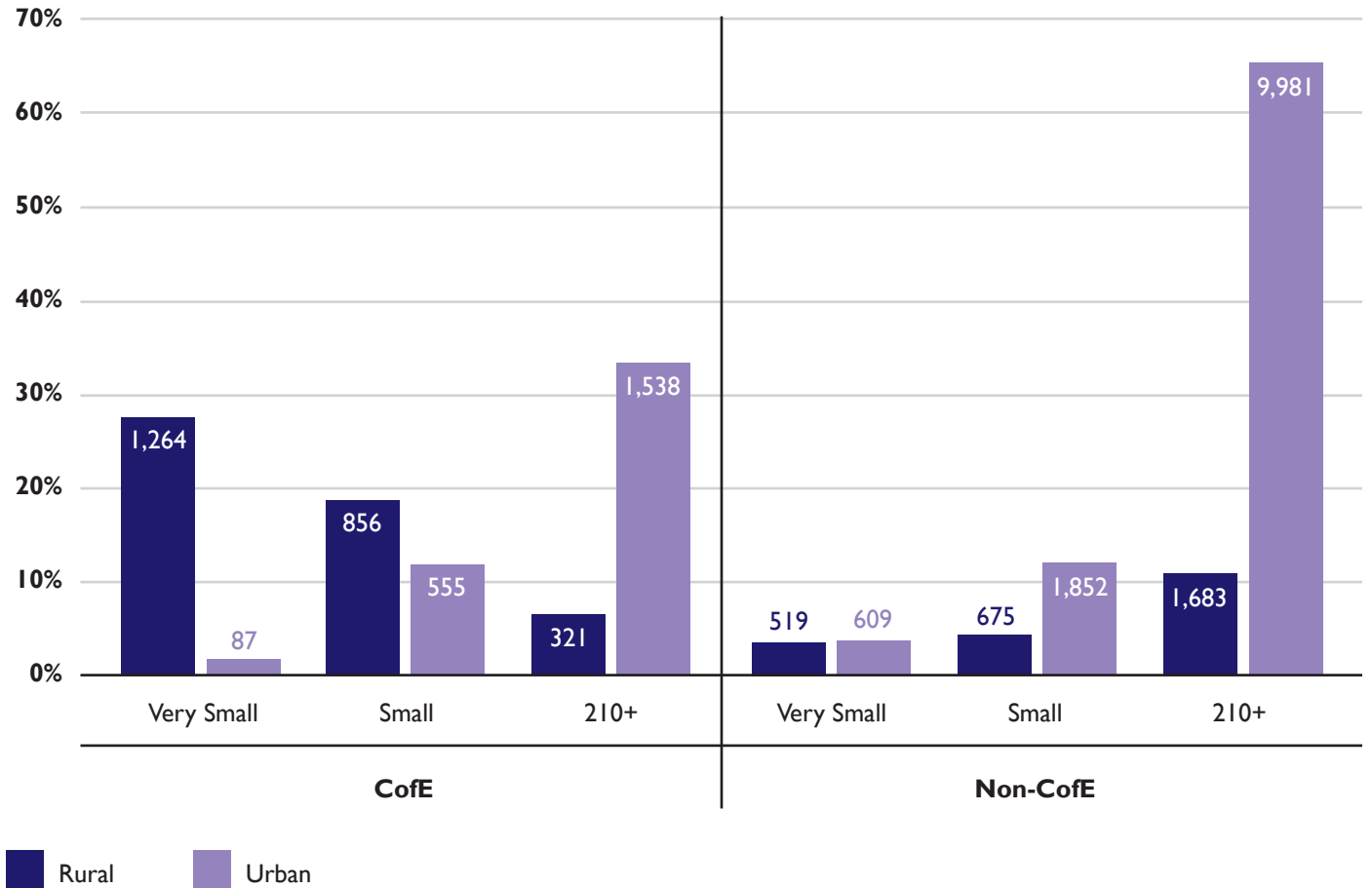
This report has included all schools with a rural classification, but further nuance can be introduced based on population sparsity (i.e. hamlet, village, town and fringe). The below chart breaks down the data further to show percentage of schools in each category.

Rural/Urban Breakdown



Numbers of Schools⁴⁰

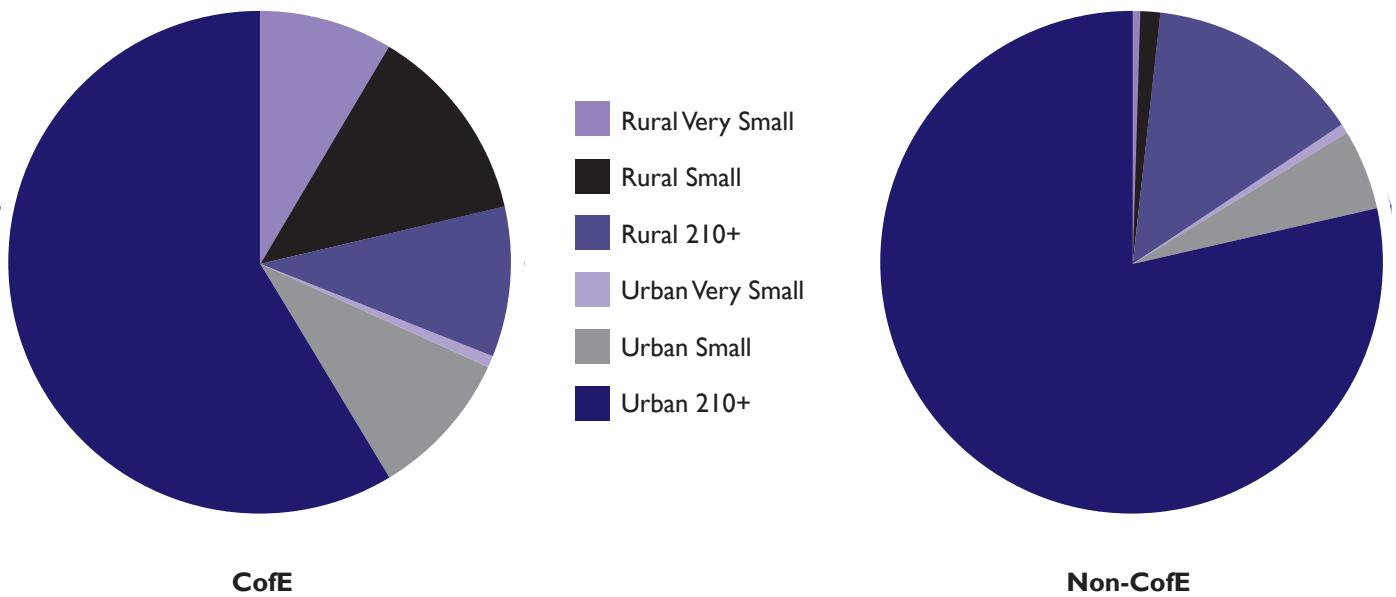
The Department for Education’s categorisation of schools with fewer than 210 pupils as ‘small’ does not adequately reflect the reality of the Church of England’s provision in rural areas. As such, the 2014 report further subdivided our small schools into “Very Small” (<110); “Small” (111-209) and “210+”. This report follows that categorisation.



Headcount of Pupils

While it is clear from the figures above that rural schools make up a significant number of Church of England primary schools, they tend to be relatively small schools and therefore do not represent the equivalent proportion of the pupil population.

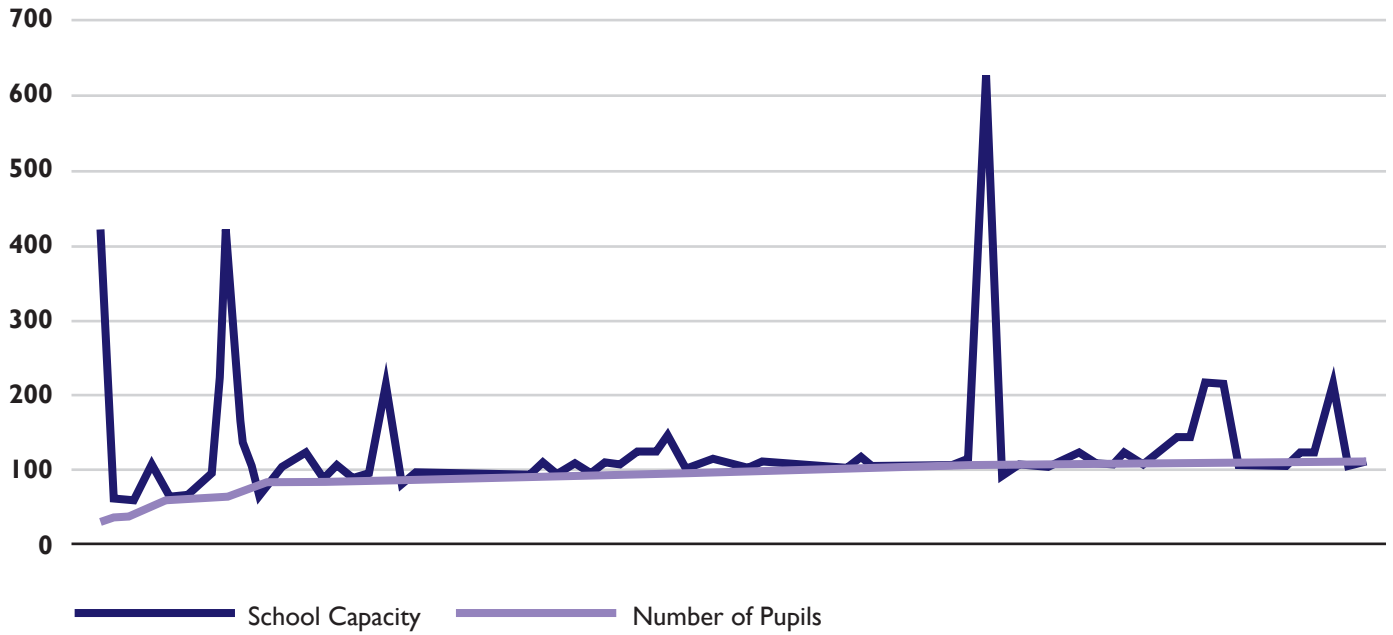
	CofE		Non-CofE	
	#	%	#	%
Rural Very Small	92,971	9%	37,792	1%
Rural Small	135,760	13%	113,475	2%
Rural 210+	110,869	10%	911,016	14%
Urban Very Small	7,884	1%	46,744	1%
Urban Small	99,923	9%	326,871	5%
Urban 210+	631,709	9%	5,291,859	79%



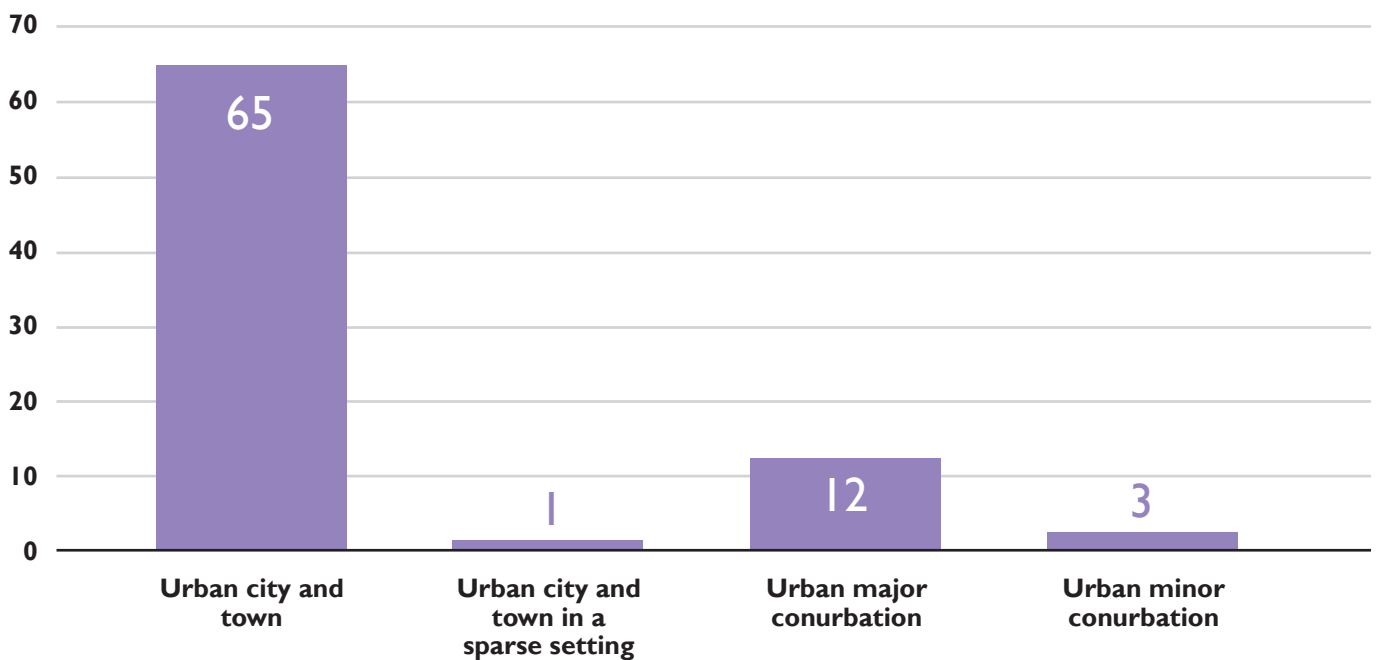
Very small urban schools

There are 81 very small urban Church of England schools. For several of these schools there is a difference between the school's capacity and pupil numbers. This is due in some instances to new schools still growing to capacity.

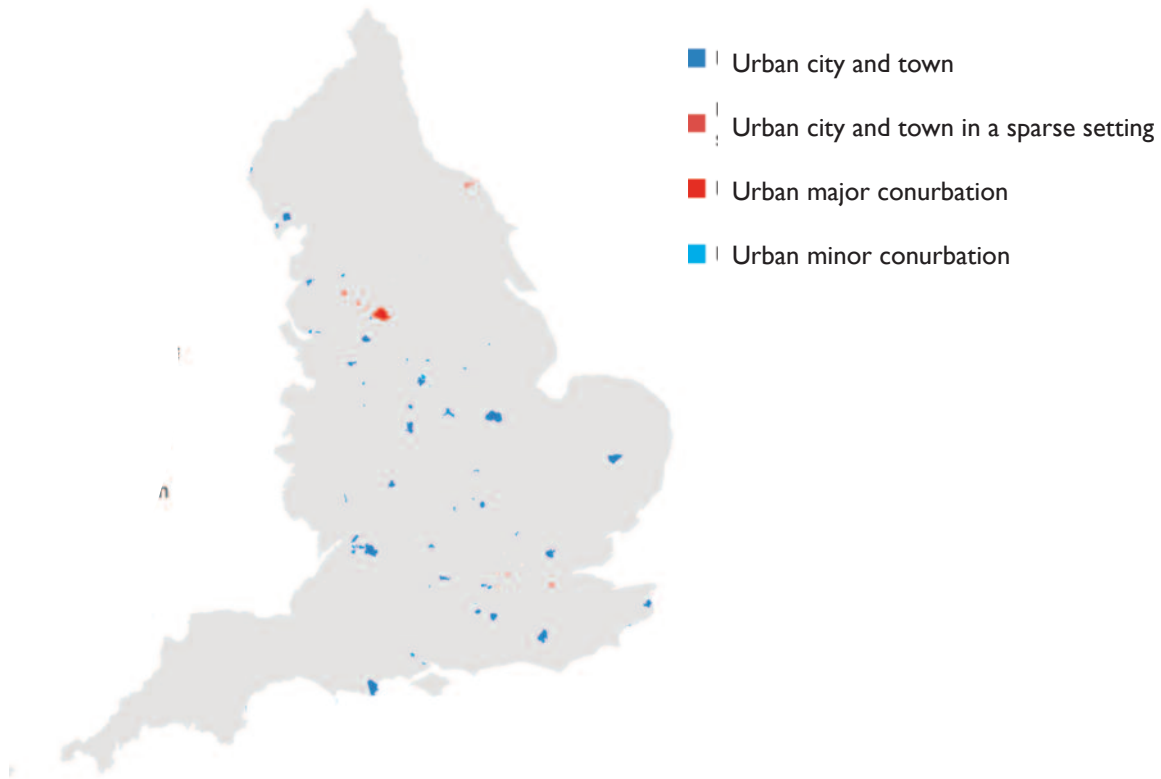
Difference between school's capacity and pupil numbers



Number of very small urban schools



Very small urban schools



Appendix 5: Small and very small urban schools

There is great variety in the context and challenges faced by very small and small schools categorised as urban. This appendix lists some of the particular issues and considerations linked to these schools.

- Some very small/small schools are categorised as urban because of proximity to an urban area but their geography, size of population and catchment area can be rural.
- Market towns are caught between the rural/urban division. They are often at the heart of an agricultural area and serve the rural economy and so are more closely related to their rural surroundings than most urban centres.
- Market towns can face similar problems to rural villages: isolation; poor community facilities; lack of cultural opportunities.
- Very small schools close to medium sized towns or several smaller towns which are not isolated and are often at capacity and so do not face the same challenges as more rural schools.
- Staff recruitment can be easier for small/very small schools in urban areas than in rural areas.
- The physical capacity of school buildings can create challenges for schools as they have to work around these physical limitations as they cater for pupils.
- There can be significant disadvantage (including above average numbers FSM) in market town schools.
- Community and church links in market towns can sometimes be weaker than in rural areas. This sometimes means models of church/school integration that work in rural areas may not translate well to market towns.
- Schools in market towns often serve rural communities most when a rural school closes and they take on the pupils from the closing school.
- Some schools in market towns would become vulnerable if there were good primary schools in neighbouring villages.
- When relationships are built between schools, whether informal or through federations, they tend to follow a rural/urban split because different models will work in each place.
- Like many rural schools, some very small/small schools categorised as urban (but often serving a rural economy and facing similar issues to rural schools) would struggle to stand alone but can get good support by being part of a MAT.

Notes

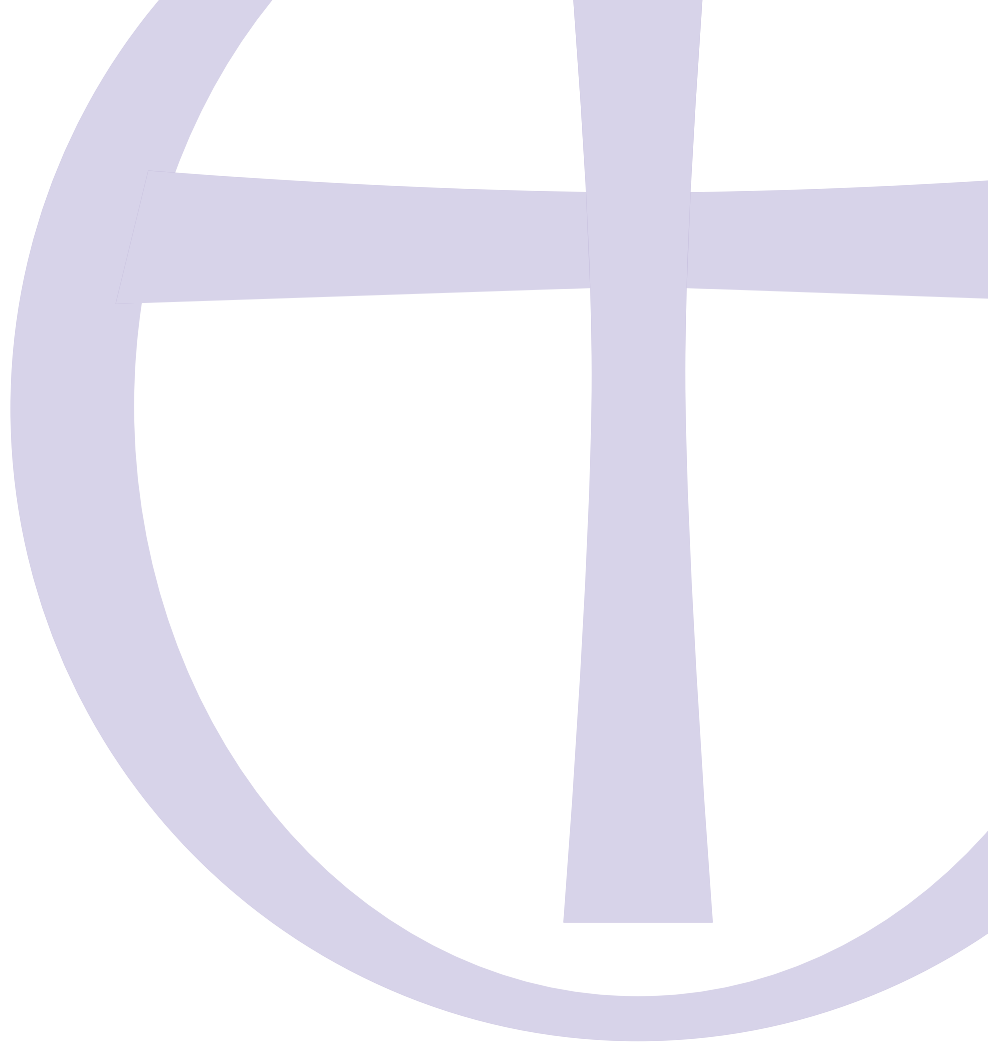
- 1 **Church of England Archbishops' Council Education Division and The National Society**, *The Church School of the Future Review* (Archbishops' Council Education Division, 2012), available at www.churchofengland.org/more/education-and-schools/education-publications
- 2 **Church of England Archbishops' Council Education Division and The National Society**, *Working Together: The Future of Rural Church of England Schools* (Archbishops' Council Education Division, 2014), available at www.churchofengland.org/more/education-and-schools/education-publications
- 3 *Working Together* (2014), p.3.
- 4 *Working Together* (2014), p. 20.
- 5 These are both included in appendices to this report.
- 6 **Department for Education**, *Educational Excellence Everywhere*, White Paper (London: DfE, 2016), pp. 57-58.
- 7 www.get-information-schools.service.gov.uk
- 8 www.ons.gov.uk/methodology/geography/geographicalproducts/ruralurbanclassifications/2011ruralurbanclassification [Accessed 23/02/18].
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- 10 *Church of England Vision for Education* (2016), p. 2.
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- 12 *Church of England Vision for Education* (2016), p. 11.
- 13 *Church of England Vision for Education* (2016), p. 11.
- 14 *Church of England Vision for Education* (2016), p. 6.
- 15 **Luke, I. and Cade, S.**, 'Big ideas about small schools' in Guild HE/Cathedrals Group (eds.) *World Class Teachers, World Class Education* (Guild HE: London, 2017), p. 31.
- 16 www.compare-school-performance.service.gov.uk/find-a-school-in-england
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- 18 www.gov.uk/government/collections/national-curriculum
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- 20 *Ofsted, School inspection handbook: Handbook for inspecting schools in England under section 5 of the Education Act* (August 2016).
- 21 **The Church of England Foundation for Educational Leadership**, *Leadership of Character Education: Developing Virtues and Celebrating Human Flourishing in Schools* (2017), p. 9, available at www.cefel.org.uk/character/ referring to **The Church of England Education Office**, *The Fruit of the Spirit: A Church of England Discussion Paper on Character Education* (October 2015), available at www.churchofengland.org/more/education-and-schools/education-publications
- 22 *Leadership of Character Education* (2017), p. 6.
- 23 ASCL comment on PAC teaching workforce report (January 2018), www.ascl.org.uk/news-and-views/news_news-detail.ascl-comment-on-pac-teaching-workforce-report.html [Accessed 21/02/18].
- 24 For example, **Gaski, M. & Abelsen, B.**, 'Designing medical internships to improve recruitment and retention of doctors in rural areas', *International Journal of Circumpolar Health*, 76:1 (2017).
- 25 Many of these ideas are adapted from **Mack, M. & Maxwell, H.**, *Being Rural: exploring sustainable solutions for remote and rural healthcare*, RCGP Scotland Policy Paper written by the Rural Strategy Group Scotland (August 2014). This will be discussed further in the section on whole community solutions in part two.
- 26 The BBC and TES reported that only 54 teachers were recruited for the scheme: www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-38172256 and www.tes.com/news/school-news/breaking-news/exclusive-dfe-abandons-national-teaching-service.
- 27 **Bolton, P. & Roberts, N.**, Implementation of the national funding formula for schools in England, (House of Commons Briefing Paper, CBP08106, London, 2017).
- 28 A toolkit for schools with 150 pupils or fewer to look at projected financial implications of working together as a MAT can be found on the Church of England Education Office webpages www.churchofengland.org/more/education-and-schools/church-schools-and-academies/staff-contracts-schools-and-academies. Another useful toolkit to help primary schools consider their current and future finances can be found on the Rochester Diocese website www.rdbe.org.uk/schools/primary-schools-financial-toolkit
- 29 **Gutherson, P. and Mountford-Lees, J.**, *New models for organising education: 'Flexi-schooling' – how one school does it well* (UK: CfBT Education Trust).
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- 33 *Working Together*, p. 7.
- 34 **Bagley, C.A. & Hillyard, S.** 'Rural schools, social capital and the Big Society: a theoretical and empirical exposition', *British Educational Research Journal* 40(1) (2014), pp. 63-67.
- 35 *Being Rural* (2014).
- 36 *Being Rural* (2014), p. 6.
- 37 Information about 'Deep Wells and Green Pastures: The Bishop of Leicester's Rural Commission' can be found at www.leicester.anglican.org/latest/features/the-rural-commission/
- 38 School census data, January 2017, for schools open in August 2017.
- 39 www.gov.uk/government/collections/rural-urban-classification
- 40 These numbers do not include state-maintained special schools as they cannot have a religious designation.

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