



## Small Schools Manifesto

### Briefing notes

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### Definitions of Small schools.

There are few agreed definitions of 'small schools' across the world and no nationally agreed definitions of what constitutes a small school in the UK. For a useful discussion on school size definitions in Europe, see Fargas-Malet & Bagley, 2021 and Gristy, Hargreaves & Kučerová, 2020.

Definition of small **primary schools** in England range from:–

- Schools where the headteacher has a significant teaching commitment (Southworth, 2004)
- fewer than 210 pupils (Church of England, 2018)
- fewer than 150 pupils (NAHT, 2019)
- fewer than 100 (Hargreaves, 2009 and DFE, 2019a)

Within England there are variations used by local authorities. For example South Gloucestershire Council (2020) define:

- Very small schools – fewer than 50 pupils
- Small schools 100 – fewer than 100 pupils
- Small schools 200 – fewer than 200 pupils

Small **secondary schools** have been defined in England as:–

- under 200 pupils (Coopers & Lybrand, 1995)
- between 600-900 pupils (Harber, 1995)

In recent Government consultation in England focussed on school sparsity and size, a small school (in sparsity contexts) is defined by year group size, where 'average year group size is below the appropriate year group threshold. This threshold is 21.4 for primary schools, 69.2 for middle schools, 120 for secondary schools and 62.5 for all-through schools. (DFE, 2021)

In Wales, small schools are those with fewer than 91 pupils (Education (Small Schools) (Wales) Order 2014). Previously it was 10 (for the purposes of discontinuing a school) (The School Standards and Organisation (Wales) Act 2013).

*Acknowledging the diversity of definitions, this manifesto includes all schools (including nurseries and pre-schools) defined as or who define themselves as 'small'.*

## **Is there a case for agreed school size thresholds?**

An agreed basis for the definitions of key terms would facilitate comparisons of schools and the generation of data to inform policy, resourcing decisions and to draw attention to issues of rights and social justice for schools and their localities.

It is argued here that agreed definitions of “small”, with regards to school size, would be useful. Definitions (or lack thereof) have implications for the distribution of resources and hence social justice.

## **Small schools and school funding in England**

With thanks to Professor Tanya Ovenden Hope for this information

(full details available at Ovenden-Hope, 2021)

Small schools are twice as likely to close as the national average (O'Brien, 2019). The reduction in the number of small schools is located primarily in rural and peripheral areas. The well documented challenges related to access to services, employment housing and transport in rural and peripheral areas (see the Rural Services Network for comprehensive and contemporary analysis), create additional challenges for small school sustainability (Ovenden-Hope & Passy, 2019 & 2020).

Changes in government policy since 2010 has impacted negatively on small schools. In 2010 government supported rapid and extensive policy reform to establish a school-led system underpinned by academisation (Academies Bill, 2010).

These reforms focused on creating large, efficient, effective schools with leaders that work directly with the government. The Review of Education Structures, Functions and the Raising of Standards for All by David Blunkett (2014), challenged the efficacy of academies. The report stated that it was 'undemocratic' to have individual schools 'contractually bound to the Secretary of State and free-floating from the communities they serve' (Blunkett, 2014:5). Small schools in the evolving academy system in England appeared to have little choice but to enter formal collaborations, preferably MATs, in order to survive (Church of England, 2018).

After 2016, the policy focus changed to funding and a commitment to deliver a national funding formula (NFF) that would address what were seen as disparities in the system. These disparities saw a concentration of funds in cities and large schools and away from rural areas and small schools (Church of England, 2018). This refocus had the potential to bring opportunity through additional funding to small schools but this did not happen. The National Funding Formula (NFF) was introduced for the school year 2018-19 (DfE, 2017) and updated for 2019-20 (DfE, 2018) and again for 2020-21 (DfE, 2019b). The NFF has not offered the anticipated significant increases in funding for small schools, despite government promises. Small schools appear under the NFF for 2020-21 to receive more funds per child than larger schools. However, this is because a school's 'lump sum' (a sum given in recognition of the school's fixed costs that is applied in the same way for all schools) is included in the per pupil calculation rather than separately, as had been the case before in the previous two iterations of the NFF. Small schools will also not receive a per pupil funding increase because, with the lump sum included, their per pupil funding appears over the threshold of £4,000 that triggers additional funding. Small schools can only receive the minimum possible uplift in funding of 1.84 per cent. Larger schools will get an increase of between 6 to 8.5 per cent (Moore, 2019). In addition to this, the 'mobility factor', which is additional funding for small and rural schools, is also absorbed through the minimum funding guarantee (MFG) protection calculation undertaken for schools at the funding floor level, typically small schools. Any additional funds that the Department for Education believes small schools are gaining as a result of the NFF are, it appears, lost

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through complicated calculations and readjustments (Moore, 2019). The Small Schools manifesto calls for changes to the NFF, with a separate threshold for small schools.

Rapid policy change and reform since 2010 appears to have focused on, and been designed for:

- large urban schools that can run autonomously through direct funding from the government (academy);
- and more latterly as groups of academies run by a single organisation (MAT) (DfE, 2016).

School/groups of school size are important for efficiencies of scale when considered within the framework of school funding cuts generally; as noted by an Ofsted report in 2019: 'The rationale for this growth [of MAT size] put forward by the government has been largely economic – for example, that larger MATs will secure economies of scale, more efficient use of resources, more effective management and clearer oversight of academies. (Ofsted, 2019:21). It appears that MATs work to the detriment of small schools and have elicited the increase in small school closures. However, inclusion of small schools in MATS is variable, with some identifying the value of small schools to their communities and providing resource to support them, believing that small schools matter. (Ovenden-Hope, 2021).

### **Impact of school locality contexts**

Small schools are predominantly in rural-peripheral areas that experience 'Educational Isolation' (Ovenden-Hope & Passy, 2019) – geographical remoteness, socioeconomic deprivation and cultural isolation. Education policy in England is informed by a metrocentric understanding of schools in and focused on the creation and funding of large schools, preferably in MATs, to support economic efficiency. This focus does not allow for consideration of school context, including place and size.

Despite the market-oriented policy and practice contexts in which schools are operating in the UK with the focus on schools as individual commodities and away from locality and context, small schools draw attention to intrinsic links between schools and their contexts. In lived reality, schools are not separate from the social, cultural economic and geographical contexts into which these schools are situated. It may be that the human scale of small schools may mean the connections with their communities and localities are more evident. The predicament, issues and challenges faced by small schools may well be universal but are perhaps surfaced more obviously through small scale of the school and/or its locality. Much of the research on small schools in Europe includes particularly a focus on locality in context and these bodies of work (see for example Malet Fargas & Bagley, 2021 and Gristy et al, 2020) may be useful in informing UK developments.

### **Small schools are central to and assets for communities**

There is renewed interest in and recognition of the importance of place in education. Despite the disconnection of schools from their localities through market-oriented education policy, school sites remain anchored in communities and places; this is particularly clear with small schools.

Small schools can be at the heart of communities. Seeing schools situated in communities, the mutual benefits of their assets become clearer. Small schools are assets to communities in many ways, including as centres for innovation, research and development in education, social and other services, sustainability, wellbeing, health and welfare.

Small schools can contribute to social and economic sustainability in locality life; encouraging younger families to stay or move into these communities, providing focus for meeting and growing relationships.

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Traditionally, small schools maintain and strengthen distinctive cultural and historical traits. They are cultural and environmental custodians and act as communities of memory and ambassadors of this treasury for future generations.

*Some good sources of information on these issues include:*

Bagley, C. & Hillyard, S. (2011) Village Schools in England: At the Heart of Their Community? *Australian Journal of Education*. 55(1) pp 37-49

Commission for Rural Communities. (2010). *Small schools, big communities: Village schools and extended services*. Cheltenham, UK

INDIRE (2020) del movimento "Piccole Scuole" <https://www.indire.it/en/progetto/small-schools/>

OECD (2021) *Delivering Quality Education and Health Care to All: Preparing Regions for Demographic Change*. <https://doi.org/10.1787/83025c02-en> 9789264656383

Villa, M., & Knutas, A. (2020) Rural communities and schools – Valuing and reproducing local culture. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 80, pp626-633

### **Impact of school size on learners, teachers and communities**

There is much debate across the world about size of schools (and classes) and the impact on issues such as pupil achievement, pupil and staff wellbeing and on economic efficiencies (for example see Blatchford & Russell, 2020 looking at the history of these ideas and Giambona & Porcu's study using PISA data). Much of this debate includes elements of school contexts such as community and social services, wider wellbeing and sustainability of communities and localities.

Small schools are places for positive and influential relationships between schools, pupils, parents and local communities. Positive and purposeful relationships are central to successful learning, happiness and well-being (Roffey, 2012). The scale of small schools allows for the development of these relationships between learners, teachers and parents. There is also opportunity for developing relationships with the communities and localities in which the schools are situated. Moves to decrease school size in some places (for example cities in the US and the schools-within-schools movement) are informed by evidence of improved relationships and subsequent student success and wellbeing in smaller schools.

*Some good sources of information on this issue include:*

Blatchford, P. & Russell, A. (2020) *Rethinking Class Size: The complex story of impact on teaching and learning*. UCL press, University College London

Giambona, F. & Porcu, M. (2018) School size and students' achievement. Empirical evidences from PISA survey data. *Socio-Economic Planning Sciences* 64. pp 66–77

Leonard, L., Leonard, P. & Sackney, LE. (2001) Confronting assumptions about the benefits of small schools. *Educational Management & Administration*. 29(1), pp79-96.

Roffey, S. (2012). *Developing Positive Relationships in Schools*. In Roffey, S Ed. *Positive Relationships: Evidence Based Practice across the World Positive*. Springer.

Wallace, W. (2009) *Schools within schools: Human scale education in practice*. Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation. London

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## **Small schools as centres for developing good practice in education through collaboration and partnership**

Teachers, leaders and governors of small schools are accustomed to collaboration, working with other schools and their local communities in their shared education endeavours. Collaboration, sharing and partnerships are familiar models of lived daily practice in small schools.

*Some good sources of information on this issue include:*

Todman, P., Harris, J., Carter, J., & McCamphill, J. (2009). *Better together: Exploratory case studies of formal collaborations between small rural primary schools*. DCSF Research Report RR162. London: DCSF.

Hill, R., Kettlewell, K. & Salt, J. (2014) *Partnership working in small rural primary schools: the best of both worlds*. CfBT

Church of England (2014) *Working Together – The Future of Rural Church of England Schools*. Church of England's National Education Office

National Association for Small Schools/Laurel Trust (2018). *Collaboration not Collision - study investigating the ways that small schools across the country are working together*. National Association for Small Schools/Laurel Trust).

## **Small schools as centres for research, innovation and development**

The characteristics of small schools make them good places for innovation, research and development into teaching and learning practices. Small teaching teams are accustomed to working in multiple and flexible ways which promotes innovation and creativity.

As small schools are closely linked to their physical and socio-cultural situations, they are also good starting points for innovation, research and development more widely such as in their communities and localities.

*Some good sources of information on this issue include:*

Quartz, K., Kawasaki, J., Sotelo, D. & Merino, K. (2014) Supporting assessment autonomy: How one small school articulated the infrastructure needed to own and use student data. *Journal of Educational Change*. 15(2), pp 125-152.

Bedrick, J., Ladner, M. (2020) *Let's Get Small: Microschools, Pandemic Pods, and the Future of Education in America*. Backgrounder. No. 3540. Heritage Foundation, Center for Education Policy, Washington, DC <http://www.heritage.org>

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<https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2018-03/Rural%20Schools%20%20Embracing%20Change%20WEB%20FINAL.pdf>

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Department for Education [DfE]. (2017). The national funding formula for schools and high needs. Policy document. London: DfE. Retrieved from gov.uk website:

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[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/728273/National\\_funding\\_formula\\_policy\\_document\\_-\\_2019\\_to\\_2020\\_-\\_BRANDED.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/728273/National_funding_formula_policy_document_-_2019_to_2020_-_BRANDED.pdf) 4

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Department for Education [DfE]. (2019b). The SCF0001 national funding formulae for schools and high needs 2020-21. London: DfE. Retrieved from gov.uk website:

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Fargas-Malet, M. & Bagley, C. (2021) Is small beautiful? A scoping review of 21st-century research on small rural schools in Europe. *European Educational Research Journal* 1–23. DOI: 10.1177/14749041211022202 [journals.sagepub.com/home/eer](http://journals.sagepub.com/home/eer)

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