

Issued 2004 – School Organisation Plan

Section 2 – Policies Relevant to the Provision of School Places

B. Maintenance of high standards

2.17 Most areas of the County are served by one school, geography and travelling times limiting choice. In recognition of the practical constraints on parental preference, therefore, the LEA accepts that it is imperative for standards to be maintained at the highest possible level at all schools. This is done through the Education Development Plan.

C. Education Development Plan

2.18 The EDP recognises the current structure of school provision (notably the large number of small primary and high schools,) and the context of falling roles. With that background, the EDP has identified 7 priorities in the school improvement programme. There are listed below, with comments provided on the links to the SOP.

EDP Priority	Link to SOP
1. Raising attainment in the Early Years towards the early learning goals and in primary education, especially numeracy and literacy.	The support offered through the EDP reflects the reliance on private and voluntary settings in early years, and the large number of small primary schools where mixed aged and sometimes mixed Key Stage teaching is found.
2. Raising attainment at Key Stage 3	The organisation of high and primary schools in partnerships should facilitate a smoother transition from Key Stage 2 to Key Stage 3.
3. Raising attainment at Key Stage 4 and post- 16	This in part is being processed through the 16-19 curriculum is one strategy which will help.
4. Tackling underachievement and narrowing the performance gaps through a focus upon PE, sport and the creative arts	The Specialist College Initiative is one way in which this can be pursued.
5. Support for Schools causing concern	The SOP contains the ultimate sanction of reviewing the future of a school in special measures.
6. Inclusion	Provision for children with special education needs is largely in mainstream schools, with places available in special schools for those with particular needs.
7. Using ICT to improve teaching and learning in a rural county	New technology is seen as one way to maintain existing provision and improve standards at a time of falling rolls, by encouraging collaboration between schools and sharing good practice.

- 2.19 In the interests of maintaining high standards, the Council provides appropriate financial and curriculum support for all schools, however small individually they may become. This is in line with the Audit Commission's view expressed in 'Trading Places' where it states:-

"If small schools and small sixth forms are not going to be closed as part of an LEA's efforts to secure the right number of places in the right locations, then other ways must be found of managing the financial and educational problems that they create. For example:

- *Financial support to small schools via protection factors in the LMS formula should be targeted to those schools that the LEA believes to be essential. LEAs can also promote clustering arrangements, which bring groups of small schools together to share expertise and resources (for example, specialist teaching staff whom none of the schools could fund wholly from its individual budget); and*
- *Sixth forms with a number on roll of less than 150 should be reviewed to ensure educational and financial health. Where problems are identified in a small sixth form, but closure is not felt to be desirable or possible, LEAs should explore the scope for encouraging collaboration with other sixth forms, the organisation of consortia or franchising arrangements."*

- 2.20 In Herefordshire, financial support for small schools is provided through the budget formula, by a combination of lump sum allocations per school, and through supplements for small schools with pupil numbers below defined thresholds so that –

- (a) even the smallest primary school can afford 2 teachers and other resources;
- (b) even the smallest high school can afford at least 12 teachers and other resources.

- 2.21 The Council also recognises the more limited curriculum and social experiences that small schools can provide. The Council, therefore, seeks to provide for wider opportunities by supporting, through its Education Development Plan, joint activities by groups or clusters of schools. Consideration is being given to proposals to extend these activities under the Extended School Initiative. The Council will also actively support more formal co-operative arrangements between schools, but believes that these can only be successfully created without imposition where there is a willingness in schools to move to such arrangements. The LEA will raise the possibilities of such partnerships where the situation arises, e.g. due to a Headteacher leaving or pupil numbers falling to the detriment to staff and curriculum provision.

- 2.22 The priorities within the Education Development Plan also take account of the significant proportion of both primary and high schools where the number of pupils in particular year groups is small. Specific attention is given to managing the literacy and numeracy strategies in mixed-age or whole Key Stage classes, and to addressing the issue of leadership through training, on-site support and by updating documentation related to the management of small schools.

D. Review of Small Schools and Surplus Capacity

- 2.23 The Audit Commission's advice, in the national report referred to in paragraph 3.18, recommends that primary schools with fewer than 90 pupils, and high schools with fewer than 600 pupils aged 11-15, should be identified to "*determine whether these small schools should be retained or expanded/closed*". (Trading Places: 'The Supply and Allocation of School Places'). Herefordshire Council believes that such figures

provide a useful general guide. However, some adjustment needs to be made for rural areas, as the DfES recognises in its draft guidance (received 3rd August, 1999) to SOCs –

The Secretary of State is concerned that in considering statutory proposals School Organisation Committees and Adjudicators have regard to the need to preserve access to a local school for rural communities. There should therefore be a presumption against the closure of rural schools. This does not mean that no rural school should ever close, but the case for closure should be strong and the proposals clearly in the best interests of educational provision in the area. The transport implications of rural school closures should also be carefully considered, including the welfare of the children, the recurrent cost to the LEA of transporting pupils to school further away, the effects on road traffic congestion, and the environmental costs of pupils travelling further to schools. The overall effect on the community of closure of the village schools should also be taken into account. Detailed guidance on particular factors that need to be considered in deciding such proposals is given at the end of this section.

- 2.24 Having considered the Audit Commission and DfES advice, it is accepted that, other things being equal, there are significant educational advantages for a 5-11 primary school to have at least 3 teachers. Under Herefordshire's funding arrangements, schools with 60+ pupils can normally afford 3 teachers on a full-time basis, whilst schools with 50+ pupils can normally fund about 2½ full-time teachers, making possible 3-teacher class arrangements for the mornings or afternoons. It is below such levels, therefore, that the educational viability of small schools should be reviewed. Similarly, the Council accepts that the ideal minimum size for an 11-16 secondary school is 3 or 4-form entry (450–600 pupils). Where such ideal sizes are not practical, however, the Council ensures that its arrangements for funding for schools provide reasonable levels of teaching resources (see paragraph above), so that a good range of curriculum options can be offered.
- 2.25 Herefordshire Council is committed to maintaining a good level of support for small primary and secondary schools, and advocates the maintenance of existing funding levels for sixth forms in schools, where such arrangements are appropriate. It believes that surplus space should initially be addressed through seeking alternative use rather than closure. At the same time, however, the Council does recognise that there comes a point at which the maintenance of an individual school or sixth form may need to be considered in the interest of ensuring that resources are used efficiently to achieve good value. Accordingly, the Council looks carefully at the annual return of surplus capacity in schools to decide whether or not fundamental review of particular schools or areas is required.
- 2.26 The Council also provides for thorough review of the circumstances when pupil numbers drop below defined levels at individual schools, though the Council also believes that small schools should be able to operate with a degree of reasonable certainty about their medium term future. The Council's overriding aim is to provide schools of a high standard, always seeking improvement, and it would undermine that objective if schools were distracted by continual uncertainties concerning their future existence. Any decisions concerning the future of particular schools would need to take account of community, transport and environmental factors as well as educational considerations.
- 2.27 The Council would normally review schools in the following circumstances.

Primary schools

- (a) a school with fewer than 36 pupils in the September of a school year, or a school whose numbers are expected to fall below that level within the following 5 years, would be reviewed by the Council, in consultation with the relevant Diocesan Education Authority where a Church school is concerned.
 - (b) schools with 36-45 pupils, which would be monitored by the Director of Education, with the relevant Diocesan Director of Education where a Church school is concerned, to assess whether or not numbers are likely to drop below 35 pupils within 5 years, and to determine whether or not there are other grounds for concern about the future of the school;
 - (c) where a pyramid of primary schools has unused capacity at a level that could accommodate the closure of the smallest school, with up to 15% unused capacity still remaining if such possible closure were to occur; or
 - (d) where a school is identified by Ofsted either as having serious weaknesses or in need of special measures;
- 2.28 If, following such review, a school is judged to be currently viable, then no further review of that school would be undertaken for at least 5 years, unless pupil numbers were to fall by a further 25% below the level considered during that review.

High schools

- (e) where a high school has fewer than 200 pupils on roll at the start of a school year; or
- (f) where a high school has sufficient unused capacity for all the existing and projected pupils to be accommodated in the nearest alternative school with up to 15% unused capacity still remaining if such possible closure were to occur; or
- (g) where a school is identified by Ofsted either as having serious weaknesses or in need of special measures;

Sixth forms (16-18)

- 2.29 The Learning and Skills Council has the responsibility for planning post-16 education, including the power to make proposals for opening, enlarging or closing Sixth Form provision.
- 2.30 The DfES has published a consultation paper on ***Learning to Succeed - School Sixth Form Funding***. The document reiterates earlier statements that each sixth form would be guaranteed its current sixth form funding, provided pupil numbers are maintained.
- 2.31 That assurance is welcome in providing a broadly secure framework in which the provision made within individual schools can be reviewed though it is noted with some concern that the safeguards do not promise budget increases for schools whose numbers rise. Discussions are continuing with the DfES in an effort to ensure that the guarantee operates effectively for small sixth forms, serving isolated rural communities.
- 2.32 The potential for closer collaboration with local colleges and with other schools is being explored, with a view to widening the options and quality of provision for students in smaller sixth forms by the Herefordshire Association of Colleges and Schools. Having considered various options, there is a consensus that improvements to the existing framework of provision is the best way forward.
- 2.33 The review of post-16 provision by independent consultants in 2002 commissioned by the LSC confirmed that co-operation to improve existing provision is the best way forward.

Nursery Units in LEA Schools.

- 2.34 There is a concern that a significant number of places in LEA nurseries are not used. From discussions with schools, it appears that many parents prefer the more flexible arrangements available in private and voluntary playgroups including earlier starting times and longer sessional care than offered in the 13 LEA nurseries where 5 two and half hour sessions per week are available. Given that all 3 and 4 year olds can have free early years education from April 2004 and follow the same foundation stage curriculum whatever the setting, the schools with nurseries do feel that they are at a disadvantage despite the undoubted quality of provision. The LEA is considering the various issues involved including encouraging schools to work with voluntary providers to achieve full day care on the school site. In the meantime it is therefore proposed that a policy to review those nurseries which are less than 50% full in September of each year be adopted, assuming that capacities are reduced from 30 to 26.

E. Review of Catchment Areas

- 2.35 The community organisation of schools in the County depends on precise definition of catchment areas. There are, however, circumstances in which parts of the established catchment areas need to be reconsidered, most frequently when significant housing development and transport patterns cause the community focus to shift. It might also be appropriate to reconsider catchment areas where differential changes in pupil numbers cause some schools to be overcrowded, while others reasonably nearby still have spare capacity. Major issues to do with provision of catchment areas – whether generated by school or parental requests or by planning considerations – will be presented to the School Organisation Committee for information and comment following consultation with all relevant groups and individuals.
- 2.36 Although alteration in catchment areas may appear an easy and simple means to balance pupil numbers to places, in practice it is not and should only be undertaken if there are long-term benefits in making those changes. Change cannot necessarily happen overnight as it is good practice to allow and to honour transport arrangements of existing pupils.