

Schools sustainability in Shropshire

A briefing paper issued on behalf of:

- Shropshire Schools Forum - Sustainability Task & Finish Group
- Shropshire Council administration group - Sustainability Task & Finish Group.

Background: where are we now?

In Shropshire we aim to provide high quality education for all Shropshire children. But we have a demographic problem in sustaining our network of schools.

The number of pupils on roll at our schools is falling overall, bucking the national trend. However, this decline in pupil numbers is not evenly spread and it varies by area.

At the same time, though new house building programmes are gathering pace in Shropshire, evidence shows that new housing developments do **not** lead to an overall increase in numbers in our schools in Shropshire, as the trend is for families to move within the county.

Indeed, between 2003 and 2012, 10,800 new homes were built in Shropshire, but over the same period the number of pupils at our schools actually **fell** by more than 2,500.

As pupils numbers fall, so will the overall funding for our schools as it is mainly pupil-driven.

And the lack of detail on a national funding formula – likely to be implemented in the next Parliament – adds further uncertainty over the future funding for our schools.

It has been confirmed that approximately £10m of additional funding is being provided for Shropshire schools in 2015-16. This is clearly very welcome and will offer some short-term relief for the issue of falling rolls. However, it will not solve the long-term problem as the reduction in pupil numbers impacts.

Changes to Shropshire's funding formula for 2015-16 will seek to place our schools in the best possible position to ensure a smooth transition to the new national funding formula, once it is implemented.

It is vital at this time for individual school leaders and governing bodies to have an increasing awareness of the impact of demography and the likely changes to funding nationally in the next few years.

This is particularly important in those areas where pupil numbers are falling and where clusters of schools will see a significant decline in both pupil numbers and, as a consequence, funding.

So what needs to be done?

We want to ensure a sustainable schools network, and maintain good quality provision.

Schools need to work together to find local solutions. We are determined to encourage collaborative working, consideration of alternative models of education provision and more efficient use of delegated resources.

This is **NOT** just a small schools problem. It is an issue for every school.

This is **NOT** about saving money. It is about making more effective use of delegated resources.

This is **NOT** about finding a countywide solution. It is about taking a local look and finding local solutions.

This is **NOT** about providing a safety net, or comfort, to governing bodies. We believe governing bodies need to be challenged to address these issues and to ensure that the Shropshire school funding formula promotes more sustainable ways of working.

And, this is **NOT** simply about producing lists of planned closures. It is about encouraging schools and communities to think about what can and must be done in light of falling school rolls and their impact on funding.

Indeed, we already have several excellent examples of ‘local clusters’, where schools are working closely together to find local solutions, including through trust arrangements, federations and other collaborative models.

What work is being carried out around this issue?

The Shropshire Schools Forum’s Sustainability Task & Finish Group was set up in the autumn of 2013 to look closely at this issue. Members include primary, secondary and special school headteachers, school governors, councillors and Shropshire Council officers.

An ‘informed dialogue’ has developed between the Task & Finish Group and Shropshire Council’s ruling administration based on the best available information and knowledge, and this will continue as we work towards a long-term solution.

An administration Task & Finish Group, led by Councillor Nick Bardsley – Deputy Cabinet member for children’s services - has also been established, to inform councillors and to provide advice and support to the Sustainability Task & Finish Group. This administration group has set out its key principles to inform the funding of Shropshire schools, to ensure that planning and implementation go hand in hand.

Both Task & Finish groups are in agreement about the problem we are facing, and about the need for schools to work together to find local solutions in order to ensure a sustainable schools network in Shropshire. Indeed, this paper has been prepared on behalf of both groups.

Once the Shropshire funding formula for 2015-16 is agreed, the Sustainability Task & Finish Group will be providing information to each school about their projected numbers on roll over the next five years, and the impact on their funding for this same period. This budget planning tool will be provided to governing bodies on an annual basis, to enable four year budget planning with most up-to-date data for their catchment. Governing bodies will be encouraged to share their data with schools in their geographical cluster.

Shropshire Councillors from all political parties, plus parish and town councillors, are also being encouraged to help, by working with their local schools.

Any questions?

If you have any questions or comments related to the issues raised in this paper, please email phil.wilson@shropshire.gov.uk . Your feedback is welcome and appreciated.