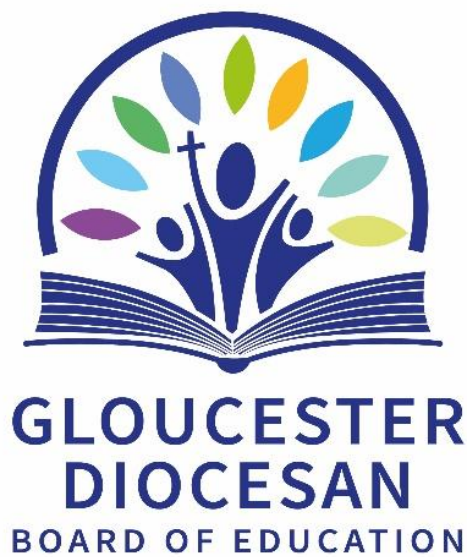


Gloucester Diocesan Board of Education

Small Schools Strategy Autumn 2025



Adopted: 30 September 2025

Introduction

Small schools are a deeply treasured and vital aspect of the life of the Diocese of Gloucester. They are at the heart of their communities, with the opportunity to act as life-giving centres of community flourishing. They are not merely educational institutions, but vital cultural, social and spiritual hubs, where the Church's mission can be lived out in a manner that is 'deeply Christian and serves the common good'. They are pivotal to links between church, school and home, and the service and dedication of their staff and governors enable children and families to experience, and be supported through, life in all its fullness (John 10:10). Small schools have been described as anchoring rural life, preventing depopulation and sustaining local identity, as well as offering a profound and ongoing Christian witness in rural communities¹.

Rural small schools have a significant historical significance and rich heritage. The Church of England became involved in weekday schooling with the establishment of the National Society, led by Joshua Watson in 1811. This was at time when there was not state education in place and the Society's vision was to open a school in every parish, serving the local community. A typical rural small school in the Diocese of Gloucester was founded by benefactors donating land and funds to establish a school to serve the poor of the parish.

The geography of our diocese means that small schools make up a significant proportion of our family of Church of England schools. A significant aspect of the work of the Gloucester Diocesan Board of Education (GDBE) and its Education Team is therefore to cherish, support and advocate for the flourishing of small schools.

Purpose of This Strategy

- To identify the challenges facing small schools in our diocesan family, enabling the identification and living out of approaches that will enable the continued flourishing of small schools within their context.
- To guide the strategic and proactive decision-making of governing bodies of small schools, with the aim of enabling them to achieve the current and longer-term flourishing of Church schools, delivering high quality education that is deeply Christian and serves the common good at the heart of the rural communities that they serve.
- To guide the support and guidance offered by the Education Team, on behalf of the GDBE, to small school governing bodies in ensuring this flourishing.

¹ *Under Pressure: The Financial Squeeze on Small Schools in England* (NAHT, 2023)

- To guide the GDBE and Diocesan Director of Education (DDE) in advocating for small schools at a local and national level.
- To support decisions where changing demographics in a community mean that closure of a Church school is being considered.

Definitions of Small Schools Within the Diocese of Gloucester

While the Department for Education (DfE) does not have a single definition of a small school, it frequently uses the threshold of primary schools of below 210 pupils for research and policy purposes. The acknowledgement of this definition is important when interpreting and applying such research and policy, but is insufficient to understand the life of small schools in the Diocese of Gloucester where a high proportion of our schools are below this threshold and many significantly below this.

Given this local picture and the range of external definitions, the Diocese of Gloucester will adopt the following definitions. This nuanced classification allows the distinct nature of the support needs of different schools to be identified while allowing strategic breadth.

Small Schools: Schools with fewer than 210 pupils, to reflect the figure most commonly used in national policy

Smaller Schools: Schools with fewer than 100 pupils, acknowledging South Gloucestershire's local use of this threshold to indicate structural vulnerability

Very Small Schools: Schools with fewer than 50 pupils, requiring targeted support and strategic planning to ensure flourishing

Projected Smaller and Very Small Schools: Schools expected to fall into the smaller or very small category within three years, based on demographic data and local authority forecasts

The Challenges Facing Small Schools

Changing demographics since the founding of our original Church schools have significantly changed the size and nature of the communities they serve to greater and lesser extents and in different ways in different places. Some small schools primarily continue to serve the local rural community for which they were founded and educate the vast majority of those communities. For others new housing has increased, and/or is projected to increase, the number of pupils that they serve. In some instances this has

led to expansion of existing Church schools or the recent opening of a new Church school, Clearwater, to meet demand.

In other contexts, changing demographics have reduced the number of children in the local community dramatically, or car travel has caused local families to choose, for diverse reasons, to travel to a different school outside the parish. These schools find themselves serving children from further afield, for example children travelling from local market towns in preference to their most local school, or with declining numbers on roll. The national picture of declining birthrates disproportionately impacts small schools, and is affecting some of our rural communities far more significantly than others.

Meanwhile the increased demands of curriculum and other expectations on school provision since the founding of our Church schools, combined within the significant funding constraints on the sector, present considerable challenges for the flourishing of our small schools.

The diocese recognises the challenges highlighted in recent research, particularly the NAHT's 2023 report *Under Pressure: The Financial Squeeze on Small Schools in England*. The list below outlines key challenges identified in this research which the GDBE recognise as key challenges to Church schools. We recognise that while many of these challenges impact all our schools and not all our smaller and very small schools will be equally impacted by all of the areas listed, smaller and very small schools are significantly more likely to face these challenges.

Funding Reductions and Instability: 87% of headteachers in the NAHT report stated that budgets are insufficient to meet pupil needs. This widening funding gap has been exacerbated by unfunded pay increases for teachers and support staff in recent years. Uncertainty of funding formulae for future years also creates challenges for medium- and long-term financial planning.

Declining or Fluctuating Pupil Rolls: Since a substantial portion of school funding is linked to pupil numbers, declining rolls have a significant impact on financial stability. In addition, changes in pupil numbers necessitate changes to class structure and curriculum. There are also pastoral demands in supporting parents and children in times of fluctuating pupil rolls, which may also lead to a school having funding calculated in a way that does not reflect the reality of numbers of pupils throughout the year.

Staffing Pressures: Nationally, two-thirds of small school headteachers have increased their teaching hours due to staffing shortages. The deployment of a headteacher in the classroom both limits their time to focus on strategic matters and creates a higher cost of teaching the class, due to the headteacher's paygrade. Governors report increasing

difficulty recruiting permanent headteachers, especially in more isolated rural areas. 56% of headteachers nationally have already reduced teaching assistant employment, placing further pressures on teaching staff to meet increasing pupil needs.

Other Operational Pressures: Budget constraints lead to reductions in maintenance spending, leading to concerns over deteriorating school buildings. Schools are increasingly investing time in seeking and operationally managing alternative income sources such as renting out school facilities. This is often makes available a valuable community resource but places the additional operational pressures of managing this on the school.

Educational and Pastoral Challenges: Previous Ofsted inspection frameworks have often failed to account for the operational reality of small schools, particularly the challenges of subject leadership within a small team. The new Ofsted framework provides guidance for inspecting small schools, including requiring inspectors to be sensitive when selecting subjects for deep dives to avoid overloading single curriculum leads who may teach multiple subjects. Inspections under this framework begin in November 2025 and further evidence of how this is landing in live inspections will be monitored. Teaching in mixed age group classes creates additional curriculum planning challenges and this is exacerbated where reducing or fluctuating numbers on roll lead to changes in class structure requiring curriculum replanning. Budget constraints mean that schools are frequently having to cut non-educational services. This is at a time when financial constraints beyond schools mean that other services to families are being cut, bringing further demands to schools. These challenges disproportionately affect children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) and/or needing pastoral care. Schools are often having to cut enrichment activities due to budget constraints and pressures on staffing. This creates a risk to the very inclusivity and holistic support that small schools are valued for by parents and communities.

Vulnerability to Closure: The NAHT report found that nationally 47% of small school headteachers felt their school was vulnerable to closure. Vulnerability to closure can be caused by financial unsustainability or by a recognition that changing demographics of the community combined with the challenges mentioned above mean that the school remaining open is not the best way to enable the community's children to flourish.

Proactively Responding to the Challenges Facing Small Schools to Enable Their Continued Flourishing

The GDBE cherishes our small schools and believes that proactively identifying and strategically responding to challenges is vital to ensure the continued flourishing of these schools and the vital service that they provide. Current and future pupils must be placed at the heart of this strategic planning. The GDBE, through its Education Team will

proactively support governing bodies of smaller, very small and projected smaller and very small schools to conduct this vital strategic work.

Proactive medium- and longer-term planning that considers good stewardship of budgets, appropriate staffing and class structures and collaborative models of mutual support are critical to assure the long-term flourishing of Church schools at the heart of the diocese.

The GDBE therefore expects all governing bodies of all its small schools to engage in ongoing evidence-based strategic discussions and decision-making to enable continued flourishing. Strategic, proactive and evidence-based decision-making in the face of falling rolls and/or increased budget challenges, and any other challenges facing an individual in a particular season, are critical to assure the long term flourishing of the school and its pupils. These considerations are of particular importance for smaller and very small schools, and prospective smaller and very small schools. While it can be tempting to seek to maintain a status quo and defer difficult decisions, failure to take on board and respond proactively to evidence, such as projections on pupil numbers and budgets, can result in the locking-in of conditions that will create increasing risk to long-term flourishing.

As part of these discussions, **governing bodies²** should:

- Place current and future pupils, and their flourishing, at the heart of all decisions.
- Proactively engage with pupil planning and budget data available from the local authority (LA) and plan for sustainable models for their school on the basis of this data. Governing body minutes should show evidence of engagement with these data sources and with appropriate advice from the LA and diocesan Education Team.
- Proactively consider changes to the published admission number (PAN), class structures and staffing that reflect pupil forecast data available from the local authority to mitigate against increasing deficit budgets that create significant risks to future flourishing.
- Where opportunities for headship recruitment present themselves, serious consideration should be given to alternative strategic models such as executive headship which can be more cost-effective and prevent a locking-in of a financially unsustainable model. There is a proven track record with the diocese of the success of appropriately designed executive headship models.
- Actively consider collaborative structures that will create resilience for the school. (See Appendix 1: Collaborative Structures), including active consideration by voluntary aided (VA) and voluntary controlled (VC) maintained schools and

² For schools within a schools trust (also known as a multi-academy trust (MAT)), a scheme of delegation will identify which layer of governance is responsible for these considerations and there will be support to the school from the MAT central team in their future planning.

single-academy trusts (SATs) of finding a good home within a schools trust (also known as a multi-academy trust (MAT)).

To support this work, the **DDE and diocesan Education Team** will:

- Be a 'persistent voice at the table' in spaces where there is the opportunity to speak into local and national policy spaces, advocating for the recognition in policy and funding models of small, smaller and very small schools in rural communities.
- Work closely with LA colleagues to ensure there is accurate information about place planning and pupil number forecasts that will enable proactive future planning as described below.
- Offer proactive conversations to chairs of governing bodies of smaller, very small and prospective smaller and very small schools regarding the expectations laid out above to support the development of a clear strategy for each unique Church school to enable its continued flourishing at the heart of its community.
- Work alongside LA colleagues and schools trusts (MATs) to support decisions around headship recruitment to ensure that sustainable models such as executive headship are considered where appropriate to offer sustainable and long-term flourishing. This will include supporting both the discussion of different potential models and the brokering of suitable executive headship arrangements.
- Work alongside LA colleagues to support schools considering formal and informal collaborative models, ensuring that strategically and operationally viable options are explored that enable continued distinctively Christian flourishing of our Church schools.
- Work with schools trusts (MATs) and the DfE Regions Group to ensure that sufficient capacity exists to offer good homes to all our Church schools, including smaller and very small schools.
- The GDBE will fulfil its responsibilities under the 2021 DBE Measure to:
 - Use conditional consent processes to ensure that decisions made about academisation are supportive of the continued flourishing of small and very small schools.
 - Intervene, using its powers under the Measure, where there is a concern that governing body decisions are not being made in the best interests of pupils and/or not enabling the school to live up to its foundation as a Church school.

Considering School Closure

There are occasions when it is necessary to consider the closure of a school. These may result from, for example:

- Evidence of financial unsustainability, despite robust and considered stewardship of available funds.
- A fall in pupil numbers, that is not evidently short-term, to a level where the school cannot provide the education that best serves the flourishing of its pupils and enables it to live out its foundation as a Church school.

This is not necessarily a sign of failure. Rather it can be a sign that discerning decisions are being made in this season (Ecclesiastes 3:1) to prioritise the welfare and education of its children in response to changing demographics in the local community and/or changing needs of society from its schools. In such circumstances planning to close well may be deemed to be a better solution than continuing to maintain a status quo that is non-viable or not in the best interests of current and future pupils.

Appendix 2 lays out the principles and processes that the GDBE will apply when consideration of closure is necessary.

Appendix 1: Collaborative Structures

- The [Diocesan Strategy](#) remains committed to the principle that finding a good home in a suitable schools trust (MAT) is the best route to flourishing for our Church schools. The structure of support, resilience and sharing of resource that these trusts offer is of particular value to smaller and very small schools. This is supported by the Church of England, which has emphasised the need for rural and small schools to join a schools trust (MAT) to ensure their sustainability.
- The exploration of joining a schools trust (MAT) should not be seen as a panacea solution for budget and other sustainability challenges to be sought at the point of crisis. Schools trusts (MATs) face their own budget constraints and need to consider the needs of their existing family of schools when taking on new schools. Therefore there are constraints on their ability to absorb significant deficit budgets or take on schools where future viability cannot be demonstrated. Furthermore, there is a timescale needed for due diligence by both the school and the schools trust (MAT), and consents and legal processes.
- Therefore, governing bodies should include planning the route to joining a schools trust (MAT) as part of a wider plan for a trajectory of sustainable flourishing, with appropriate planning for readiness to join a schools trust (MAT) and timescales for these processes built into wider strategic planning work. (Schools must inform the diocesan Education Team at the earliest opportunity when beginning to consider plans for exploring options for joining a schools trust (MAT) so that they can be offered more detailed guidance and support.)
- A relationship with a schools trust (MAT) should be mutually beneficial and we encourage schools to dialogue with trusts about how they can journey together; this could include working within a service level agreement (SLA) with the trust, prior to joining to support the school's flourishing in the short-term and explore the relationship further, while preparing the school to be in a strong position to join the trust at a planned point.
- Other models of collaboration, both informal and federation, can mitigate capacity challenges for small schools, for example subject leadership expertise and other resources can be shared across schools, and bulk-buying power can be created. This capacity includes collaborating in exploration of good homes in schools trusts (MATs), and a group of sustainable schools joining a trust together can often be an attractive and efficient model.
- The GDBE supports the development of federations and other informal collaborations that offer resilience and capacity-sharing to small and smaller schools. While in some cases these can offer long-term sustainable models in their own right, they should not be regarded as an equivalent alternative to finding a good home in the right schools trust (MAT). Therefore care should be taken to ensure that any federation arrangements take into account the future plans of the schools in relation to joining a schools trust (MAT) and are not made

in a way that would limit options that it would be in the interests of schools to explore.

- Other more informal collaborations between schools can also create opportunities for flourishing through sharing of resources, such as joint curriculum planning or sharing of a resource such as a family support worker across schools.

Appendix 2: Considering School Closure

The GDBE cherishes its small schools and it is never the goal of the GDBE to see closure. However, changing seasons (Ecclesiastes 3:1) mean that there have been, and may in future be, instances where it is necessary to consider closure. This occurs when, even with all the measures outlined above to create sustainability, pupil numbers take a school unavoidably below a threshold of sustainability, and that there is no firm evidence that a change in demographics is foreseen that will address this.

In some cases this will be due to an inability to maintain financial viability. In other cases, it will be identified that the number of pupils is insufficient to enable pupils to flourish in terms of educational provision, the living out of the church foundation of the school and/or experiences that enable life in all its fullness and preparation for future chapters.

It may be identified that there are sufficient school places elsewhere in planning areas that it is in the best interests of current and future pupils to facilitate smooth transition to alternative schools.

Governing bodies should be open to the consideration of such evidence and plan proactively for exploration of closure where required, rather than 'soldiering on' to a point where there is less capacity to close well.

Where a governing body considers that there may be a vulnerability to closure or considering consultation on closure may be in the best interests of pupils, conversations with the diocesan Education Team and local authority must be sought at the earliest opportunity, in order that they can support evidence-based discussion and ensure due processes³ are understood and undertaken.

In considering whether school closure is an appropriate avenue to explore, the following factors must be honestly and discerningly considered:

- Current and projected numbers on roll.

³ For an outline of the statutory processes for school closure, including statutory consultation processes see [Opening and closing maintained schools: Statutory guidance for proposers and decision makers](#) (DfE, 2024).

- Pupil cohort profile: SEND and disadvantaged children, levels of need and context.
- Current outcomes, including outcomes of groups such as SEND and disadvantaged pupils.
- The ability of the school to live out its Christian foundation and provide suitable educational and other experiences to pupils in light of these projected numbers and cohort profiles: this should include a consideration of inspection profile and other external reviews of school performance.
- Budget projections and financial sustainability of the school.
- Sustainable and stable leadership and staffing structures.
- Estate profile, including suitability for appropriate provision for pupils and any capital or investment expenditure required.
- Availability of places in other schools, including Church schools, and their capacity to meet the needs of the current and projected cohort profile.
- Transport: links and viability of getting to alternative placements for pupils, including additional transport provision options that the LA would be willing to support.
- Location and community impact: the broader function of the school as a community setting. (However, this should not be placed above the needs of current and future pupils, for example, the desires of the community to have the school as a community hub should not be prioritised where the school cannot make suitable provision for the flourishing of pupils).

Processes When Considering Closure of a School

- The GDBE is a statutory consultee under the School Organisation (Establishment and Discontinuance of Schools) Regulations 2013 and the School Governance (Federations) (England) Regulations 2012. The Department for Education's statutory guidance on school closures (2019) makes it clear that the views of dioceses must be sought and given serious consideration where Church schools are involved.
- Decisions around sustainability or the proposal to consult on closure rest in the first instance with the governing body. The GDBE, through its Education Team, will support these discussions, pastorally and with evidence-based strategic guidance. The final decision on whether a school will close does not rest with the governing body, but is undertaken through a statutory process detailed in [*Opening and closing maintained schools: Statutory guidance for proposers and decision makers*](#) (DfE, 2024).
- The GDBE is prepared to intervene, using its powers under the DBE Measure, where it is felt that the decisions around closure (whether to stay open or close)

are not considered to be being made in the best interests of current and future pupils.

- Where consideration of closure is necessary in the best interests of current and future pupils and/or due to the financial viability of the school, the GDBE will:
 - Support governing bodies pastorally and practically through consideration of whether to propose consultation on closure and the process of consultation and, if it is the outcome of consultation, closure.
 - Work with LA or schools trust (MAT) colleagues to ensure due process is followed for consultation.
 - Fulfil its statutory responsibilities in relation to consultation on closure.
 - Support the governing body in communication with stakeholders.
- Where the outcome of consultation results in a decision to close the school, the GDBE will:
 - Work with the school, LA, and where relevant schools trust (MAT), to enable smooth transition for pupils.
 - Support the governing body in ensuring appropriate celebration of the contribution of the Church school to life in all its fullness within its community.
 - Support the legal processes of closure.

Appendix 3: Case Studies

(Last Updated: 30 September 2025)

These anonymised case studies are based on good practice from Church schools within the Diocese of Gloucester family and from schools in other dioceses where diocesan strategy and policy are not materially different from our own in ways that would prevent the application of learning from them within our context.

Identifying details have been changed or removed.

We are seeking to add to this collection of case studies over time. Please do get in touch with the Diocesan Director for Education if you have a case study that you would be willing to share that would helpfully illustrate elements of this strategy.

Case Study 1: Informal Collaborations to Support Flourishing

A group of small Church and non-Church schools across neighbouring villages identified the increasing pressures that reducing pupil numbers and resulting reduction in staff numbers were having. This included staff having to subject lead increasing numbers of subjects and headteachers having to increase their own teaching hours to balance budgets. This resulted in less capacity to offer enrichment activities that supported pupil flourishing.

To mitigate this, the schools began to create subject leader networks through which resources and good practice could be shared to reduce workload. Over time this developed into the sharing of other resources. The schools now have a flourishing programme of shared activities where minibus hire is shared and each school leads on putting on an experience, sometimes involving local churches, that other schools can share in. For example, *Jumping Fish Experience Easter* is set up in one church, with all schools visiting over the course of consecutive days. Another church in a different village hosts a prayer spaces activity that all schools can participate in. Another hosts a theatre company which performs to an audience from across the schools. Minibus costs are shared between the schools.

Since these collaborations have begun one school has joined a schools trust (MAT) and others are exploring options that may result in them joining different schools trusts (MATs). This has not placed any barrier to continuing collaboration and offers the opportunity for the schools to bring new ideas to schools within those trusts.

Case Study 2: Consideration of Published Admission Number (PAN) Adjustments within a Schools Trust (MAT) Context

A schools trust (MAT) maintained a practice of close attention to local authority planning area information regarding pupil numbers and projections. As a result of this they were able to identify schools within their group where the PAN did not match projections of pupil numbers. The existing PANs were no longer fit for the needs of the community and were deemed likely to create increasing challenges for the schools. These challenges included excess spare places in classes creating budget challenges due to increased per pupil staffing costs and increased pupil transience creating increased demand on teachers. It was recognised that there would likely be a resulting need to adjust class structures from year to year, in response to the budget challenges of changes in pupil numbers from year to year. Indeed if actual pupil numbers led to a decision to create staffing structures that combined year groups in a way that could not support the full PAN of the combined year groups, there could be a disruptive need to change class structures in-year if a sudden increase of pupils occurred.

The central team therefore worked with local governing bodies, headteachers and the local authority and diocese to consider possible changes to PAN and carefully went through the correct consultation and decision-making processes to enact these changes. In some cases, these changes led to a new PAN that was more attractive to many prospective parents and more operationally manageable, such as a move from 1.5 to one-form entry. In other cases, there was a recognition that the necessary change could create parental concerns and risk a further reduction in pupil numbers. Proactive monitoring of data and early discussions and decision-making about the likely need to reduce PAN meant that the MAT central team could work with headteachers and local governing bodies to ensure appropriate time for conversations with current and prospective parents that could allay the potential for unfounded concerns.

Case Study 3: Adjustment to PAN in a Maintained School Context

The headteacher of a school in an area where local context meant that there was a higher than national average transience in pupil population noted that the overall pattern appeared to be of decreasing pupil numbers in the majority of year groups over time, although this was partially disguised by in-year pupil transience. It was recognised that most classes were undersubscribed against PAN and that this was increasing the per pupil staffing cost in a way that was leading to increasing structural deficit.

The governing body and headteacher agreed that this should be explored further and spoke with the local authority to develop a greater understanding of pupil numbers. It was established that there was a surplus of places in the local planning area and that this surplus was likely to increase over time due to falling birth rates. The school and LA

gave due thought to whether there was a risk of pinch points in the local area as a result of pupil transience that would risk under-supply of placements and the LA were confident that this was not the case.

The school made the decision to reduce PAN to a level that better matched local demand for places, which would enable planning for a more predictable staffing structure, reducing per pupil staffing cost and making the budget easier to manage. This recognition of the need to plan to move to reduced PAN meant that scheduling the change of PAN could be carefully planned with the local authority, including sufficient time for appropriate processes and consultations in a way that enabled a carefully planned timescale. This enabled the school to plan careful communication to parents about the increased need for mixed year group class structures that this would involve and to plan carefully ahead of time for necessary curriculum planning changes to achieve this.

Case Study 4: Increasing Pupil Numbers Through Publicity

A very small school in a small rural village was experiencing accelerating reduction in pupil numbers in the local population. Some village parents were choosing to travel further to larger schools on their commuting routes, citing the availability of wraparound care and preferences for a larger school with single year group classes as a better preparation for secondary school as key reasons for this choice.

The very small school considered joining a schools trust (MAT) as a perceived solution to this problem, with perceptions from some members of the governing body that this could increase available budget for the school and enable them to afford increased staffing and resolve the increasing year-on-year deficit budgets that were being caused by not operating at full PAN. One governor noted that one of the trusts they wished to consider appeared to have schools that were oversubscribed and felt that that trust could assist with increasing pupil numbers.

Early discussions with schools trusts (MATs) clarified expectations and identified that joining a trust might offer some economies of scale but was not a panacea solution to resolving budget deficit. It was further identified that building up a substantial budget deficit was reducing the ability of a trust to offer a home to the school for financial reasons. A conversation with the trust identified as having oversubscribed schools identified that there was a very different local context in those schools with substantial new estates having been built in the areas over the past five to ten years that affected pupil numbers.

However, these early conversations with trusts identified other significant benefits to the school of seeking the right home in a trust that the governors had not foreseen. They

therefore decided to continue to pursue finding the right home within a trust. As part of this, a trust was able to offer them support with identifying practical ways to reduce their budget deficit, which were able to be implemented, stemming the risk of the budget deficit reaching a point that could not be absorbed by a suitable trust.

These conversations also encouraged conversations with the local authority that identified that, while the school was undersubscribed, there was not a surplus of places in the local planning area. It was identified that many parents travelled past the village on nearby A-roads but were unaware of the presence of the school. These factors gave the trust confidence that it was financially viable for them to offer a home to the school and conditional consent was sought. In parallel to this, the trust and school planned an advertising campaign of banners, flyers and open events that drew attention to the school and helped parents to understand the potential benefits of a small rural Church school. The trust had a local network that enabled them to identify a suitable provider of wraparound care that would be interested in making provision in the school as pupil numbers began to increase as a result of these measures.

A few years on the school is a flourishing school with pupil numbers broadly on PAN and a trajectory of year-on-year increases in Reception pupil numbers.

Case Study 5: Planned Timescales for Joining a Schools Trust (MAT) Within Wider School Improvement Planning

A one-form entry school headteacher gave two terms' notice of the intention to retire at the end of the school year. The governing body worked with the LA to consider carefully headship recruitment and felt that a substantive headteacher was affordable and the right model. There was evidence in pupil planning forecasts from the local authority that these numbers could be sustained within budget. However the school carried a substantial historic deficit relating to matters that were now resolved and deemed unlikely to recur.

The governors also felt that this transition would be the right time to signal a clear intention to join a schools trust (MAT) in the coming years. They advertised the headship with a clear indication that this was the intention, so as to avoid a risk of recruiting a headteacher who would not be supportive of the governing body's long-term plans and wish to move on.

The new headteacher and governing body agreed that some work was needed on vision, curriculum and budget planning to ensure the school had sufficient clarity to understand what it was seeking from and what it could offer to a trust and to provide the necessary information to be able to enter a due diligence process with a trust.

A three-year plan school improvement plan was therefore created that involved this work being undertaken while, in parallel, the governing body set up a sub-committee to undertake the work of considering trust membership and bringing back reports to the governing body for them to consider. An initial exploration by this sub-committee presented the benefits and disadvantages to the school of joining a trust, informed by conversations with relevant DBE officers, attendance at DBE-led training, and exploratory conversations with trusts. This led to a decision to proceed to identify specific trusts to consider in more detail and bring a proposal of next steps back to the full governing body.

The result after appropriate work by the sub-committee and careful consideration by the full governing body was the decision to enter into due diligence with an identified trust that already contained a number of diocesan schools. However, this trust was not in a position to take on this school for a year due to its planned growth and consolidation strategy. Planning ahead on a three-year strategy meant that the school was in a strong position to work to this timescale without risk and enable it to join its preferred trust. The school decided to enter into an associate membership with the trust, involving an SLA that gave them access to training, support and financial planning advice from the trust. The financial planning advice enabled the school to reduce its historic deficit at a faster than planned rate and mitigate risks of future increases to deficit that could have put the trust's financial capacity to offer a home to the school at risk. Coming alongside the trust through this SLA enabled a 'try before you buy' type model that gave the school and its community confidence in the relationship with the trust and made transition into the MAT a smoother experience when the time came.