

Isle of Wight Council

Policy and Scrutiny Committee for Children's Services, Education and Skills

1st September 2022

Submission by Primary Chairs of Governors on Pupil Place Planning

Introduction

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission on behalf of primary school chairs of governors on the subject of pupil places planning and the growing problem of overcapacity in the primary school system on the Isle of Wight. This is a rare opportunity to make the voice of school governors heard at this level and I am grateful to Cllr Quigley for permitting my attendance to represent primary chairs of governors.

Our group acknowledges that the Local Authority has a legal duty to ensure sufficient school places, and that there is no legal obligation to keep surplus places below a certain level. We also acknowledge that the Local Authority is meeting its legal duty in providing sufficient school places, as reported to this committee on 2nd September 2021. However, it is the excessive nature of the over-sufficiency that is failing island primary school children.

The current over-capacity in the primary school system dates back to the reorganisation from a 3-tier system to a 2-tier system, when the Council at that time rejected Officers recommendations and bowed to public pressure to keep schools open that were surplus to requirements. Ever since the reorganisation there have been more primary school places on the island than needed and the situation is projected to become much worse in the next five years.

In the light of the Council's decision earlier this year to keep Chillerton & Rookley Primary School open, 22 primary school chairs and headteachers formed an informal group to discuss our collective concern that the Council had disagreed with the Governing Board's assessment that the school was no longer viable. As the Council delegates substantial responsibility to Governing Boards we are concerned that Council would reject the determination reached by an accountable body in consultation with Council Officers and other stakeholders.

Context

The purpose of this submission is to present our view of the challenges in providing strategic governance to our schools caused by chronic over-capacity and our view of the impact on children's education. I will not be bombarding committee members with data and statistics as that information is available through Council Officers, but some high-level numbers will provide the context to this submission. The following numbers are drawn from a presentation to school governors by Council Officers on 22nd June 2022 and are broadly consistent with data presented to this committee at its September meeting last year.

Currently on the island there are 39 state-funded primary schools with the capacity to admit a total of 1394 Reception children across 51 forms of entry in September 2022. Together those schools are expecting a total of 1133 children, an overcapacity of 261 places (just under 20%), which probably does not sound significant. However, that is equivalent to just over 8 forms of entry. For the Reception Year 2022, 8 one-form-entry primary schools

across the island could admit no new pupils and there would still be 21 surplus places in Reception year.

By September 2024, just 2 years from now, the number of children entering primary schools is projected to drop to less than 1000, a number that can be accommodated in just 34 forms of entry.

The simple reality is that there are too many primary schools on the island for the number of primary-age children. We accept that there is a legal requirement to provide for parental preference including different types of school (e.g. Anglican and Catholic church schools) and demand for school places is skewed by the nuance of unequal population distribution and the desire to minimise primary pupil transport, but with school funding being largely determined by pupil numbers, there are far too many primary schools to share the limited funding available.

Impact of Overcapacity

In school governance it is a well-established and accepted principle that a class size of 30 pupils is the optimum class size for financial efficiency. As governors we would love to have unlimited funding for our schools, but we acknowledge the need to operate within a budget determined by pupil numbers. This means maximising financial efficiency with the school full (or as close as can be achieved) and class sizes of 30 pupils.

The impact of overcapacity in the system is that hardly any primary schools are expecting their Reception year to be full this year and very few schools are full to capacity across all year groups. Those schools that are currently full are projected to see reducing numbers in coming years. By 2024 no primary schools are projected to have a capacity intake into their Reception year. Under the current funding system, any school that is not maximising intake every year will have to make compromises to operating within budget and prevent falling into a budget deficit. This inevitably creates a competitive marketplace where primary schools attempt to attract families to their school at the detriment of a neighbouring school. School governors champion the rights of children to high quality education and the achievement of the best outcomes from that education. We are not willing to compromise the quality of our educational provision at our own school for the benefit of children at another school. Council Officers urge schools not to aggressively market themselves as this is apparently unpalatable to parents, but it is a consequence of Council's decision to maintain the current number of primary schools.

When a primary school is full to capacity, it should have the financial resources to employ sufficient qualified teachers and other staff to maintain a structure of one class per form of entry. For example, a 2-form entry school of 420 pupils will have 2 classes per year group, 14 classes in total. But when there is 20% over-capacity, the funding is insufficient to maintain that structure and compromises need to be made that will have a negative impact on quality of education. Such compromises include:

- Sharing learning support assistants between classes
- Reducing small-group intervention and tuition
- Reducing pastoral and SEND care
- Combining administrative functions with part-time teachers
- Requiring school leaders to have timetabled classroom responsibilities
- Mixed year-group (age) classes
- Reducing wrap-around care (after school club and breakfast club)
- Moth-balling parts of the school site that are no longer needed

Another issue with chronic over-capacity in the school system is the difficulty with recruiting high-quality qualified teachers. For example, the current structure of 51 forms of entry requires 51 qualified early years' teachers, whereas a more efficient system with less over-capacity would require significantly fewer. The island teacher market is less open than on the mainland and we are all aware of the challenges with attracting professionals to relocate to the island, which means that some schools struggle to recruit qualified teachers because the available teachers in the system are spread across an inefficient system.

Yet another well-known issue with over-capacity is the ability of the system to accommodate frequent and multiple school changes by disgruntled families. We acknowledge that there must be sufficient scope to allow for pupil relocation for the right reasons, but many primary schools have experienced the knee-jerk reaction by parents to a disliked decision by moving their children's school. Governors are well informed by their headteachers of the negative impact of a child moving school mid-term and the disruption to their educational progress, and every headteacher knows a family that has moved their children 3 or 4 times during their primary years, occasionally returning to the original school.

Current Action Plan

Some chairs and headteachers have attended meetings with Council Officers to discuss pupil numbers at their school, with the recommendation to consider reducing the PAN. There is a limit to the number of primary schools that can reduce their PAN and those discussions revealed that the Local Authority does not have a strategy for managing over-capacity once all primary schools have reduced their PAN to the lowest practical level. Members of our group report hearing Council Officers say that they have been forbidden from including school closures in any proposals to reduce the over-capacity in the primary school system. Whilst disappointing, this should not be surprising as it is clearly consistent with the press statement released by the Cabinet Member for Childrens Services & Education, Cllr Andre, on 9^h May 2022 regarding the final decision not to close Chillerton & Rookley Primary School. That statement reiterated the current Council's commitment to keeping small rural schools open in the belief that there are social and economic benefits from children attending local schools with small classes. The statement also reported that Education Officers had been tasked with investigating options as to how smaller and more rural primary schools can be supported so that they can be sustained during periods of falling numbers and financial challenges, presumably without the option to reduce the number of primary schools.

Our group is looking to Council Officers for advice on managing pupil numbers and it is becoming increasingly clear that Officers do not have the full range of options at their disposal, relying solely on PAN reduction in individual schools. If Council does not wish to accept the recommendations of the education experts it employs through the contract with Hampshire County Council, is Council reviewing that contractual arrangement and seeking to contract a different organisation that is more aligned with Council's strategic objective to keep small unviable schools open?

It has been suggested by Council Officers that chairs of governors and headteachers in Place Planning Areas need to work together to address the over-capacity in the system because the Council will not address the issue strategically. But this is counter-intuitive for those governors who wish to see their pupils excel. We are looking to the Local Authority to take a strategic and holistic view of the primary school system; no governor wants to be responsible for their own school becoming financially unviable, failing to provide high-quality

education, and being forced to close. There needs to be a long-term strategic plan to address the chronic over-capacity in the primary school system which will start to affect secondary schools in 7 years' time. There is no expectation amongst Council Officers that pupil numbers will increase in the foreseeable future, and the issue of over-capacity will continue to worsen if no action is taken.

Governor Vacancies

At the meeting of this committee on 9th June 2022 members were told about the higher-than-average vacancy rate for school governors on the Isle of Wight. To quote from that report, Governing Boards are ambitious for all children and committed to continuous improvement of the school or academy to deliver the best possible educational experience. But it is a challenge to recruit and retain new governors in a system where our efforts to do just that are hampered by the inefficiencies created by the Council. School governors are recruited on the basis of skill and experience, but skilled and experienced people want to have an impact and will not commit to governing where their ability to have an impact is restricted by one of the key stakeholders in the system.

Summary

At the meeting of this committee on 3rd March 2022, it was reported that before the COVID pandemic attainment levels at Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 4 had seen significant improvement but were still below national average for England. Many chairs of governors, including myself, find this pursuit of mediocrity quite perverse. We all contribute significant proportions of our spare time to lead our Governing Boards in holding to account our headteachers and senior leaders to strive to achieve the best possible educational outcomes for the pupils in our schools. Yet we find ourselves operating in a school system that is grossly inefficient with multiple additional challenges caused by chronic overcapacity that inhibit our efforts to improve the educational experiences of our young people. We are aware that the schools with the highest levels of capacity are effectively being subsidised by those schools with lower levels of capacity because there is a limited pot of funding. We will of course continue to lead our Governing Boards in the drive for outstanding outcomes for our pupils, but feel strongly that our efforts, and those of everyone involved in education, would be much more fruitful without the constant battle to maintain pupil numbers. We are seeking a more strategic long-term vision from elected members but appreciate that long-term decision-making does not come naturally to politicians, especially on education where the people most affected by the policy around Reception school places cannot vote for another 14 years.

Thank you for your time and for the opportunity to present the views of primary chairs of governors (and by association their Governing Boards) across the island.

Presented on behalf of the group by, Chair of Governors, Haylands Primary School

Policy and Scrutiny Committee
1 September 2022
Isle of Wight Headteacher submission

Dear Chair and Committee Members

Following the recent decision and discussions with Head Teachers and Governors regarding School Places, we felt it was important to engage fully with the process to ensure the voice of the undersigned Headteachers may be recorded and taken into consideration in current and future decision making.

Our core purpose as Head Teachers is to ensure we provide the best possible education for the children in school now, whilst striving to provide the same or better for those who come to school in the future. This purpose stretches out beyond the walls of our own schools as we recognise we are part of the system which shapes the future of our children and thus our community, the Isle of Wight.

LOCAL AND NATIONAL DATA

Three years ago, the Head Teachers were made aware that the trend was showing a significant over-provision of primary school places and this was predicted to get worse. The reality now is that the forecasts were correct and that this is in line with national data on surplus primary places published by the Department for Education. There has been opportunity for Head Teachers to collectively consider this position and many are of the view that to ensure the Island's children receive the education they deserve, a reduction in primary school places is a necessity. This is about equity, equality and a sustainable system which is able to support continuous school improvement.

ACADEMIES

Following the publication of the government's White Paper, there are discussions about what the Academy Sector could mean for the Island. In reality, any Academy Trust interested in taking on a school would be required to undertake rigorous due diligence on key aspects of school management, considering the education, financial and capital risks of doing so. Similarly starting a new academy trust will require an equally thorough approach as viability and sustainability of a trust are key deliverables for the government. The guidance in this area is updated and strengthened all the time. The suggestion that the Academy Trust structure would provide opportunity and relief for very small schools is not a reality, nor is it the experience on the Isle of Wight.

PRIMARY SCHOOL SIZE

The national 'average' primary school is two-forms of entry, i.e. 60 children per year group. The Island has 39 primary schools, nine of which are at the national average according to their Planned Admission Number (60). However, of those nine only three expect to be full in September with 60 children starting (correct as at last presentation by Suzanne Smith to HT and CoG in June 2022). In recent years, five further two form entry primary schools have reduced their Planned Admission Number from 60 to 45 or even 30. Over and above this, two one-form entry primary schools have reduced their PAN to 20 or 15 to manage their school organisation. We are by no means advocating that every school on the Island should be two form entry. However, funding and school organisation start to work at an optimal, sustainable level when a school is that size.

GEOGRAPHY

In contrast to the mainland, Island families are able to access a number of schools within a five-mile radius. As we have already identified most Island schools are small, irrespective of their geographic location. Thus, the Isle of Wight geography is important because the positioning of schools is such that even if a very small school closed, rural or not, local families would still have a choice of an alternative school less than five miles away. So, keeping very small schools open does not provide flexibility for the education system on the Island. Instead it provides a weight that drags other schools down due to the excessive funding needed to sustain the very small schools. This is because almost 30 schools are running below their full capacity. There is no need to build in more flexibility. Even if the smallest schools in each area closed there would still be a surplus of school places, this is the flexibility (except for East Cowes if families were not to access Cowes schools and 'area' as defined in the school place planning presentation to Head Teachers in June 2022).

FUNDING

Maintaining very small schools creates inequality of funding as they require more funding per head. Deciding to maintain very small schools causes greater financial discord between schools. Minimum staffing levels, facilities management, consumable costs, wage increases and inflation mean that very small schools are already in deficit or are financially very vulnerable and struggle to balance the requirements of the curriculum, employing staff, providing the right ICT and maintaining the school premises as required under Health and Safety Laws and Safeguarding regulations. By ensuring the Island has the appropriate mix of schools, funding will be distributed more equitably; each will be better funded, more able to provide the right curriculum and maintain a good facility.

STAFF RECRUITMENT AND WELL-BEING

Staffing schools is a national challenge, employing staff to work in a very small school is even more difficult. The expectation for the breadth and depth of the Curriculum offer has significantly increased over recent years. Ofsted inspectors are expecting to see a broad and balanced curriculum with schools increasing the range of experiences for children whilst taking their 'cultural capital' into account. Invariably, the role of the Subject Leader has increased in prominence, importance and workload. In a very small school one person will lead more than one subject. This places huge pressure on Subject Leaders to achieve the expectation, for not only one, but two or sometimes three subjects. This has a detrimental effect on the wellbeing of staff members and their ability to lead their subject effectively.

SUSTAINABLE SYSTEM

For Island education to be most effective supporting leadership and collaboration between schools, the right mix of 'average' two form entry schools and small schools is needed. Managing school places purely by reducing Planned Admission Numbers is not an effective strategy because the reduction achieved via this method is not sufficient to improve the overall position of over-capacity in school places. It creates smaller schools which often have to go through prolonged periods of staff restructuring and manage mixed aged classes, neither of which are beneficial for the children or the staff. In fact, this would perpetuate the current situation where schools are in competition for children rather than creating a system where schools can work together in partnership to improve teaching and learning for all children on the Island.

PUPIL SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Attending very small schools can have an impact on the social and emotional development of children: the opportunities to learn to manage different social situations and develop friendship groups. The impact of this is often particularly felt by the children at transition from primary to secondary school,

when Year 6 pupils go on to attend a 600+ student secondary college (and in most cases 1000+) for the next phase of their education.

CONCLUSION

In summary, we need to act decisively and effectively in planning primary school places, bringing the number of places available in line with the required number of places, so that ultimately Island's children have the best opportunity to become economically and socially successful citizens in the 21st Century as the corner stones of a thriving Isle of Wight community.

We are keen to work with Council Leaders in order to logically and strategically pave the way forward together. We believe by doing this the children will be put first with the shared vision that every child on the Isle of Wight will receive a first-class education, with an enriching curriculum, personalised, tailored provision, inspired by enthusiastic and engaging members of staff. Together as Head Teachers and Local Councillors we would be showing strength in not pacifying the perceived desire for very small schools in the immediate but looking into the future and what we want our legacy to be for our children.

Presented by:

Isle of Wight Headteacher Forum

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ISLE OF WIGHT
HEADTEACHER FORUM

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By Email: list of councillors below

cc: Ashley Whitaker, Naomi Carter, Jade Kennett

8 July 2024

Dear Councillors

The Headteacher Community is very aware the school place planning strategy is to come forward shortly for your deliberation and decision.

Headteachers are passionate about their schools, their communities and education for all children on the Isle of Wight, working tirelessly to achieve the best outcomes.

Nationally the education sector landscape is changing with more children in receipt of Pupil Premium than ever, significantly higher levels of Special Educational Needs, a considerable increase in children presenting with social and emotional needs as well as a significant reduction in the number of children in primary schools mostly because of the consistently falling birth rate. This situation is amplified on the Isle of Wight due to the number of schools, thus making it increasingly challenging to provide the resources to meet the needs of all children and ensure school buildings and other elements such as IT provision are maintained to a high standard.

Left unattended the situation on the Island will become untenable. We refer to our previous correspondence to Cllrs Jordan, Bacon, Peacey-Wilcox and Price and ask that you take all of our points into consideration in the deliberations you are about to undertake and the decisions you are about to make.

Headteachers are committed to their schools, their children, their staff and the wider community. Headteachers are supportive of the wider Island position however, they also have a responsibility and loyalty to their school. Headteachers and governing bodies are responsible for the strategic direction of their school(s) whilst the Isle of Wight Council is responsible for the planning of school places on the Island, therefore this is a fundamental decision to be made by you. The Headteachers undersigned feel collectively that doing nothing is not an option you should consider.

Yours sincerely,

34 Headteachers

Isle of Wight Headteacher Forum