



# BRIEFING PAPER

Schools Forum  
Report

UNISON West Sussex briefing paper for all schools members

February 2020

## Schools Forum Report

Following the update by The Director of Education and Skills - Paul Wagstaff, in relation to the proposed closure of 3 small rural primary schools; Clapham and Patching C of E Primary School, Rumboldwhyke C of E Infant School and Stedham Primary School based on their viability, there has to be concern for many of the small rural primary schools in West Sussex.

If as indicated by Graham Olway, speaking for the Local Authority in response to questions at the meeting, that the deciding factor of viability is the size of the school and the size of intake, then Small Rural Primary Schools will always be disadvantaged. For many living in those communities about to be affected by these decisions and for our members working in those schools this will come as a huge blow. Despite consultation results indicating strong support for "no change", a fact disputed by the LA in response to that question at SF, as in their opinion many people wanted change, these schools are still at risk of closure. This is a decision that becomes harder to understand when you consider the respondents to the consultation on the 3 schools facing closure all indicated the schools secure the highest quality education provision for all children and young people. The LA was keen to stress there was no overall plan to look at closing significant numbers of rural primary schools, which seems positive although the Leadership and Governors of any small school in rural areas shouldn't feel relieved at this comment.

The LA stressed it would consider supporting a struggling small school, when analysis showed closure would prove disastrous to the local community, even if that school wasn't financially viable and indicated it already had, unfortunately when asked for examples, they couldn't remember the names of any school supported this way.

The LA is also looking at Academisation or Federation as possible solutions to the viability of many rural primary schools. However it seems that for many there will be significant obstacles to achieving that as an alternative to closure, small

schools overall are not an enticing prospect for academies and federation might not achieve the desired aim of proving viability in the eyes of the LA. The LA is keen to stress no final decisions have been taken and they would still consider alternatives to closure should any viable plan surface, but it also stated that Federation would not solve all the problems of struggling schools and in those cases where the LA feels the schools are no longer viable, they would have to look at all options including closure.

The LA also confirmed that the Secretary of State for Education, still hasn't delivered a decision on the disapplication request to overturn School Forums decision to block the transfer of 0.5% (£2.4m) of Schools Block Funding to the High Needs Block budget to cover the projected overspend in the HNB. Budget pressures are higher than anticipated in the HNB due to increases in the number of EHCPs as well as other pressures. It is anticipated that there will be no reserves in the Dedicated Schools Grant to offset rising costs and despite increases in funding, the increases following years of under-funding remain insufficient to offset the cost pressures, with the result that unless Central Government provides Education funding as promised which is fit for purpose, the DSG will move into a deficit position. The LA is now having to consider how it can write a budget recovery plan for the next 3 years in the event that this happens. DSG deficits can only be 1% of the total DSG budget (£6.8m) and even with the £2.4m transfer if agreed and allowing for the increase in funding from Government of £8.312m, with current budget pressures of £15.8m and increasing pressures it is difficult to be optimistic. It is vital that any additional costs including pay awards, are funded for all education staff, if not it is hard to see how these will not be met without further restructuring, impacting on all education staff including many members working as support staff.

**Keith Manville, Branch Schools Forum Rep**