



## **Education & Lifelong Learning**

### **Small Schools Policy**

**Version 2: January 2007**  
**Next Review : September 2009**

# Scottish Borders Council - Policy for Small Schools

## 1. Introduction

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The policy has been developed following extensive research into the issues facing small schools and through consultation. The consultation process had five distinct phases: in-depth interviews with headteachers of small schools in the Borders, an open public consultation on elements of school review, a separate consultation for teaching staff on support for small schools and a final consultation on the draft policy itself. The fifth phase was to consult on proposed changes to the policy after its first complete cycle of review.

The policy document is divided into five sections:

1. The background and context of the policy
2. Defining the size and characteristics of a small school for the Borders
3. Creating a framework for support for small schools
4. The criteria and process of review for small schools
5. Appendices

Listed below are a number of objectives that the authority has to balance in delivering its services. This 'balance' is not meant to dismiss or diminish the contribution of small schools which often provide the vital intra community links in rural areas.

- Recognising the role and importance that small schools can play in rural communities
- Ensuring fairness in distribution of resources.
- Taking decisions in the context of the overall picture for all children in the Borders.
- Initiating change in the best interest of the service.
- While meeting its statutory duty to achieving best value.
- While accepting that it costs far more on a per pupil basis to operate small schools
- While respecting the passionate commitment of some communities to maintain the status quo, often in the face of significant declines in school rolls.
- Dealing with school communities' concerns arising from the inevitable changes in the way education is taught and delivered

The fundamental principles of the policy seek to meet these objectives by:

- putting the interests of children first
- supporting headteachers and school staff to deliver an education that will prepare our children for an ever more complex and competitive world, meeting the four competencies that are guiding the development of the A Curriculum for Excellent
  - Successful learners
  - Confident Individuals
  - Responsible Citizens
  - Effective Contributors

- establishing a clear and fair framework to support and review schools that meets the authority's legal duty to secure adequate and efficient provision of school education

The implementation of the policy will be taken forward through 'practice points' which are identified in the document and listed in appendix 1. Appendix 2 contains references to a number of Council policies and national initiatives relevant to this policy. Appendix 3 comprises a list of small schools as at January 2007;

## **2. Policy Context**

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The pattern of primary school provision in the Borders was established more than 100 years ago to serve a different age, with a primarily rural population. Since then there has been enormous change in lifestyles and in the teaching environment.

Over the past 20 years this change has accelerated and further changes to school life are inevitable. Scottish Borders is one of only three areas in Scotland to forecast significant continuing growth in the under 15 population, however this growth is primarily taking place in the region's vibrant towns and larger village settlements and some remote rural areas are forecast to see continuing decline.

There are also significant changes in the way schools operate, due in part to the Devolved School Management regime and more recently to McCrone (a national agreement to deliver 'A teaching profession for the 21st century'), both of which have increased management and administrative duties for headteachers. In addition a multitude of new initiatives, the need for headteachers to develop and implement an ever-increasing raft of policies, together with changing legislation all put considerable pressure on schools. The effect of these measures is amplified in small schools. All of these initiatives will be beneficial to our children but all (albeit to different degrees) consume non-teaching/management time for headteachers.

Another very significant change arises from the statutory requirement for local authorities to ensure a continuous process of quality improvement in schools. This has resulted in changed roles for the former school advisers. Their roles are now focused on driving improvements in quality - an absolute necessity - but pastoral and supportive duties no longer form part of the quality improvement officers' role. The quality improvement framework refocuses responsibilities for headteachers, which again in small schools consumes proportionately more time. This has a stronger impact on small schools where the previous support framework helped compensate for the professional isolation of perhaps just one, two or at most three teachers working together.

The lack of space and poor facilities within many of our schools also brings additional pressure. As stated earlier, the majority of our small schools were built in a different age and while the buildings have been maintained to an acceptable standard, some lack space for fundamental activities while other schools have far too much space for the reduced number of pupils in their catchment area.

The Council has an approved policy (School of the Future Model – Primaries) detailing the space and standard of accommodation required for primary schools and a comprehensive school asset strategy is in place to start addressing this. In line with the Scottish Executive requirements, this

will entail an asset-based review of all schools. In the Borders this will be undertaken through a rolling three-year programme and a review of small schools will be undertaken on the same cycle.

- The principal objective of the asset review is to identify needs and determine the priorities for investment.
- The principal objective of the small schools review is early identification of issues that may threaten the viability of these schools and where possible take action to address any potential threats.

While larger schools also face growing challenges, they generally have a more comprehensive infrastructure of support (staffing, resources and premises) than small schools and as the funding allocation for resources is largely based on pupil numbers, larger schools also have more flexibility in the way they use their devolved budgets.

### **Efficient Service**

Few can argue that in terms of efficiency operating fewer, but larger schools, is the optimum solution but this ignores the rural realities and attractions to some families of life in the Borders. Although the revenue costs related to a single school may be considered marginal, when compared to the discretionary spend of the department's overall budget, failure to redress an imbalance in resources can impact upon a large number of pupils.

## **3. Small Schools in a Borders Setting**

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### **Defining a Small School - Practice Point 1**

The general definition of a small primary school across the United Kingdom is one with less than 200 pupils. This however is not relevant for the Borders where the average size of a primary school is 120 pupils.

- The authority's considered view is that a small school for the purposes of this policy should be defined as comprising no more than three composite classes with a maximum of 75 pupils.

A list of the schools that come into this category will be published in August of each 'review year'.

Other issues examined when defining the size of a small school for the Borders included:

#### **Single-teacher schools**

There is much excellent work undertaken in one-teacher schools and they provide a close nurturing environment but they do face increasing and significant challenges. The level and nature of the challenges will vary but they include:

##### **For pupils**

- Meeting the full curriculum when taught in a single class that may have up to 19 children, ranging in age from 4½ to 11

- Insufficient social interaction with children of their own age and/or gender
- Involvement with the same teacher for the duration of primary schooling
- Insufficient opportunities for team interaction - particularly sports
- Less resources or space than larger schools - this is generally true for a whole range of sports, arts and games facilities
- Less money to spend on books and supplies etc
- Huge cultural change for pupils moving from a school with under 19 pupils to a secondary school that could have over 1,000 pupils.

#### **For teachers**

- Ever increasing management and administrative burdens falling on a class-committed headteacher
- Isolation - the lack of contact with other teaching professionals to provide the constructive challenge of a critical friend
- The difficulty in delivering the full curriculum across up to five or seven year groups in one classroom
- The reliance on supply staff to cover their teaching commitments when they need to attend courses, conferences and network groups - a consequence of the changing curriculum and initiative driven education environment

#### **For the authority**

- It is increasingly difficult to attract headteachers, teachers and support staff (for both permanent and supply posts) to small schools, which can lack the facilities and opportunities of larger schools and may be in remote locations.

### **Minimum size for a one-teacher school - Practice Point 2**

For many years the policy in the Borders has been that a one-teacher school should face a review if its roll dropped to 13 (or fewer) pupils. This takes into account the concept that three or four pupils at each stage (or developmental year groupings i.e. P1- P3, P4-P5 and P6-P7) is the minimum number required to provide adequate cognitive development and effective personal and social development. This will continue as part of the rolling three year review cycle.

### **Pupil age profile of one-teacher schools - Practice Point 3**

In some parts of the Borders, single-teacher schools only offer education from P1 to P5, thereafter the children transfer to their nearest larger school for their P6 and P7 years. This provides an attractive mix to parents of a local school for the early years and the chance for pupils to benefit from the broader opportunities. This help in the transition from primary to secondary.

- Any single-teacher school that provides P1 to P7 education will be asked to consider if it wishes to change its age profile and transfer P6 and P7 pupils to a larger school. If the majority of parents want to explore this further, a statutory consultation will be undertaken.

- Should parents in schools that already transfer pupils at P6 wish the authority to consider reversing this transition process, then this can be explored through the review and statutory consultation process.

#### **4. Support Framework for Small Schools**

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The authority's principle of support is based on providing an appropriate level of support for all schools based on need. Until now levels of support have been largely allocated on a per pupil basis, working towards equality in resource allocation. It is now acknowledged that this is insufficient to maintain small schools but it must be recognised that it will place additional costs on to small schools.

The introduction of all these elements will be on a phased basis as funding permits. But when bidding for new resources, support for small schools will be given a high priority.

##### **Additional management time for headteachers - Practice Point 4**

The Education Executive has agreed a formula to increase management time for all headteachers. In small schools the extra management time will provide an additional teacher to cover the headteacher's class commitment.

Management time for small school has been increased to

- 1.5 days a week for 1 teacher schools
- 2 days a week for two and three teacher schools

##### **Non teaching support - Practice Point 5**

It is acknowledged that small schools need additional non-teaching support, although one effect of this will be to raise their cost base. Support will initially cover additional office staff for administration and janitorial time.

- All small schools will have non teaching staff on site throughout the school day.
- All small schools will have a janitor on site for ½ day each week.

##### **Professional support for headteachers in small schools - Practice Point 6**

As discussed in section 1 of the policy, headteachers in small schools face additional pressures from a huge number of factors that are amplified by their relative isolation and lack of professional support on a daily basis.

- The primary professional support team will
  - advise on new teaching initiatives for multi stage teaching

- promote and facilitate clustering, whereby small schools will work together to develop relevant policies and bid for additional funding
- encourage sharing of best practice

#### **4. Review of Small Schools**

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##### **Small Schools Review - Practice Point 7**

The small schools review will be an open and inclusive process and should not be confused with the formal statutory consultation that is required to explore changing a school's status, its location or closure. Early exploration of roll forecasts, changing catchment areas or non-traditional methods of operation through the committee process indicates a proactive approach intended to help sustain the school.

- Small schools will be reviewed on a rolling three year programme, beginning in August 2007 so that as appropriate, and when possible, proactive measures can be taken to help sustain small schools whose future might otherwise be in jeopardy.

This timescale will now be in line with a asset review of all schools.

##### **The Principles of the Small Schools Review Process - Practice Point 8**

- For every trigger point listed below evidence will be required of a trend - rather than a short term or single year factor.
  - This evidence (and the trend) will comprise a mix of historic and forecast data, looking up to five years ahead.
  - Parents, staff and community members will be invited to participate in the process. They will have access to all evidence or material put forward by the department and may challenge the information provided or submit their own data to be considered.
  - For school rolls forecasts (in line with the Council's approved methodology for roll projections) all likely housing development for the next five years will be taken into account. Additional factors, such as the re-introduction of the rail line, will also be considered.

##### **Trigger points - Practice Point 9**

A number of consistent trigger points for review have been developed. A school will normally face a review if it meets two or more of the points listed below.

It is important to reiterate that a 'review' is not a statutory consultation on closing the school.

- A small school will be reviewed if:

- Its status changes from
  - a four to a three teacher school - so becoming a 'small school'
  - a three to a two-teacher school
  - a two to a one-teacher school
- Its school roll fall is *forecast* to fall below the minimum size (13 pupils) in the next three years.
- If its operating cost is three or more times higher than the SBC average for all schools. When considering average costs, the additional funding provided for small schools through the GAE allocation will be taken into account.
- If the school needs urgent and unavoidable investment which, based on the number of pupils on the school roll, is considered disproportionate. The definition of disproportionate investment would be more than £11,000 per pupil for a single project. (The £11,000 limit will rise in line with the BCIS tender priceinflation index).
- If the school is operating at an occupancy level of 45% or less. The Accounts Commission recommended in its 'Room for Learning' Report that local authorities should consider alternative arrangements for schools whose occupancy falls below 60%. The lower threshold recommended as a trigger for the Borders, recognises the disproportionate effect that just one or two pupils leaving a school can have on a small school's roll. Occupancy levels will be determined in line with the Council policy, approved in September 2006 on school capacity.
- If more than 40% of parents in the catchment area choose to access another school by placing requests. The primary schools manager and the school's quality improvement officer will be asked to report on reasons behind the trend in outward placing requests and recommend steps to halt the decline in school roll.
- If there is a significant decline in pupil performance. This will initially be referred to the Authority's Joint Quality Assurance body for consideration who will report back to the committee on their findings.

### **Preliminary Assessment - Practice point 10**

- The Assistant Primary Schools Manager will lead the review process for the department.
- The first stage of the programme will be a preliminary assessment of each small school measured against the trigger points identified in practice point 9.
- A school profile card will be drawn up by the department in August for each small school. Each school's Business Support Officer will collate and prepare the data for the schools. Sources for information are:
  - School rolls and capacities - Department's Policy Manager
  - Maintenance and premises issues: Department's Asset Manager



- Financial figures: School's April Devolved School Management Statement
  - Placing requests: The school's headteacher
  - Attainment and achievement data: The school's headteacher and QIO
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- The profile card will be shared with the school's headteacher, staff, parent council and local elected members. School representatives will have the opportunity to challenge the information if they feel it is incorrect.
  - If no trigger factors emerge, the school will not go forward for review unless this is requested by either the headteacher or parent council.
  - This will be the end of the process for that year and the headteacher and parent council will be notified in writing. This is likely to be the position for the majority of small schools.

### **The Small Schools Committee - Practice point 11**

- The small schools committee will comprise
  - One of the department's portfolio holders (Councillors) - who will chair the meetings
  - two senior officers from the department
  - two headteachers
  - three parental representatives

Nominations will be sought from headteachers and parents willing to join the committee for this process. The headteacher and parents will not be from schools that face review. ( An invitation will be issued to all schools to nominate representatives and selection will be based on securing a cross section by geography and school size, one representative at least must be from a small school.

Committee Members will serve for one complete review cycle, from start of the process in August to its conclusion.

- The committee will also invite each school facing a review to nominate up to five representatives to attend when the review committee meets for the discussion on their school,
- School representatives will be determined by the headteacher and could include
  - Member of the non teaching staff
  - A parent or carer
  - Representatives from the parent council
  - A member of the local community - for example the Minister or representative from the Community Council
  - The local elected member
  - A pupil representative from P6 or P7 year groups
- The attendance of the headteacher of any school to be reviewed at the review committee is mandatory.

The school representatives can present information, and participate in discussion but the final recommendation to the Director will be made by the Small Schools Committee.

- The Committee will make its recommendation to the Director of Education and Lifelong Learning but as with any Council report, the final decision on the recommendations and content of any subsequent report to the Education Executive will be made by the Director, rather than the Committee.
- The Lead Officer for the Review will ensure that each member of the Small Schools Committee is given the opportunity to consider and comment on the draft of the Director's report.
- Should members of the Small Schools Committee wish to make a different recommendation for an individual school this will be included as a separate paragraph within the Director's Report to ensure elected members are made aware of diverging views.

### **The Review Process - Practice point 12**

- Invitations to join the Review Committee will be issued in May of each cycle.
- The review process will start in August with the issuing of the review information to schools
- The first meeting of the small schools committee will be in September. The process would normally end by November - if however further reports are required then it may meet for a final session in either December or the following January.
- The first meeting of the committee will be to explore future options for the school. This could include discussion on:
  - School roll forecasts, future housing developments etc
  - The catchment area constraints
  - Out of area catchment requests - in and outward requests
  - Interaction of school and community
  - Potential for upgrading the school to meet School of the Future standard
  - Attainment and achievement of pupils
  - Health and safety considerations
  - Alternative schooling
  - Transport issues
- From these topics, reports will be requested on relevant issues. Most reports will originate from within the Council but on issues such as the 'interaction of school and community' it might be more appropriate for this to be prepared by the community representatives. But whatever the subject matter of the report, the school's

representatives will have access to all information used to prepare the report.

- The second meeting will be held within six weeks to consider the findings of these reports.
- If at this stage a clear outcome is identified, a report on the findings, which will be approved by the committee, will be sent to the Director to present a report to the next meeting of the Education Executive for consideration. Any minority or dissenting views from Committee members will be included in the report. Copies of the report will be sent to the school for staff, parents and the wider community and a copy placed on the Council website.
- If further reports are required, or the committee wishes to consider in more detail alternative methods of operation, a further meeting will be held to finalise the review before recommendations are made to the Director.
- Minutes, reports and evidence (apart from personnel data on staff and personal information on pupils))from all review meetings will be available for parents and the community

### **Outcomes of the review - Practice Point 13**

The small schools committee can recommend a range of options depending upon the situation for an individual school:

Potential outcomes could include

- Maintaining the status quo until the next school review process
- Recommending a review of the catchment area to see if this could increase pupil numbers. This could only be considered if it did not weaken the viability of the school(s) in other catchment areas. This would require a statutory consultation process.
- Recommending a statutory consultation to consider changing the age profile. The support of a majority of parents would be required for this change before a statutory consultation is undertaken.
- Recommending the school is classified as a strategic school. This classification is generally based on the distance from an alternative school, although the nature of the road to be travelled, and geographic location relative to weather conditions will also be considered.

Strategic schools will still face a review but exploring closure would only be undertaken in exceptional circumstances.

- Asking for a report on encouraging greater use of the school buildings by the community (both by the public or if appropriate private sector users)

- Recommending mothballing a school.  
This would only be considered if it had the support of a majority of parents and is most likely to be considered for strategic schools. A typical scenario might be if a strategic school were to experience a sharp (but short term) drop in pupil numbers,, parents might prefer that their child goes to the nearest school for an interim period, rather than be disadvantaged through lack of social interaction. This action would require Council approval and a statutory consultation and would initially be for a fixed period of two years – and would be reviewed and if thought appropriate renewed for a further two years.
- Recommending exploring a shared headship; hub and satellite or cluster model of operation. This would go beyond the current shared headship model, which has been piloted in the Borders. If recommended and approved by the Education Executive implementation of an alternative model of operation may require a statutory consultation.
- Recommending undertaking a statutory consultation on closure.  
**This would only be considered as a last resort** and would only arise if at least three of the following factors are met:
  - a parent council wishes this to be considered in the best interests of their pupils
  - if the school roll has declined below 13 and is either set to decline further (or there is insufficient evidence to suggest the school roll will show a sustained improvement.
  - 40% or more of parents are requesting placing requests out of a school
  - there are serious deficiencies with a school's building that cannot be resolved without disproportionate investment
  - a school's running costs are three or more times the Borders average and cannot be reduced by management action
  - it is the authority's professional view that closure is in the best interest of the pupils as the lack of peer group is impacting upon personal, social and educational development - this must be supported by clear evidence
  - the authority considers this to be in the best interest of the overall service

#### **Statutory Consultation - Practice Point 14**

A recommendation to explore a statutory consultation must be accepted by the Education Executive before being implemented.

- The consultation will go beyond the statutory requirements by
  - inviting community responses
  - sharing all consultation information with parents and the community, subject to any Data Protection restrictions.
  - inviting representatives from the school to address the Education Executive or Council meeting that considers the outcome of the consultation.
  
- If the Director's recommendation is not in favour of closure, or if Members decide a school should be kept open after a statutory consultation the Council will be asked to:
  - exempt the school from another statutory consultation for five years to offer the school a period of stability.
  
  - This exemption period might be waived, subject to Education Executive consent, in exceptional circumstances.

## 5. Appendices

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### APPENDIX 1 - Summary of Practice points

Practice Point	
1.	The size of a small school in a Borders setting is 75 pupils or less in no more than three composite classes..
2	The minimum number for pupils in a one-teacher school is 13 pupils.(
3.	The preferred age profile of single teacher school will have P1 to P5 classes but this will not be compulsory.
4.	Management time for headteachers in small schools will be increased.
5	Support staff for small schools will be increased, with office staff throughout the day and part time janitor cover.
6.	Professional support for small schools will be strengthened
7.	A rolling three year programme of reviews is being introduced to support small schools through early intervention and establish a consistent framework for review - it will be an open and inclusive process.
8.	The evidence required for the review process will be a trend rather than a short term or single year effect and will be shared with parents, staff and local communities.
9.	A school will be reviewed if it meets at least two trigger points.
10.	The first stage of the programme will be a preliminary assessment against the trigger points
11.	Small school reviews will be taken forward by a small schools committee. This will comprise senior officers from the department, head teachers and two

	parents. Each school being reviewed can nominate up to five representatives to attend and participate in the process.
12	The process of the review
13.	Suggested potential outcomes from the review- range from maintaining the status quo until the next review process, to exploring alternative models of management and as a <b>last resort</b> statutory consultation on closure.
14.	Statutory consultations will go beyond the minimum requirements and a five year exemption period is proposed for schools that are not closed following a statutory consultation process.

## APPENDIX 2 - Reference sources for Council policies and national initiatives

### National Policies and Initiatives

- McCrone - A Teaching Profession for the 21st Century  
<http://www.scotland.gov.uk/library3/education/tp21a-00.asp>
- School capacity levels  
Scottish Executive Circular - Measuring school capacities, November 2004  
Accounts Commission Publication - Room for Learning 1995
- Devolved School Management  
[www.scotland.gov.uk](http://www.scotland.gov.uk)

### Scottish Borders Council

- Corporate Plan  
<http://www.scotborders.gov.uk/council/yourcouncil/reportsandpublications/3399.html>
- Education & Lifelong Learning - Better Next Steps for Schools – January 2007  
<http://www.scotborders.gov.uk/life/educationandlearning/index.html>

Policy paper - Roll projection methodology - Original Report - September 2003 and Primary Update March 2005

- Policy Paper - Methodology for determining roll capacities - Approved by the Education Executive September 2006
- Policy Paper - Admissions Policy - Approved by the Education Executive December 2006
- Policy Paper - School of the Future Model (Primary Schools) updated January 2007

All policy papers are available by telephone from Education Lifelong Learning Communications Team 01835 825090 or by email from [ellinfo@scotborders.gov.uk](mailto:ellinfo@scotborders.gov.uk)

### Appendix 3 – Small Schools as at January 2007

School	School Roll
Ancrum	41
Ayton	52
Channelkirk	57
Coldingham	51
Eccles/Leitholm	29
Ettrick	11
Fountainhall	28
Gordon	58
Greenlaw	73
Heriot	55
Hobkirk	25
Kirkhope	32
Lilliesleaf	61
Newcastleton	58
Reston	56
Roberton	9
Sprouston	32
St Joseph's	41
St Margarets (Galashiels)	65
St Margaret's (Hawick)	28
Walkerburn	41
Westruther	25
Yarrow	6
Yetholm	42
24 schools	976 pupils