

ESSEX PRIMARY HEADTEACHERS' ASSOCIATION

**INAUGURAL MEETING OF THE EPHA SMALL SCHOOLS SUPPORT GROUP
HELD ON THURSDAY 17 MARCH 2022 3.30 – 5.00 pm**

Venue online

Clerk Pam Langmead [TEL: 01621-786359/07791 143277]

1. In attendance

Natasha Bartram	Wimbish Primary
Ruth Baugh	White Notley CE Primary
Ceri Daniels	Holy Trinity CE Primary, Eight Ash Green
Hayley Dyer	Crays Hill Primary
Debbie Hanson	Clarity School (Special, independent)
Matthew Hawley	Debden CE Primary
Martin Hawrylak	Stisted CE Primary
Becky Keitch	St George's CE Primary, Great Bromley
Nathan Kempster	Ardleigh St Mary's CE Primary
Alison Kerrell	Great Bardfield Primary
Llewellen Lawson	Dr Walker's CE Primary, Fyfield
Maria Luck-Davies	Bradfield Primary
Stephanie Newland	St Margaret's CE Primary, Toppesfield
Jinnie Nichols Bulmer	St Andrew's CE Primary/ St Giles' CE Primary
Andrew MacDonald	Langham Primary
Becky Maguire	St Joseph's Catholic Primary, Dovercourt
James Newell	Wix and Wrabness Primary
Maire O'Regan	Margaretting CE Primary/ Roxwell CE Primary/Ford End CE Primary
Lucy Overton	Great Tey CE Primary
Sarah Stevenson	Langenhoe Primary
Kirsty Stuart	Ridgewell CE Primary
Marnie Tait	Manuden Primary
Pam Langmead	EPHA Professional Officer
Harriet Phelps-Knights	EPHA Chair/ Janet Duke Primary

2. Apologies for absence

George Athanasiou	Great Sampford Primary
Emily Bartram	Radwinter CE Primary
Jamie Bearman	St Peter's CE Primary, West Hanningfield
Claire Berry	Birchanger CE Primary
Tracey Bratley	Chrishall Holy Trinity/St Nicholas CE Primary
Hannah Coyle	Fingringhoe CE Primary
Louise Eastbrook	D'Arcy Primary
Emma Flin	Great Yeldham CE Primary
Julie Ingram	Chappel CE Primary School
Aedin Lipski	Highwood Primary

Elizabeth Maycock	Little Waltham Primary
Sarah Meares	Terling CE Primary
Becky More	Rivenhall CE Primary
Jennifer Penney	Shalford Primary
Simon Rance	Ashdon Primary
Julie Sarti	Colne Engaine CE Primary
Sarah Sloper	Rettendon Primary
Lisa Waters	East Hanningfield CE Primary
Hannah Wheatcroft	Farnham & Rickling Federated CE Primaries
Samantha Willis	Canewdon CE Primary and Nursery

3 Introduction and context of the meeting

Harriet Phelps-Knights, the EPHA Chair, welcomed everyone to the meeting and thanked the headteachers for attending. She explained that she was a bit of an interloper as she definitely doesn't qualify as a small-school headteacher – her school is a large primary in Basildon – but as Chair of EPHA she felt it was important to hear what small schools heads were saying and to be able to talk on their behalf.

Pam Langmead, the EPHA Professional Officer, explained that she hears concerns and comments from heads of all schools, and certainly those in small schools, sharing the challenges they face. There are four representatives on the EPHA Executive who are small-school heads: Jinnie Nicholls, Becky Keitch, Ceri Daniels and James Newell. They are clear and vocal about the challenges of small schools. Over the last three plus years, as the Lump Sum for schools has decreased, and as Local Authority support and services are cut, the pressures on all, but in particular on small schools, has increased.

Pam referenced the Local Authority-led Small Schools Group, now called the Sustainable Schools Group, led by Alison Fiala. This has a different remit from the EPHA group, as the focus is mainly on sustainability, focused on structure, governance and viability. While small schools exist (and hopefully they always will), headteachers need more and varied support. Pam noted that she had recently received an email from a headteacher who was finding the delivery of the curriculum a real challenge: she asked if there were other colleagues who she could contact to share ideas and suggestions. It became obvious that there would be real benefits in bringing the 60 or so small-school headteachers together, to facilitate the sharing of expertise and experience.

Jinnie Nicholls noted that the voices of small-school headteachers are heard, but other heads don't really understand the challenges that are faced. For example, a headteacher in a larger school might experience the loss of a deputy or a caretaker for a while, not realising that this is the day to day reality for a small school headteacher. The small-school head is obliged to pick up every gap in their school; they all agreed that they are wearing many, many hats.

Harriet said that EPHA hoped that the group would not only give the opportunity to share ideas, but also would offer some reassurance and comfort to small-school heads, who can often feel very isolated.

4 Purpose and terms of reference

Harriet noted that she was chairing this first meeting, but suggested that it would be more appropriate for one of the small-school headteachers to take on that role, if someone was willing. It was noted that the EPHA Professional Officer would administrate the group, so hopefully being Chair would not be too arduous.

Preliminary, draft terms of reference were shared, as a starting point for discussion. The following points were agreed:

Purpose

To offer the following to small-school headteachers in Essex:

- Support and reassurance
- Advice and guidance
- Shared experience and expertise
- Opportunities
- Developing and promoting the understanding of the unique challenges of the role
- A voice, locally and nationally

Chairing

Jinnie Nicholls offered to Chair the group, and Ceri Daniels will be Vice-Chair. This was **AGREED** by the group.

Membership

- All headteachers of mainstream primary-phase schools with 120 or fewer pupils
- Other headteachers of small schools, by invitation or with the agreement of the group (such as schools with slightly higher numbers, independent schools etc).

It was agreed that it was important not to dilute the focus of the group, but that there were a number of headteachers who are in schools with just over 120 pupils (some with falling numbers) who have said that they face the same challenges, and would benefit from being part of the group.

- EPHA Professional Officer
- EPHA Chair – *to ensure that she has the overview of the group*

Guests (including Local Authority officers) will be invited as the agenda and focus of each meeting requires. If the group would like to know or hear about something, it would be helpful to have additional expertise from non-members.

It was strongly agreed that it is important the meetings are a forum where members can speak openly and frankly about the issues that they face.

Meeting arrangements

The meetings will be held half-termly. It was felt that this would be helpful; if the meetings are only once a term there is a long break if one is missed and members may become isolated. Meetings will usually be held online, but in-person meetings and possibly an annual conference will be planned.

The time of day is a challenge for small-school heads, but it was agreed that after-school tended

to work best for the majority.

Administration

Agendas and minutes will be drafted by the Professional Officer, and agreed with the Chair. They will be then be circulated to the whole membership. The Chair of the group will report back to the EPHA Executive on a termly basis.

Resources and budget

Will be provided by EPHA.

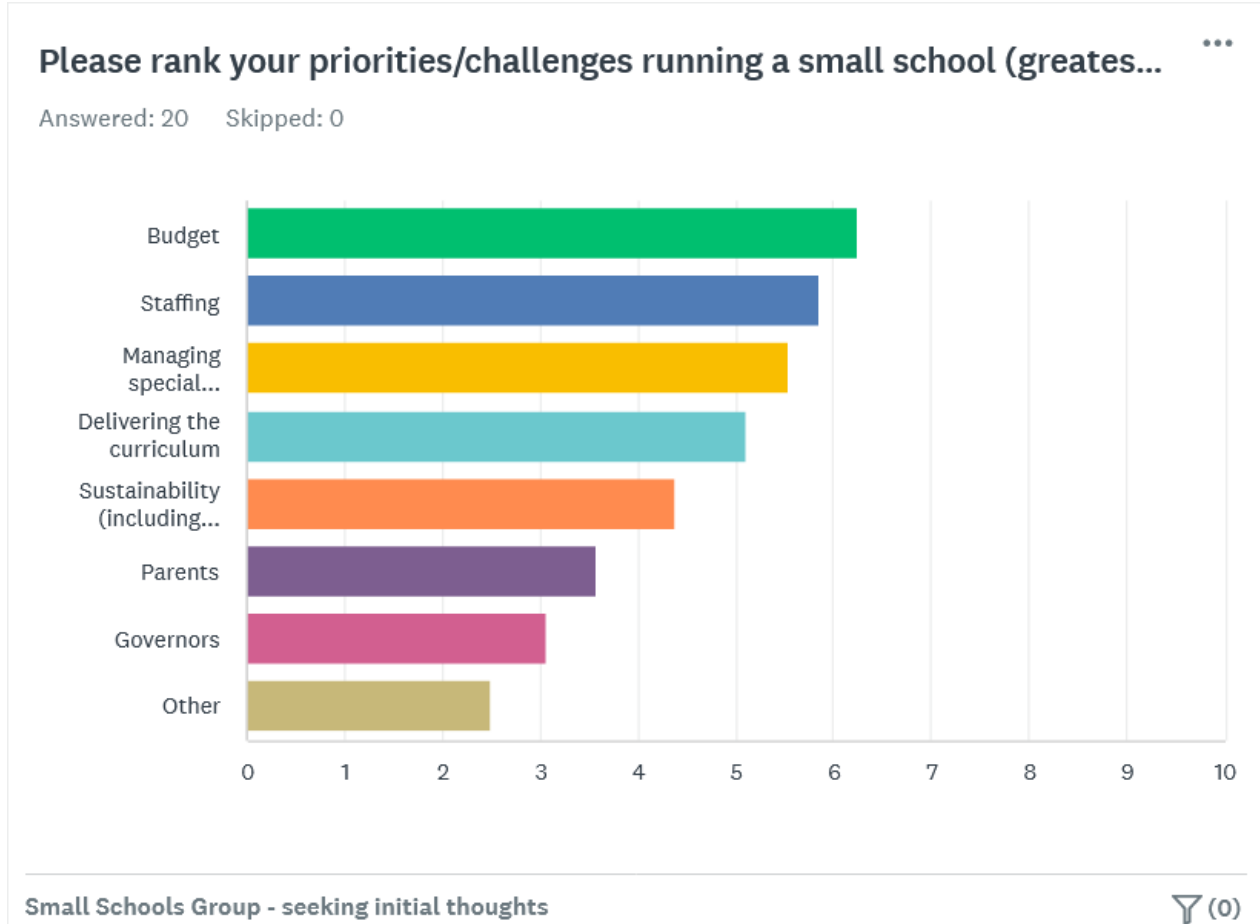
It was agreed that the developed terms of reference should be shared with the whole group, and a final version would be considered and agreed at the next meeting.

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5 Feedback from the pre-meeting survey

https://www.surveymonkey.com/stories/SM-07Yn0x511zMFGYyeteXUA_3D_3D

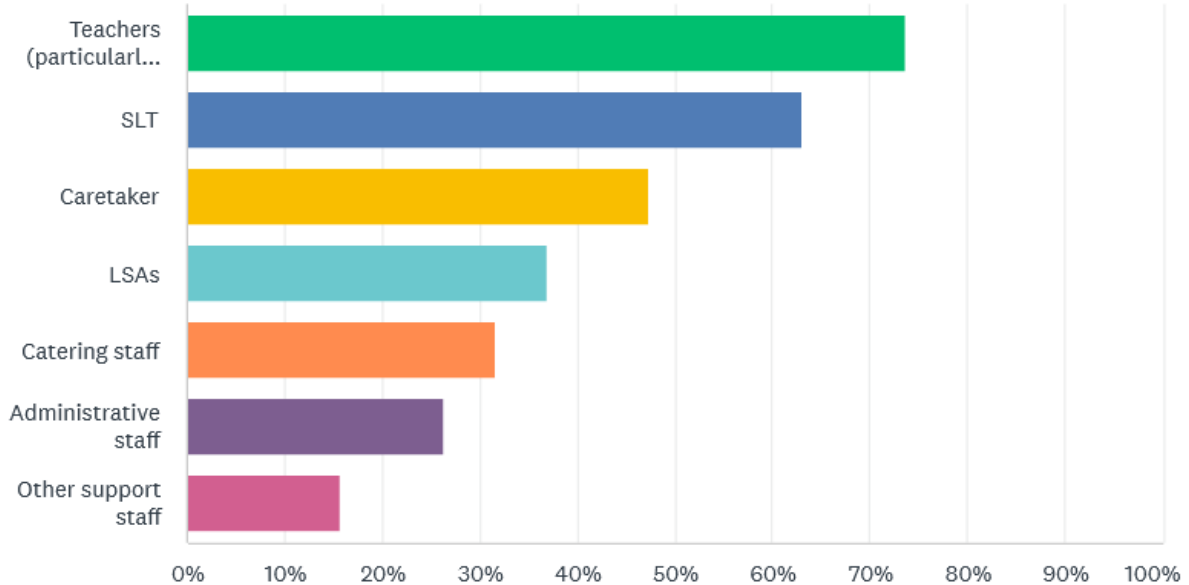
There were 20 responses to the survey, that was sent out a few days before the meeting.



Small Schools Group - seeking initial thoughts (0)
One pressure that had not been mentioned in the survey was Ofsted, and this was mentioned by a number of respondents.

What are your particular staffing challenges? (Check all that apply)

Answered: 19 Skipped: 1



Small Schools Group - seeking initial thoughts

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The survey was trying to scope out where the staffing pressures were; teaching is a pressure for most small-school headteachers, and particularly where they have a teaching commitment.

Are there other things you want the Small Schools Group to offer?

The following comments were included in the survey:

Support for each other – advice from more experienced heads within the group, one to another would be good (we are new).

Ideas about how to free up headteacher time without unduly overburdening my other 2 teachers.

Ways to tackle fall in pupil numbers when there is no appetite to close any schools. Ways to stop being effectively run into the group.

Recommendations of value for money services used.

Just support and an opportunity to share ideas would be perfect. Also, a place to gather important info – things we should be doing this month/term as I'm always worried I miss things. Creative solutions – not just a get together to moan. We all know it is tough, so we now need to think how we can keep our schools and ourselves going until, hopefully, better times arrive.

Strategies and ideas for what is working well. Shared resources/bank of suppliers who are willing to support small schools.

Support for small school Headteachers. Whilst the size of the school means we have fewer pupils to care for, as leaders we still have many of the same jobs, paperwork, curriculum responsibility etc to provide for our children, but fewer people to delegate these jobs to. Hence, as a small school headteacher, you find yourself taking on everything that you cannot reasonably ask other people to do for you.

I would like to think that the Small Schools Group would be extremely supportive of the challenges we face that aren't always understood by larger schools (including those that claim they're a small school but have a caretaker, full time office staff, a deputy, a senior teacher, MDAs that aren't also TAs). Particularly in terms of the Head often being a teacher/caretaker/only member of the SLT. It's very frustrating hearing heads of larger schools complaining that they're a teacher down and haven't had a deputy for 2 weeks! That's small schools every day!!

A chance to be open and honest without appearing to "moan". There are genuine pros to small schools (otherwise I wouldn't have chosen to be a head of one) but at the moment it really feels that the odds are well and truly stacked against us. I am fearful of Ofsted in a way I haven't been before because the expectations are so rigid and prescriptive, and so hard for small schools to fulfill in a meaningful way. I am spreading myself to thin that I feel that I am not doing a good enough job in any area. I purposely do not have a teaching commitment, as I know that would tip me over the edge. Obviously this has financial implications, but I cannot take on any more – and don't feel that I should have to, to be honest.

Subject leadership in light of Ofsted pressure e.g. deep dives etc

Subject leader support/networking.

Working groups/models of good practice, curriculum, etc in small schools.

Harriet noted that there were a few things that stood out for her: one being Ofsted. She noted that it might be helpful to share recent experiences of Ofsted inspections of small schools at the next meeting. The Professional Officer noted that she had sent a link to a webinar run by the Chartered College about Ofsted inspection in small and rural schools. A number of the headteachers had attended the webinar and noted that it had been both useful and reassuring; there was an acknowledgement of the pressures in inspection. It was agreed that the speakers on the webinar might be able to speak at a conference or a future meeting of the group.

Maire O'Regan noted that she has joined the Chartered College as a member and is running an event on 17th June at her 3 small schools, showcasing the delivery of the curriculum across mixed classes as well as subject leadership. She explained that some of the day will be virtual. However, it was noted that the event is full (and headteachers are on a waiting list), but Maire suggested that it could be repeated if there was sufficient interest. Harriet suggested that Maire could feed back to a future meeting, if that would be helpful.

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The Professional Officer noted that, although it didn't feature heavily in the survey, she is aware that the management of SEN provision is a particular challenge for small schools. She suggested that this might be something that the group should come back to.

One headteacher noted that her biggest headache is managing the premises, including having the funding to undertake even basic repairs. The Professional Officer noted that one headteacher (who was unable to attend the meeting) sent an email stating:

Having just struggled with setting my school's budget and having visited a couple of large schools recently I am coming to the view that children in small schools are being discriminated against and that funding is disadvantaging them.

I have seen schools with adequately sized, well decorated classroom (with fully functional smartboards), fabulous outdoor spaces with exciting climbing equipment. Children have opportunities to take part in radio broadcasts (one school had their own radio station). Well-resourced libraries and TAs to support classes full time. A plethora of non-class based SLT.

I can offer my children a good quality of education, but I cannot offer the same level of enhancements. I find myself constantly wanting to stamp my foot and say, "this is not fair".

I wonder if the small school's group could consider this thought and make representation to the LA/DfE/somebody with influence? I am a firm believer in if you do not agree with something you need to make the best effort to change it ... but I am not sure where to begin.

The Professional Officer noted that, unfortunately, the current financial direction of travel is to reduce the lump sum for schools, which has a significant impact on small schools. Jinnie Nichols agreed that premises and building maintenance fall behind staffing as a priority, and although schools can be creative with fundraising, it can be dispiriting to be unable to offer good facilities to pupils. She suggested that it may be a reason that some headteachers are put off taking on small schools. She wondered if the group could consider ways of sharing resources or procurement, to make their individual circumstances more viable, or even consider group-buying a service which could be accessed by small schools. She noted that many MATs are not willing to take on small schools because of the potential financial impact, so there are many challenges for the future.

One headteacher noted that locally three small schools are sharing a caretaker; this is not ideal, but considerably better than nothing. However, parents don't understand funding constraints and are often critical of the facilities on offer, comparing small schools with larger schools that are better resourced. This is having an impact over time on pupil numbers. It was agreed that there is also an impact on staff wellbeing, as a result of having to undertake numerous roles.

6 Break out groups to discuss the following questions:

The group split into three break out rooms to discuss a number of issues, including

- Meetings and conference?
- Communications (setting up a WhatsApp group?)
- Local groups to be set up?

- Other issues

The first group noted that they had had a general conversation, acknowledging the numerous roles they all had to undertake. A good piece of advice shared in the group was to ensure that a headteacher took non-contact time away from school to enable them to think strategically and get things done. The group also felt an email group would be helpful.

The second group talked about jobs, particularly the workload impact of being a SENCo as well as headteacher. They agreed that working together in groups is really the answer in future, either in formal MATs or other partnerships. However, they discussed how difficult this can be at times, depending on the category of the school. For example, church schools are not allowed to formally partner with other schools, even though this is how they have worked for years. Schools may also be limited working with academies. The question is, how can we help to make a plan of who a school can partner with; the diocese changes its advice frequently.

The Professional Officer noted that the Government White Paper is imminent, and it is expected to include some direction about schools' structure. It is likely that the expectation will be that no school will "stand alone" but not yet clear whether those partnerships will be formal or otherwise. There is current uncertainty about whether federation will continue to be an option. Pam suggested that the implications of the White Paper might be a subject for discussion in the next meeting.

The third group discussed the challenges they faced, juggling so many hats and with such a restricted budget. Among many other things, headteachers have to focus on staff wellbeing and, also, their own wellbeing.

Harriet suggested that, in order to aid communication, the Professional Officer should circulate the email addresses for the group, if everyone was in agreement. The headteachers present were happy with this, though Pam will check with the wider group that they are happy to share their emails with colleagues. Headteachers might want to set up smaller sub-groups of more local schools.

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There were some comments about the benefit of organising a Small Schools conference (probably in September, at the Lion Inn, Boreham), and one headteacher noted the importance of taking the opportunity to celebrate what is good about small schools.

One headteacher suggested that it might be helpful to set up similar system to the one that the EPHA Executive runs, which is called "Ask the Executive". If the Professional Officer receives a query that she can't immediately answer, she will send an email to the 33 or so heads on the Executive, and collate the responses. This works very well, as headteachers only reply if they have relevant information or time to respond. The Professional Officer agreed that it would be very straightforward to set up a similar system for this group ("Ask the Small Schools Group") and it would be an excellent way of sharing experience and good practice. It was **AGREED** that the Professional Officer would set this up and explain it to the other headteachers in the group.

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7 **Headteacher wellbeing**

Pam reminded headteachers that the Education Taskforce has allocated £100k to headteacher wellbeing, and she has had a recent discussion with Linda Robinson, the governor representative on the taskforce, about how this might be used. They are inclined to use some of the funding to support small school headteachers. There is also some funding within the EPHA budget, and possibly some from the NAHT (the Essex branch finance officer is currently looking into this). The Professional Officer noted her view that one reason that small-school heads don't seek counselling or coaching is lack of time, but another key reason is lack of budget. EPHA feels strongly that the budget shouldn't be a barrier to a headteacher seeking counselling and coaching, if they feel that this would support them. There is a feeling that governors should be stepping up and acknowledging headteachers' wellbeing, so the expectation is that a school would contribute a percentage of the cost of support, although this may only be a nominal amount.

She stressed the understanding that "one size doesn't fit all", but that all headteachers should be able to seek support if they need it. One headteacher agreed, saying that in a small school, the head has a very limited number of senior colleagues they can share things with, and are also wary of increasing other staff workload, particularly if they are not on the leadership scale.

The Professional Officer reminded the group of the Colleague Support programme that EPHA already runs, which can be expanded beyond new and acting headteachers. One of the things that EPHA has been considering is whether there is a possibility of brokering and funding additional capacity in a school, on a short term basis. Larger schools, which have more staff, may be willing to "lend" a staff member for period of time, and this can be part-funded by EPHA.

Jinnie noted that recently a Deputy Headteacher has undertaken her NPQH placement in one of her schools, and this proved really beneficial for the Deputy, including accepting how forward thinking and dynamic the small school environment can be. A bigger school could benefit from the professional development that their staff member would gain, working in a small school environment.

Harriet suggested that she and the Professional Officer could discuss this with the Teaching School Hubs and encourage them to use small schools for placements.

HPK/
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8 **Next steps**

Harriet summarised the next steps for the group:

- Jinnie Nicholls will take over chairing the meetings, and will liaise with Pam Langmead.
- A number of issues will be included on the next agenda, including Ofsted experiences and sharing good practice; SEN changes.
- The Professional Officer will start to work on setting up a conference in the autumn term
- Jinnie suggested that the group might put forward representatives to sit on the assessment panel meetings, so that small schools were taken into account.
- Considerations of the implications of the Government White Paper.

JN

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Group

9 **Date and time of next meeting**
Tuesday 24th May, at 3.30 pm, online

Harriet thanked the headteachers for attending, and noted that it had been really informative to hear from those who were able to attend, helping her to understand the challenges that they all face. She felt that it is important to educate all headteachers across the county about these challenges, as there are things that bigger schools could learn from small schools, and ways in which larger schools can help support the system.