

ESSEX PRIMARY HEADTEACHERS' ASSOCIATION

**MEETING OF THE EPHA SMALL SCHOOLS SUPPORT GROUP
HELD ON TUESDAY 21 NOVEMBER 2023 3.30 – 5.10 pm**

Venue online

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

1. IN ATTENDANCE

Judith Dale	Baynards Primary
Emma Flin	Great Yeldham CE Primary
Becky Keitch	St George's CE Primary, Great Bromley
Llewellen Lawson	Dr Walker's CE Primary
Stephanie Newland	St Margaret's CE Primary, Toppesfield
Jinnie Nichols	Chorus Schools Federation – Chair
Donna Parker	Fingringhoe CE Primary
Amy Reis	Great Sampford Primary
Marne Reynecke	Ashdon Primary
Lyndsey Wood	St Cedd's CE Primary
Pam Langmead	EPHA Professional Officer
Linda Robinson	Education Taskforce
Ruth Everett	Schools Adviser, Diocese of Chelmsford

2. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Phil Andrews	Rettendon Primary
Charlotte Brown	Messing School
Hannah Coyle	Fingringhoe CE Primary
Claire Jackman	Great Easton Primary
Andrew Price	Manuden Primary
Kirsty Stuart	Ridgewell CE Primary
Melissa Taylor	Margaretting CE Primary
Sharon Vessey	Birchanger CE Primary

Jinnie Nichols, Chair of the SSSG, welcomed everyone to the meeting.

Before the meeting began formally, there was a discussion about Ofsted inspections and what advice headteachers who had been through the process would share with other colleagues. It was agreed that having the website up to date, in particular with curriculum information, was important, as well as ensuring that safeguarding is in order. It was generally felt that having a “mock Ofsted” was not helpful, as each inspection would be different and simply adds additional pressure and workload for staff.

Headteachers advised that, if possible, senior leaders should stop second-guessing what they think Ofsted might ask and, instead, be confident about the information that they want to share with the inspection team.

It was also felt that if the school has had a complaint to Ofsted, as long as it was dealt with properly, this should not be an issue; it may be mentioned in inspection, but not necessarily.

3. MINUTES AND MATTERS ARISING

The minutes of the meeting held on 13th July 2023 were approved as an accurate record. The follow matters arising were noted:

a) Introducing the new RE syllabus (Minute 3a refers)

It was noted that, at the last meeting, it was agreed that the Professional Officer would organise an online workshop to enable small school heads to share and discuss RE resources that they are using to support the introduction of the new syllabus. This had not yet taken place; instead, Ruth Everett, adviser for the Chelmsford Diocese, had been invited to this meeting to talk about the implications for small and church schools. (See minute X below)

b) National Small Schools Roundtable (Minute 4 refers)

The Professional Officer noted that she had not received the terms of reference from Sean Tobin, who is a representative on the national small schools roundtable. It was **AGREED** that he should be invited to attend the next meeting, on Monday 22nd January.

Professional
Officer /
Sean Tobin

c) Small School Governance (Minute 6 refers)

The Professional Officer noted that she had sent out an email inviting small school governors to join a governor network. There were only 6 responses, so this had not yet been actioned. It was **AGREED** that Pam should resend an email via headteachers, which will, hopefully, attract a bigger response. If a viable group is created, she will then set up an inaugural online meeting.

Professional
Officer

d) FundEd subscription renewal (Minute 7a refers)

The Professional Officer confirmed that she has renewed the annual subscription to Fund Ed for small schools, and that EPHA is now also subsidising other primaries who wish to take advantage of the membership.

There were no other matters arising from the meeting.

4. OFSTED FOCUS ON SMALL SCHOOLS

At the Small School Headteachers conference in October, Mike Sheridan, Senior HMI, explained that Ofsted is continuing to look at the impact and challenges for small schools in an inspection. He noted that John Lucas is leading on this work.

The Professional Officer explained that she had invited John Lucas or Mike Sheridan to attend the meeting; neither had been available, but it was agreed that the discussion should go ahead and the views of small school heads in Essex should be fed back to the inspectors.

In advance of the meeting, headteachers were asked to consider the three questions that Ofsted inspectors will focus on in relation to the inspection of small schools. These were:

- ❑ How do small schools deliver a well-sequenced, rich curriculum that builds continuously on prior knowledge for all pupils across a broad range of subjects?
- ❑ What are the challenges faced by small primary schools in developing a broad, sequential curriculum for all pupils?
- ❑ What are the characteristics of such effective practice in overcoming these challenges and providing a good or outstanding quality of education?

The group discussed each question in turn:

How do small schools deliver a well-sequenced, rich curriculum that builds continuously on prior knowledge for all pupils across a broad range of subjects?

It was agreed that some subjects are more difficult to deliver than others, particularly in terms of resources and building a sequence. Small schools in particular need to understand where they are in a cycle of delivery, if teaching to mixed age classes, and need to be able to communicate this effectively.

In addition, small schools have relatively few teachers who have a substantial individual workload. The range of specialisms or areas of expertise will inevitably be limited. This is even more acute when a school has ECTs. The turnover or instability of staff is also an issue, for example when teachers take maternity leave, and headteachers noted that they are often having to go back to the drawing board, to re-focus and plan. There is a lot of time supporting new staff and bringing them up to speed.

One newish headteacher explained that she has approached this by initially focusing on subject areas where there was confidence, in order to build on the strengths of staff.

One headteacher noted in the chat: *We had an Ofsted in June and they were willing to listen to our opinion about our curriculum strengths and areas for development. They did not select any of our developing areas for a deep dive.* A headteacher responded, saying:

I was asked for my strongest and weakest when I was inspected exactly a year ago today and I was brutally honest. They deep-dived both and then looked at others to find what was typical. Luckily, they decided my strongest was more typical so everything was ok!

Another headteacher agreed that if you are able to verbalise where there are gaps and challenges then Ofsted will recognise the difficulties that a small school might face.

Another headteacher, who was unable to attend the meeting, sent the following comment: *..with difficulty! The trickiest element is having mixed year groups - so in history for example you cannot build knowledge in a chronological order because we have children in mixed 3//4, 4/5 and 5/6 and so we have to teach the whole key stage the same project. This means some children could be studying the Egyptians in Y3 and some in Y6. All we can do is to continually relate back to prior learning and focus on the richness and breadth of the curriculum. It can be well-sequenced in that it can link well and be rich in a cross-curricular way.*

One headteacher explained that when she took over as headteacher at her school not everything was in place. Ofsted was interested in their context and journey, but quickly moved on to asking “Where are you going”.

It was suggested that headteachers should try to arrange to have more than one senior leader present during deep dives; often in a small school one of those will be the headteacher themselves, but it is helpful to be able to share the load and knowledge during an inspection. In one case the head was accompanied by a knowledgeable governor.

The Professional Officer noted that one of the real strengths of being a headteacher in a small school is that they are likely to know their whole school, the pupils and the staff really well, and can share their knowledge and understanding with inspectors.

One headteacher (anxiously awaiting inspection) asked whether his “good” school with only 59 pupils was likely to have a one or two day inspection, and how many inspectors were likely to attend. It was agreed that this was impossible to answer, although one day inspections are unusual, and in addition to the inspection team (which could be one or more) there are sometimes additional inspectors observing the process.

To summarise, the three key challenges for small schools when delivering a well-sequenced, rich curriculum were:

- Turnover and inconsistencies of staff
- Limited specialist knowledge
- Mixed age groups

What are the challenges faced by small primary schools in developing a broad, sequential curriculum for all pupils?

It was felt that this was largely answered in the previous discussion, in particular limitations of staff numbers and expertise. Mixed year groups definitely add to the challenge.

A headteacher emailed to say:

The mixed years - we take 10 children from one class and add them to a year group (20 pupils) every year and in year 4/5 have a mixture and no full year group. So it is really messy! The teachers in my school lead 3 separate subjects so their capacity is less and they are spread much thinner to be able to organise visitors, events, training, manage pupil voice, monitoring etc etc. Then there is the budget...

To summarise:

- Reduced opportunities
- Mixed-year groups
- Limited staff numbers and expertise

What are the characteristics of such effective practice in overcoming these challenges and providing a good or outstanding quality of education?

In addition, access to training and CPD was seen as problematic, due to workload, time and funding constraints. It was also difficult to offer a rich and varied menu of visits, trips and

extra-curricular activities for such a small number of pupils, often in a rural location and with a very limited budget.

The Chair noted that this was why her schools federated and, as a group, they were able to arrange 25 visits and activities in the last year, across the three schools.

Another headteacher urged colleagues to ask bigger schools for support; for example, she needed to access online safety training for pupils, and was able to take part in the training being arranged by a larger school. Another head said that she was able to take a very small group to a choral event in London, by taking a number of places on coaches arranged by a big school.

It was agreed that EPHA might be able to help with this, encouraging bigger schools to offer support and opportunities to their small school neighbours.

Strong partnerships with other schools can be invaluable in arranging training and CPD for staff across a group – this makes it affordable for all.

Another challenge faced by schools is looking for creative solutions; there was a long and helpful discussion about seeking support from governors and the community. One school holds regular visits to a parent who is an artist and also lives in a lovely house; she hosts art sessions for the pupils. This headteacher said that her staff are increasingly reaching out to parents for their skills, experiences and expertise.

Another head reminded colleagues to reach out to the local business community: their local nursery owner comes to the school to teach pupils about plants (and also makes donations to the school). There were lots of good ideas from headteachers along this theme.

One headteacher emailed to say:

Well we have organised our curriculum so that the children in each key stage all follow the same topic, the depth is varied so what Y3 and Y6 will be learning is obviously very different. As a whole staff we spend a whole day together at the end of each term. The idea being everyone reviews the current project and completes a thorough evaluation and assessment for the subject leader. The team then spends ¾ of the day planning next term's project, writing to parents, thinking about visitors who can come in and broaden their understanding of careers in that area, school trips etc etc. We also make sure our projects lead with a big question (P4C) and end with a big outcome so we are making the world a better place somehow...this term we are raising money for a horse & donkey charity that one of our parent's works for. Their big question is around 'Should animals and humans be treated the same?' In KS2 they are learning about mountains, all climbed Mt Everest with a VR experience, they are making first aid kit bags in DT and having first aid training at the end of it. Their big question is something around 'why do some people risk their lives for their hobby?' We do this every term and it involves charity work, liaising with the community and is rich in cultural capital. This is just what we do but it is hard work when people wear so many hats! It's a real team approach and we try to block time - so if teachers want to teach all their

science in the first week or so they can, it's about depth of learning and understanding and how it is all taught really doesn't matter to us!

It was agreed that school development planning and training should be carefully thought through and sustained, which can be difficult in a small school.

Last, but not least, the headteachers discussed the challenge posed by the numbers of children in their schools with special educational needs. Small schools are particularly attractive to some parents who see the environment as more nurturing and secure. However, the group agreed that small schools don't necessarily mean small classes, and they certainly don't have the resources to overstaff, or maintain dedicated SEN spaces. Everyone felt that the external support for small schools, particularly in rural areas, is limited and very difficult to access. A high proportion of children with special needs brings numerous challenges including pressure on resources and staffing, the need for specialist training and expertise, the range of ability and need for differentiation across mixed-year groups, managing parental expectations and so on.

The headteachers were thanked for their engagement in the discussion and it was **AGREED** that the Professional Officer will forward their views to John Lucas, HMI.

**Professional
Officer**

5. RE SYLLABUS ROLLOUT IN SMALL SCHOOLS

Ruth Everett was welcomed to the meeting. She explained that she was is of two consultants that serve Essex SACRE, and was instrumental in producing the new RE syllabus for Essex schools. She is also the diocesan RE adviser.

Ruth explained that she had listened to the previous discussion with interest, and confirmed that she was keen to develop a focus on SEND in the RE syllabus. She agreed that relevant links and resources would be useful for all schools and she would work over the next two terms to include these on the SACRE website.

The group was reminded that we discussed the Saffron Academy Trust RE Scheme at the meeting in July, which has been produced as a resource to help schools to introduce the new syllabus. The scheme has been offered at a subsidised rate to small schools. Ruth noted that SACRE and the diocese do not endorse any particular scheme of work, the teaching of RE needs to be matched the school's local context and pupils. She understood that it may be helpful for schools to take on a scheme to help them deliver the syllabus.

She suggested that schools need to own the units and, in particular, look at the end goals at the end of Key Stage 1 and 2. This is stressed in both SIAMS and Ofsted inspections: inspectors focus on the end goal of RE delivery. Be clear of which outcomes the school is addressing.

Jinnie Nichols noted that therefore it is important that schools review the delivery of the curriculum as they go, and should be prepared to swap content around to suit their own school and context. Ruth referred to the core knowledge tables on pages 30-31, which are

the aspects that schools particular need to engage with. Church schools involved with SIAMS need to be aware of what the Statement of Entitlement says; the language in the Statement matches the language in the agreed syllabus. The scheme of work is the tool, but Ruth stressed that this year is very much a year of trial and schools shouldn't be afraid to tweak the units.

Jinnie asked for suggested advice, if schools aren't sure about a particular unit. Ruth recommended the following resources, and agreed that these will be signposted on the SACRE website in due course:

- RE Today – they have some good offers of resources and booklets.
<https://www.retoday.org.uk/>
- Essex SACRE page https://schools.essex.gov.uk/other/Essex_SACRE/Pages/Essex-SACRE.aspx
- RE:Online <https://www.reonline.org.uk/> (strong on subject knowledge)
- Cullum St Gabriel's <https://www.cstg.org.uk/>
- Board of Deputies of British Jews <https://bod.org.uk/>
- British Humanist Society <https://humanists.uk/>
- NATRE – National Association of Teachers of Religious Education
<https://www.natre.org.uk/>
NATRE is running a virtual conference at the end of January, the Strictly RE conference, which Ruth recommended. <https://www.natre.org.uk/courses-events/strictlyRE-2024/>

Ruth urged schools not to visit sites that may give inaccurate information (Twinkle RE, for example).

Ruth encouraged headteachers to contact her for advice about useful and legitimate resources. Her email address is reverett@chelmsford.anglican.org
Phone number: 07972 113640

It was agreed that Ruth would be invited to a future meeting to continue the discussion about the RE provision.

6. ANY OTHER BUSINESS AND SUGGESTED ITEMS FOR FUTURE MEETINGS

a) Feedback from the Small Schools Headteacher conference

The Professional Officer noted that the Education Taskforce had funded the majority of the small schools headteacher conference held on 18th October, which had been much appreciated by EPHA. Linda Robinson had been particularly helpful in persuading the Taskforce that this was an effective way of supporting the wellbeing and knowledge of small school headteachers. The turnout for the conference was really good, which is a testament to its popularity; it can be such a challenge for small headteachers to get out of their schools.

One headteacher said that he had appreciated the Temple Spa wellbeing sessions, and had already hosted a session at his school, run by Sue Crace. Other schools had also booked her and this has been very well received by staff. Sue's input was enjoyed during the day.

It was agreed that the conference offered a huge variety of speakers, ending with Dolly Slateman, who heads found bonkers but brilliant! Helen Youngman was particularly well received and was extremely generous with resources and support. It was a great opportunity for small school heads to hear from her. All headteachers felt that the conference was an important networking opportunity which offered support and validation, and everyone agreed that it should be repeated next school year.

b) Agenda items for the next meeting

It was suggested that the agenda for the next meeting in January should include:

- An update from Sean Tobin about the national roundtable work and progress;
- Input from Yannick Stupples-Whyley, ECC Senior Finance Manager, to discuss budget planning for the year ahead;
- Feedback from the newly established Governors' network.

**Professional
Officer**

7. DATES AND TIMES OF MEETINGS FOR THE 2023/24 SCHOOL YEAR

- Monday 22nd January 2024
- Wednesday 13th March 2024
- Wednesday 22nd May 2024
- Tuesday 9th July 2024

All meetings at 3.30 pm online.

The meeting ended at 5.10 pm

