

ESSEX PRIMARY HEADTEACHERS' ASSOCIATION

MEETING OF THE EPHA SMALL SCHOOLS SUPPORT GROUP
HELD ON TUESDAY 24 MAY 2022 3.30 – 5.10 pm

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

1. IN ATTENDANCE

Emily Bartram	Radwinter CE Primary
Claire Berry	Birchanger CE Primary
Ceri Daniels	Holy Trinity CE Primary, Eight Ash Green
Julie Ingram	Chappel CE Primary School
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
Stephanie Newland	St Margaret's CE Primary, Toppsfield
Jinnie Nichols	St Andrew's CE Primary/ St Giles' CE Primary
Andrew MacDonald	Langham Primary
Becky Maguire	St Joseph's Catholic Primary, Dovercourt
Sarah Mearns	Terling CE Primary
Maire O'Regan	Margaretting CE Primary/ Roxwell CE Primary/Ford End CE Primary
Jennifer Penney	Shalford Primary
Caroline Shingleton	Wethersfield Primary
Sarah Stevenson	Langenhoe Primary
Amy Wareham	Matching Green CE Primary
Pam Langmead	EPHA Professional Officer
Harriet Phelps-Knights	EPHA Chair/ Janet Duke Primary
Alison Fiala	ECC Head of Education and Early Years, Mid
Linda Robinson	NLG/Essex Education Task Force

2. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Natasha Bartram	Wimbish Primary
Hayley Dyer	Crays Hill Primary
James Newell	Wix and Wrabness Primary
Simon Rance	Ashdon Primary
Melissa Raymond	Finchingfield Primary
Julie Sarti	Colne Engaine Primary
Theresa Walker	St Mary's, Woodham Ferrers

Jinnie Nichols, the Chair of the Small School Group, welcomed everyone to the meeting, including Alison Fiala and Linda Robinson.

3. MINUTES AND MATTERS ARISING

The minutes of the meeting held on 17th March were approved as an accurate record. The following matters arising were discussed.

a) Terms of reference (Minute 4 refers)

Following discussion at the last meeting, the revised terms of reference had been updated and were circulated to the headteachers. The following terms of reference were agreed for the group:

EPHA SMALL SCHOOLS SUPPORT GROUP – TERMS OF REFERENCE

A sub-group of the ESSEX PRIMARY HEADTEACHERS' ASSOCIATION
Established March 2022

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 Nichols – Chair

Ceri Daniels – Vice-Chair

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)
- EPHA Professional Officer
- EPHA Chair
- 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 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.

Meetings will usually be held online, but in-person meetings and 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

From the EPHA funds

Review

Annual review

Next review date – March 2023

It was noted that the Chair (Jinnie Nichols) had reported to the EPHA Executive on 19th May and had explained the progress of the group so far.

b) “Ask the Small Schools” email helpline (Minute 6 refers)

The Professional Officer reminded the headteachers that since the last meeting she has set up an email information sharing system for small school headteachers. If she receives a query that she can't immediately answer, she will send an email to the 60 small school heads, and collate any responses. This currently works very well with the EPHA Executive, as headteachers only reply if they have relevant information or time to respond. Small school heads were encouraged to use the system as a way of asking and responding to queries, and sharing good practice and experience.

c) Small Schools Group conference

A conference is being planned for Wednesday 19th October, at the Lion Inn, Boreham, for all small school headteachers. After discussion, it was agreed that, although it may be helpful to invite governor to future conferences, the first one should be an opportunity for small school headteachers to meet each other and network as a group, without non-heads in attendance.

The Professional Officer **AGREED** to research and plan the programme (liaising with the Chair), and the following suggestions for presentations were put forward, with a focus on the particular experience of small schools :

- Wellbeing
- Ofsted
- The DfE White Paper and direction of the education system in Essex
- Premises management
- Budgets and staffing (possibly SBM Services?)

Professional
Officer

The group also discussed the encouragement of placements in schools, such as deputies from larger schools undertaking NPQH choosing small schools. It was **AGREED** that this should be discussed further at the next meeting in July. One headteacher noted his concerns about managing the additional cost of trainees and the release time and attention that they required.

Andrew MacDonald suggested input about funding opportunities. This was seen as a really useful suggestion, and one that could be a standing item on the Small Schools Support Group meeting agenda. The Professional Officer **AGREED** to action this.

SSSG
meeting
6 July

Alison Fiala suggested including input from Teaching Hubs about development opportunities. It was agreed that there were plenty of ideas for the conference and future meetings, and

the Professional Officer will develop the programme and report back in July. All of the headteachers in attendance were asked to encourage their colleagues in small schools to attend the conference.

Professional
Officer

3. Support for small-school headteacher wellbeing and capacity

Linda Robinson was welcomed to the meeting. She explained that she is a National Leader of Governance, and is a representative on the Essex Education Task Force (EETF), with responsibility for the management of a fund to promote the wellbeing of headteachers and senior leaders. She noted that she had met with the Professional Officer to discuss a proposal to contribute towards the cost of wellbeing programmes undertaken by small school headteachers. After consultation with the Task Force, they agreed to offer the following:

Contribution of 75% of the cost of participation in the Heart Health Programme (led by Maria Brosnan, Pursuit Learning). The four-session programme costs £600, so the proposal is that the Task Force will contribute £450, and £150 will be contributed by the school. The total budget allocation for this from the EETF is £11,250, enabling 25 headteachers to take up this offer.

EPHA has already subsidised a number of headteachers to take part in the programme.

The second proposal concerned the expansion of the EPHA Colleague Supporter programme. Linda noted that the EEEF will offer an allocation of £5,000 to support approximately 25 schools to benefit from Colleague Support. The Professional Officer explained that Colleague Support is generally offered to new and acting headteachers, but EPHA's plan is to extend this and broker support from schools with more capacity who may be able to "lend" a senior member of staff, such as the head, deputy or SENCo on an occasional basis to support a smaller school, or one in need of help. The intention is not to offer a permanent staffing arrangement, but to support headteachers in need of additional capacity once in a while. The Colleague Support programme can offer funding of £180 a day to partly cover the cost of releasing a member of staff.

It was noted that the EETF proposal suggested that EPHA would fund up to six days for a small school across the year, at a cost of £1,080, alleviated by the £200 contribution from the Task Force. However, the Professional Officer noted that this was not an absolute commitment by EPHA and that support for any school (whatever its size) would be discussed on an individual basis, rather than promising a specific length of time for every school.

Linda noted that the Task Force would need Key Performance Indicators and case studies to evidence the impact of their contribution.

The proposed funding from the EETF was welcomed and the Professional Officer **AGREED** to develop the offer of support and publicise it to schools. It was agreed that the recording of the Heart Health programme webcast would be re-sent to small school headteachers with the minutes of the meeting, and the offer of participation reiterated.

Professional
Officer

Linda asked headteachers to share other ideas that could be used to support headteachers,

subsidised by the Task Force. The Chair emphasised the usefulness of hosting a NPQ placement in a small school; in her case a deputy in a large school undertook a placement. It not only opened the Deputy's eyes to the challenges of running a small school, but she was also able to undertake a useful piece of work and research for the school.

One headteacher suggested that small schools would benefit from help with paying for the Wellbee staff survey. This is quite costly, but schools that have used the survey have found it very helpful, generating an anonymous report of views from staff and suggestions for wellbeing improvement.

One headteacher noted the value of DSL supervision, and asked if this could be subsidised. It was noted that there is currently a pilot being delivered by Social Care and this has been well received by participating headteachers. The Professional Officer will find out if this is going to be rolled out more widely. If not, it was agreed that this could be a useful area of support for Designated Safeguarding Leads.

There was a discussion about the importance of governors understanding the importance of the wellbeing of their headteachers, and doing all they could to develop the capacity in their school. Alison Fiala noted that she had recently discussed this with a headteacher; despite the small size of the school, they had a relatively healthy carry-forward and she urged the headteacher to use the funding to employ an additional teacher to alleviate the pressure on her time, particularly releasing her from teaching responsibilities. She argued that schools can't afford not to use their existing funds to manage and cope with the pressures of day to day operation.

One headteacher noted that his governors recognised the importance of his wellbeing and included this as one of his performance management targets, but this was an additional target over and above the school performance objectives, so it was impossible to fulfil and reconcile the demands of them all.

4. Experiences of Ofsted – feedback from small school headteachers

Natasha Bartram had sent her apologies for the meeting, as she was called away to manage an emergency at the last minute.

Alison Kerrell, headteacher at Great Bardfield Primary, shared her experience of her school's Ofsted inspection which took place in February. It was a one day Section 8 inspection. She explained that the Lead Inspector was fair, and gave her plenty of opportunity to explain the school's journey through Covid and other events. She had explained that the biggest challenges in the school were premises management and staffing, and she noted that he was quite shocked at the state of the buildings and premises. In addition, the school had just made the decision to merge two classes as they had lost a teacher and couldn't afford to replace them, so they were introducing that new arrangement.

The two inspectors looked at the curriculum in general, and did deep dives in maths, reading and RE. Alison undertook a detailed safeguarding audit with the second inspector, and he

wanted to look at the recruitment process in particular, along with the Single Central Record. He didn't look at personnel files, though much of this was covered by the review of recruitment.

The inspectors spent lots of time in classes, looked at maths across the curriculum, and were interested in understanding the school ethos. They then went to cross check with pupils, and had lunch with them. They continuously checked the responses on ParentView; at one point Alison had to respond to apparently negative feedback when 33% of parents said that they wouldn't recommend the school to others. However, this equated to just one in three parents who responded to the questions, demonstrating another challenge faced by a small school.

The governors were given just 15 minutes of the inspector's time, which they found frustrating as they wanted to support the school by sharing their knowledge and understanding. Alison was able to sit in on the first feedback discussion, with her Deputy Head and a senior leader, but was unable to comment. The final feedback meeting was attended by senior leaders, the SEP and governors, and the inspection was over by 6.00 pm.

Disappointingly the inspection report took a long time to be produced (the inspection was on 23 February, and the report was finally published on 29 April).

Following questions, Alison gave more detail about the deep dives, explaining that the inspectors spoke to pupils, the phonics and English subject leaders, and looked at books. They also acknowledged the lack of staff in the school, and talked to staff about their wellbeing and workload.

Claire Berry, headteacher at Birchanger CE Primary, noted that her school had been inspected three weeks previously. The report was not yet published so she was unable to share the outcome, but she reported that the process had also been fair, though demanding. In her case the inspectors had particularly focused on behaviour, and behaviour records. They talked to at least half of the 105 children in the school!

Linda Robinson felt that it was positive that both inspections had focused on staff wellbeing. However, it was noted that the focus was never on headteacher wellbeing, and often staff wellbeing comes at a cost to the head.

Alison Fiala agreed that, on the whole, the feedback about inspections in small schools in Essex has been reasonably positive. She stressed that heads need to have the confidence to lead and direct the inspection.

5. The DfE White Paper –implications for small schools

Alison Fiala shared DfE slides summarising the aims and intentions of the government White Paper for education, published in March. (She **AGREED** to send these to the professional Officer to share with the group.) She noted that one of the greatest challenges for all schools, but particularly small schools, will be the ambition that by 2030 90% of pupils will reach

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expected standards in English, reading and maths by the time they leave primary school. The DfE has also set themselves a challenging recruitment target, offering 500,000 teacher training opportunities by 2024.

The DfE vision is that every school should be in (or have plans to join or form) a MAT by 2030, but Alison noted that small schools are not specifically mentioned in the White Paper. She stressed that the Director of Education, Clare Kershaw, understands the DfE direction, but currently the focus in Essex is support the improvement of all schools in the authority, whether they are already an academy, in a MAT, or a maintained school. Alison acknowledged the Schools Bill which, from September 2023, gives LAs the power to direct schools into academies or even to cease maintaining schools at all, she stressed that Essex schools currently benefit from a strong partnership system, and this is the Authority's continued focus.

There was a discussion about the future options for small schools, including existing single academies, and Alison stressed that there is not one fit for every school. There are additional complications for church schools. She noted that in the past small schools may have been unattractive to a MAT due to financial constraints, but this is less of a problem now, as several small schools attract a sparsity grant and increased deprivation funding.

It was agreed that there will need to be discussions with the Regional Director (formerly Regional Schools Commissioner) about which MATs might grow in the county, and the possible formation of a LA MAT. Alison also noted that federation is still an option (and not mentioned in the White Paper) and also schools can decide to join a MAT on a temporary basis in a Trust Partnership, the so-called "try before you buy" arrangement.

A couple of headteachers noted that their small schools were in very supportive Multi Academy Trusts (Compass, and LIFE trusts).

Alison explained that the Sustainable Schools Group would be meeting on 9th June and will update the criteria and risk assessments within the toolkit developed by the LA.

She stressed that Clare Kershaw is not making any hurried decisions about the future structure of schools in Essex and urged schools not to panic.

The Professional Officer noted that much of the discussion was about whether and which MATs would be prepared to take on small schools, but this did not address the concern that maintained school headteachers might have about their future role in a Multi Academy Trust; in many, though not all, the headteacher lost autonomy and the ability to run their school as they would choose.

Ceri Daniels noted that she had received the following email from the Diocese, setting out their position on the White Paper:

Firstly I would emphasise that the Schools Bill will undergo many amendments and alterations while it progresses through the House of Lords and House of Commons. The CofE National

Education Office work proactively to share the views and voices of Diocesan Education Departments across the country with the DfE. Presently nothing from the White Paper is tied down in legislation and until it is we are cautious of reading too much into what could happen.

The current situation is that we continue to have a list of academies on our website that Church Schools can join. Anyone interested in academizing should consult the list, along with their school adviser. Governing boards are encouraged to speak to more than one academy to find the best fit. The DBE strategy will remain one that ensures Church Schools continue to join Church School MATs.

Federation has not been officially ruled out and is, am I sure you will have noticed, not mentioned in the White Paper or Schools Bill at all. We do currently have two sets of schools exploring federation within the Diocese. My advice would be that federation is not a long term solution based on the direction of travel by 2030. It might be a suitable stepping stone along the way to academisation. Consideration would need to be given to the time and money allocated to federating if academising might come shortly afterwards. All things for the Governing Board to consider.

There will be an opportunity to attend an Academisation Forum for both HTs & CofGs on Monday 11th July at 4 pm in Chelmsford. Further details will be published on our Reflect & Connect email today. Please do come along to this event, it is an opportunity to share views around opportunities and challenges as we navigate the coming months and to feed into the DBE strategy on academisation

It was noted that the Diocese has recently brought out new guidance on federation, and meeting their expected criteria can be demanding. It was suggested that there need to be joint discussions between the Local Authority and the two Dioceses to align the future vision for education in the authority.

Alison was thanked for her input and contribution to the discussion.

6. Any other business and suggested items for future meetings

The EPHA Professional Officer noted that she had talked recently to Sean Tobin, CEO at Berlseduna MAT, who is on a national roundtable for headteachers of small schools. She suggested that he was invited to the next meeting of the Small Schools Support Group to share information about the roundtable, and to hear feedback from Essex small school headteachers. This was **AGREED**.

PO/
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It was suggested that Jonathan Duff, Regional Director, could be asked to lead a webcast for Essex schools about the White Paper and direction of travel. In addition, Ian Jacobs, who led a workshop at the small schools conference in 2018, could be asked to lead a webcast or presentation at the conference.

7. Dates and times of meetings for the remainder of the 2021/22 school year, and the 2022/23 school year

- Wednesday 6th July 2022
- Wednesday 19th October 2022 – conference, in person, 9.00 am – 1.00 pm Lion Inn, Boreham
- Wednesday 23rd November 2022
- Wednesday 18th January 2023
- Thursday 16th March 2023
- Wednesday 10th May 2023
- Thursday 13th July 2023

Meetings to be held online (unless otherwise indicated) starting at 3.30 pm