



Small Schools Strategy: *Supporting small rural schools to be successful and sustainable within Pickwick Academy Trust*

Pickwick Academy Trust is an outward-facing, inclusive and primary-focussed Multi-Academy Trust with nine schools across North and South Wiltshire, and North Dorset. We are committed to growing our family of community and church schools in a measured and sustainable way over the next few years.

We are aware that across Wiltshire, North Dorset and beyond, there are a significant number of small and rural schools that are playing an important role as centres of their communities for families, and delivering high-quality local education provision for children.

We are also aware of the challenges facing small rural schools: financial instability; unpredictable pupil numbers; proportionately high staffing costs; low levels of funding available for staff professional development, pupil equipment/resources and premises maintenance; difficulties in recruiting and retaining high quality staff, especially senior leaders and specialist staff such as SENCOs and subject leaders; and workload, due to small numbers of staff having to take on multiple roles and responsibilities.

Many Trusts are reticent to welcome small rural schools into their organisations because of the challenges listed above, but we passionately believe that being part of a Trust can help small rural schools to thrive; access more support and services than they could do as a standalone school; become financially sustainable; and recruit and retain high-quality staff due to the professional development and networking opportunities a Trust can provide.

We are committed to welcoming small rural primary schools (balanced with schools that are medium and large) to join and thrive as part of Pickwick Academy Trust. We work together to find innovative and creative ways of working, in partnerships, to maximise the educational benefits for children, ensure staff are well trained and supported, and secure the financial sustainability of the school for the future.

Whilst we would expect small rural schools joining our Trust to be outward-facing and open-minded to different ways of working to achieve these benefits, we do not want a one-size-fits-all model of alignment for our schools – we are fully committed to safeguarding the ethos, uniqueness and identity of each of our schools, and the Christian distinctiveness of our church schools.

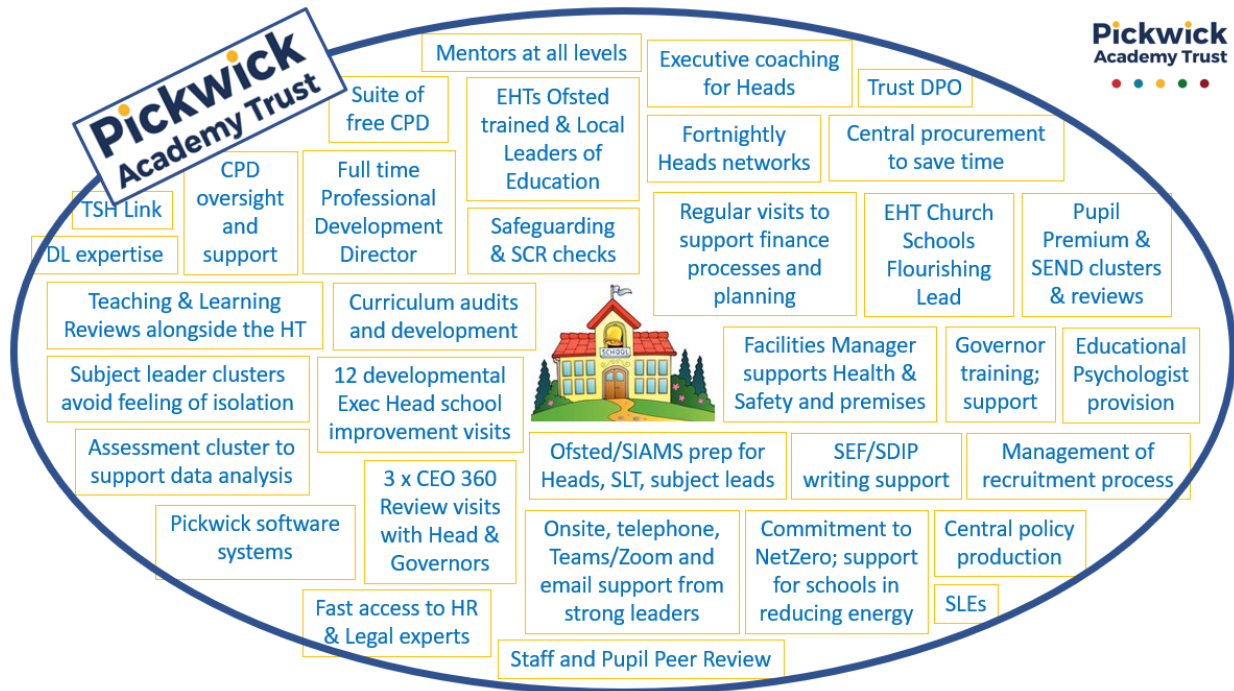
As part of the central Trust team, we have a dedicated Executive Headteacher who understands and supports the work of our small, rural and church schools, and we have several Heads with experience in leading successful small schools. One of our Executive Headteachers is a trained Ofsted inspector, and two others are Local Leaders of Education. We have a full-time Professional Development Director who leads on CPD and curriculum development across our schools, and coordinates the Trust-wide subject cluster groups that have been transformational in supporting subject leaders who no longer feel isolated. All our Heads and Executive Leaders have external professional coaching, as well as mentoring from other Trust leaders.

All schools receive 12 developmental school improvement visits a year from our experienced executive team, which support and challenge senior leaders to ensure safeguarding procedures are strong; a purposeful and appropriate SDIP and SEF are in place; leaders are well-prepared for Ofsted and subject leaders supported with deep dives; teaching and learning reviews identify strengths and areas for development; and data is analysed and understood. As well as these scheduled visits, the team are available for senior leaders onsite, and/or via telephone and email as required. For schools

in challenging circumstances, an even more enhanced package of support is provided by the Trust to secure rapid improvement working alongside school leaders.

Schools benefit from a full-time Trust Business & Finance Director, a Head of Finance, a Head of HR, a Facilities Manager, external legal support and a Data Protection Officer who supports with GDPR issues. School finance managers work together to share expertise and receive support from the Trust team to set and monitor balanced budgets.

All schools pay a central contribution of 6% of their General Annual Grant (GAG) funding to be part of Pickwick Academy Trust. All schools, irrespective of their size, benefit from all of this support and these services (examples of support and services shown in the diagram below).



Our small schools' strategy and the philosophy behind it has been developed to support small rural schools to thrive within our Trust, but the approaches could be used to benefit schools of any size.

The principle objectives of this strategy are to ensure that small rural schools within Pickwick:

- Are retained for their communities and thrive as centres of excellence
- Raise standards and provide strong outcomes for children academically, socially and emotionally
- Are financially viable and sustainable, ensuring strong value for money

The Department for Education defines small schools as those having fewer than 210 pupils on roll. In Wiltshire about 75 (70%) of the remaining Local Authority maintained schools (those that have not converted to become academies) have fewer than 210 pupils on roll, nearly a third have fewer than 120 pupils and just less than a fifth have fewer than 90 pupils.

As a Trust, we have defined 'small schools' as those having fewer than 150 pupils and/or those with 5 classes or fewer. We would look at the current and projected number on roll as part of initial conversations with a school considering joining the Trust, as well as part of our due diligence processes. A school could be identified as becoming a 'small school' at some future point after it has joined, or a small school may grow and no longer be considered a 'small school'.

Defining a prospective joining school as a 'small school' would trigger a small schools strategy conversation. This would explore to what extent school leaders and governors were open to thinking differently about the school's operational and organisational arrangements, if required, which could enable it to sustainably achieve the benefits set out above.

Each school would be considered on a case-by-case basis, looking at strengths and areas of potential vulnerability, to explore if there were any partnership or shared working arrangements that would benefit the school on conversion and/or what could be implemented when opportunities presented themselves (examples could include not automatically replacing a staff member like for like, or looking to align/share working across schools, such as sharing a SENCO). These approaches would not be imposed on the school, but would be discussed and decided on alongside school leaders and governors.

If a school with fewer than 150 pupils was performing strongly; was well governed and resourced; was delivering in line with Pickwick's financial KPIs and was financially secure and sustainable, it is likely that minimal or no changes would be suggested on conversion, but opportunities could be explored when they arose in the future.

If, however, there were opportunities for the school to become less vulnerable, more financially sustainable and for it to provide enhanced educational experiences and outcomes for children by working differently within Pickwick Academy Trust, this is something we would want to promote and support.

The following are themes for discussion with leaders and governors of a potential joining small school. They would form part of our initial conversations as well as part of the pre-academy order due diligence stage of our conversion process. As stated above, each school would be considered on a case by case basis, and any changes in school operational arrangements would only be implemented with the full support and agreement of school leaders and governors.

Operational arrangements to consider:

- Partner your school closely with another currently in our Trust, or commit to supporting a future small school joiner (not a satellite of another school, but a genuine partnership)
- Look at creative ways to develop staff in small schools who otherwise might have to leave to professionally develop; provide opportunities for staff to develop and use their skills, and be outward-facing across the partnership and Trust
- Identify opportunities to support another school and share expertise, e.g. leadership and school improvement etc
- Review financial position and expect costs (e.g. staffing) to be sustainable over the next 3 years, taking the opportunity to reduce them if necessary over time in line with Pickwick financial KPIs
- A small school working in close partnership with another may need to align their work in more areas and/or more closely to take advantage of e.g. shared curriculum, staffing, leadership etc
- Explore a range of leadership and staffing models to benefit from economies of scale, expertise and retention of strong staff across the partnership (e.g. shared Headteacher, school leadership, subject leaders, SENCO)
- Reflect on staffing opportunities when they arise; do not automatically replace like for like, instead consider if there is a different, more efficient and/or better way
- Reflect on expertise and composition of existing governing bodies – could one Local Governance Committee (LGC) sharing their collective expertise and strategically leading across more than

one school be more effective? Are there strengths within your LGC that could benefit other schools in the Trust?

- Review administrative and finance capacity and skills sets; consider sharing business/admin/finance resources for mutual benefit, e.g. joint finance or premises/Health & Safety lead, or asking Pickwick to run these centrally if capacity/recruitment is a challenge
- Consider operating two small schools as if in a federation as one school, pooling the budget of both schools and considering all needs as one school (particularly if two like-minded schools join Pickwick together)
- Set out in advance the timeframe for any elements that would be aligned following conversion and what will be considered for alignment when opportunities present where agreed between school and Trust?

Reading:

1. Small and Rural Schools Strategy (South Gloucestershire Council, June 2020)

<https://www.southglos.gov.uk/documents/Small-Rural-Schools-Strategy-Final-June-20.pdf>

2. Running small rural primary schools efficiently (Department for Education, March 2019):

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/785502/Running_small_rural_primary_schools_efficiently-brief.pdf

Appendix 1: Small Schools Strategy RAG template

School:	Date:	Completed by:	
Area of review	RAG (red = high risk; green = low risk)	Comments	Agreed actions
Ofsted outcome <i>(Base RAG on latest Ofsted outcome and history)</i>			
Pupil outcomes <i>(Base RAG on latest pupil outcomes data Y6, Y2, Phonics)</i>			
Quality of Education <i>(Base RAG on Teaching & Learning Review and latest Ofsted)</i>			
Pupil numbers (NOR) <i>(Base RAG on projected NOR over 3 years, changes in NOR recently and capacity at school)</i>			
Staffing situation <i>(Base RAG on % spent on staff, retention rates, skill spread, approaches)</i>			
Financial sustainability <i>(Base RAG on 3-year financial plan)</i>			
Financial compliance <i>(Base RAG on adherence to KPIs)</i>			
Quality of governance <i>(Base RAG on latest Ofsted report, external review, skills audits, vacancies, local intel)</i>			
Level of resourcing <i>(Base RAG on learning walk, and local intel)</i>			
Quality of premises, H&S <i>(Base RAG on premises survey, H&S audits)</i>			