

PRIMARY SCHOOL ORGANISATION STRATEGY 2016 - 2018

1. Executive Summary

The main challenge that the City of Wolverhampton faces in relation to the organisation of primary school provision, is ensuring that sufficient high quality school places are available to meet the needs of local communities across the City. Driven by a 24% increase in births between 2002 and 2014, levels of demand for primary school provision have increased significantly in recent years and in excess of 2,150 additional places have been commissioned since September 2012 to cater for the demographic uplift. This Strategy outlines anticipated levels of future demand and key policy decisions adopted by the Council to guide the ongoing development of the City's primary school estate.

2. Introduction

Background

This Strategy is a key feature of the City of Wolverhampton Council's approach to meeting its statutory duties as an advocate for parents and families, supporting vulnerable children and championing educational excellence.

Underpinning both the Council's Corporate Plan and Wolverhampton's Children, Young People and Families Plan 2015 - 2025, this document details the significant challenges that the Council faces with regard to the sufficiency and distribution of primary school places in the City and outlines a set of recommendations to guide the future development of primary school provision across Wolverhampton.

The Primary School Organisation Strategy, aligned with the Council's School Improvement and Governance Strategy, seeks to secure sufficient school places where high quality education is provided that contributes to improved educational outcomes across the City. The two Strategies recognise the Council's role in ensuring sufficiency of provision and in influencing the quality of education provided regardless of how schools are organised or governed.

The principles that have guided the development of this Strategy are:

- The right of every child to fulfil their potential
- The needs of local communities
- The value of partnership working
- The need to respond effectively to the dynamic demographic position
- The requirement to consider the sustainability of the school estate
- The need to ensure resources are used efficiently.

Context

Key Statutory Duties:

Councils are under a statutory duty to ensure that there are sufficient school places in their area, promote high educational standards, ensure fair access to educational opportunity and promote the fulfilment of every child's educational potential. They must also ensure that there are sufficient schools in their area, promote diversity and increase parental choice.

There is a legal requirement that any class containing infant aged children (five, six and seven year olds) will not exceed a maximum of 30 pupils with a single class teacher, other than when an additional pupil admitted fits the criteria for an 'excepted' pupil (as defined in the School Admissions Code).

Demand:

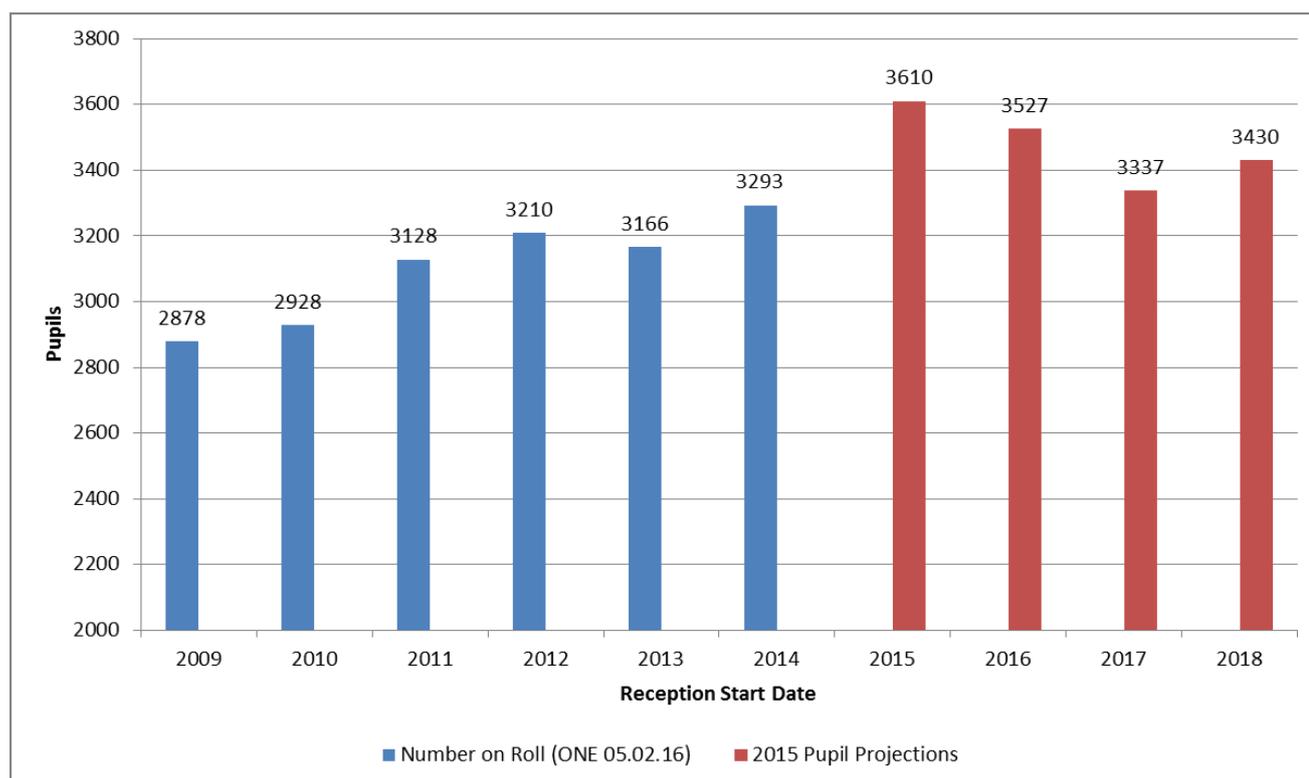
The main challenge that the City faces, in relation to the organisation of primary school provision, is ensuring that sufficient high quality school places are available to meet the needs of local communities across the City.

As illustrated in Figure 1, levels of demand for primary school provision across the City have increased significantly in recent years. This upsurge has been primarily driven by an increase in the number of births to Wolverhampton residents; a 24% increase between 2002 and 2014 (Office for National Statistics).

In order to meet demand, the Council has recently invested heavily in the provision of additional primary school places in a number of areas of high demand across the City. Recent expansion schemes have been funded through a combination of both central capital funding and constrained Council resources. Since September 2012, Primary School Expansion Programmes have introduced an additional 2,175 additional primary school places across 20 existing primary schools. In addition, a new primary Free School (Nishkam Primary School Wolverhampton) has recently opened in the City. Moving forwards there remains uncertainty in respect of future central government capital funding allocations to meet basic need in the medium term.

The Council's policy of prioritising popular and successful schools for expansion has proved successful; despite the significant growth in demand, in 2015/16, 89% of on time applicants were offered a Reception place in their first preference school and 97% were offered a place in one of the preferred schools.

Figure 1: Numbers on Roll by National Curriculum Year and Projected Citywide Reception Cohorts



As demand has increased, the number of surplus school places has reduced and levels of surplus within some primary year groups are now constrained. Figure 2 illustrates citywide levels of surplus in each national curriculum year group and highlights recent fluctuations in the size of individual cohorts. Levels of in-year growth have accelerated in recent years; anecdotal evidence suggests that this growth is also being experienced by neighbouring local authorities and is likely to be the consequence of migration rates.

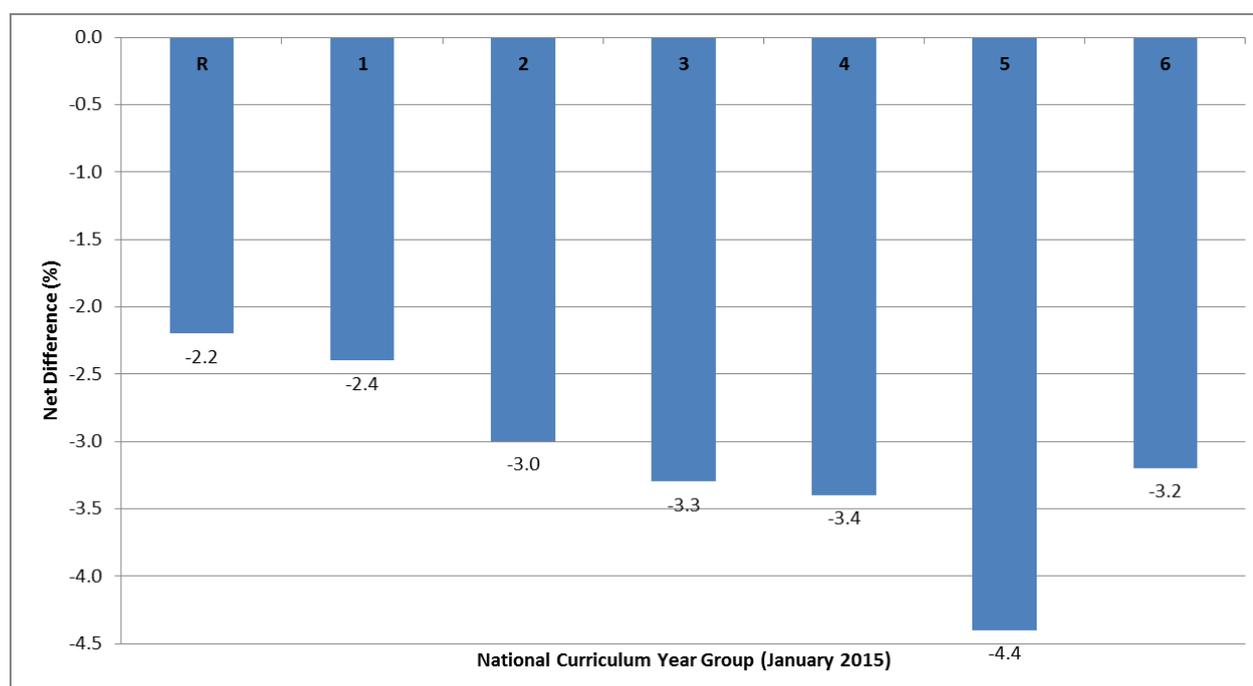
Figure 2: Surplus and Demand by National Curriculum Year Group

National Curriculum Year Group (2015/16)	Number on Roll (February 2016)	Surplus Places Against Admission Limits (Percentage)	Overall Cohort Fluctuation Since Cohort was in Reception (January School Census to February 2016 ONE Data)	Cohort Fluctuation January 2015 to February 2016
R	3494	167 (4.6%)	N/A	N/A
1	3293	89 (2.7%)	+28	+28
2	3166	129 (4.0%)	+41	+31
3*	3210	80 (2.5%)	+119	-19
4	3128	75 (2.4%)	+98	+15
5	2928	252 (8.0%)	+53	+9
6	2878	293 (9.3%)	-29	-12

*Please note that in order to meet levels of demand in specific hotspots that a minority of primary schools in the City have introduced additional capacity by agreeing to admit significantly above their admission limits.

One of the key factors that influences demand for primary school places in the City is the cross border movement of pupils. In January 2015, 690 primary pupils who reside outside of Wolverhampton attended schools within the City (imports) and 1,261 primary pupils who live in Wolverhampton attended schools outside of the City (exports). As illustrated in Figure 3, in January 2015 Wolverhampton was a net exporter of pupils in all primary year groups.

Figure 3: Net Difference between Imports and Exports as a Percentage of the School Population



It should be noted that the scale of net loss has changed significantly in recent years; in January 2015, the net difference between imports and exports as a percentage of the school population in Reception was -2.2% compared with -4.4% in Year 5. This change has principally been driven by a lower proportion of pupils who reside in Wolverhampton attending a school outside of the City.

Should this trend continue and the net difference reduce further, levels of demand would be impacted upon and additional capacity would be required to meet demand. If Wolverhampton had experienced a zero net difference between imports and exports in January 2015, an additional 571 pupils would have been attending primary schools in the City.

Autonomous School System:

Central government policy initiatives, including the establishment of Free Schools and the conversion of schools to Academy status, have changed the landscape in which education is delivered and school organisation is undertaken. As illustrated in Figure 4, in February 2016 there was a diverse range of primary provision in the City.

Figure 4: Mainstream Primary Establishments (February 2016)

Establishment Type	Count
Infant School - Community	4
Infant School – Voluntary Controlled	1
Junior School - Community	4
Junior School – Voluntary Controlled	1
Primary Academy	16
Primary Community School	34
Primary Free School	1
Primary - Voluntary Aided	6
Primary - Voluntary Controlled	7
Total	74

Appendix A illustrates the location of each primary establishment in the City in February 2016.

Legislation dictates that, when considering the establishment of a new school, Free School/Academy proposals should be considered in the first instance and that Academy Trusts can apply directly to the Secretary of State to make significant changes to individual establishments.

The Council is not in full control of all factors relating to the effective and timely supply of school places and as a consequence, successful partnership working is of paramount importance in order to ensure that the needs of the City's communities can be met.

The Council recognises the value of sustaining an effective partnership with all schools regardless of their status or governance arrangements. In order to support the Council with its duty to ensure the supply of sufficient school places within an increasingly autonomous school system, the Council have established a strong working partnership with Free Schools, Academies, Trusts, the Department for Education, the Education Funding Agency, the Regional Schools Commissioner for the West Midlands and local Diocesan Authorities.

The relationship between the Council and Academies/Free Schools in the City is governed by the recently developed 'Academy Protocol'. This Protocol provides a framework to promote cooperation and partnership working between the City of Wolverhampton Council and all academies and free schools operating across the City. This Protocol sets out a shared ambition

for our children to realise their full potential and our commitment to work together and share best practice to secure this. The Protocol sets out respective roles and responsibilities in terms of safeguarding and the continuous improvement in the educational outcomes of Wolverhampton's children and young people.

Opportunities to expand on the number of Free Schools in the City will be explored in order to meet basic need; however introducing additional Free School provision in geographically appropriate locations and in a timely manner presents a significant challenge. In order to ensure that the needs of families and pupils in Wolverhampton can continue to be met effectively it may, on occasion, be necessary for the Council to adopt a more responsive approach to school place planning and to develop contingency plans to cater for external influences on the supply of school places.

3. Primary School Organisation

This section details the key recommendations that the Council will use to guide the organisation of the primary estate:

School Size

In order to ensure the efficient use of resources, whilst avoiding the loss of a more personal primary ethos, it is recommended that primary schools in the City provide a minimum of 30 places per year group (one form entry) and a maximum of 90 places per year group (three form entry).

Larger primary schools (2 form entry and above) can potentially offer: greater opportunity for specialism, a workforce that has a wider spectrum of experience and expertise, increased opportunity to offer a broad and balanced curriculum, greater flexibility to cover staff absence, increased potential to provide strategic leadership succession opportunities, the opportunity to use resources more efficiently and an increased ability to respond to change more readily. This Strategy supports the development of larger schools, where appropriate.

Admission Limits

Admission limits will be managed in accordance with Infant Class Size Regulations and in order to promote the most efficient use of resources. This Strategy recommends that admission limits, which exceed a form of entry (i.e. 30 pupils), are either set as full forms of entry (multiples of 30) or half forms of entry (multiples of 15).

Surplus Place Position

Surplus places are school places that have not been filled.

This Strategy recommends that a minimum level of surplus within each year group of 5% (against admission number) is available at a citywide level.

A level of surplus is essential in order to provide for parental choice, to allow for fluctuations in demand and to offer flexibility to cater for mid-year entrants. Too few surplus places can result in reduced parental choice, increased travel times, and increased class sizes. However, too great a number of surplus places can lead to the inefficient use of resources.

To ensure that pupils can access a local school and that pupils' travel times are reasonable this Strategy recommends that, where required, a primary school place is available within a maximum

of two miles (walking distance) of each primary school pupils' home. An aspiration of this Strategy is to offer pupils a school place within their local community.

In order to support this aspiration the Council employs Primary Planning Areas. The City has been divided into three planning areas (see Appendix A) which enable a localised approach to be adopted when developing solutions and reporting upon primary school organisation. This approach also recognises the differing pressures facing local communities across the City.

Children usually start school in the September after they turn 4 but currently parents of summer-born children can ask to delay entry into school for a year. In September 2015, the DfE announced their intention to give summer-born children the right to start in reception at the age of 5. It was suggested that admissions rules should be changed so children born between April 1 and August 31 cannot be forced to go straight into year 1 if they wait to start school until they turn 5. A full public consultation on this matter is expected; however, it should be noted that the introduction of such a policy may result in the need for a greater level of surplus to be made available in the future.

The Introduction of Additional School Places

In order to meet rising demand for primary school places the Council will continue to consider, where feasible, the expansion of existing schools across the City. However, it should be noted that, given the scale of recent expansion programmes, there are a limited number of remaining opportunities available within the existing primary school estate.

The following factors will be considered when prioritising potential school expansion schemes:

- Parental Choice – schools which are most popular with parents
- School Performance - schools judged as 'Good' or 'Outstanding' by Ofsted
- Attainment - schools whose end of key stage results consistently exceed floor standards
- School Leadership – schools with stable and proven leadership
- Location – schools located within areas of high demand
- Viability for expansion – schemes which can be most easily and efficiently implemented
- Value for money - schools that can most cost effectively be expanded.

In order to safeguard the sustainability of the school estate, the expansion of existing schools will be investigated in the first instance, prior to considering the introduction of new provision. In order to achieve this ambition, the capacity of existing schools' accommodation will be maximised and the appropriation of suitable land adjacent to existing school sites will be considered.

The Council are committed to ensuring the implementation of practical solutions to meet the basic need challenge and will work closely with schools to develop appropriate schemes that consider pupils' needs and support the effective delivery of the curriculum e.g. through the introduction of additional breakout spaces.

In order to support the needs of pupils in expanding schools and in line with the Education Funding Agency's recommended approach, the Council will seek continued support from Schools' Forum for a Growth Fund to support resultant revenue needs of schools which are required to provide extra places in order to meet basic need. Schools currently qualify for funding through the Growth Fund in the following circumstances:

- The school or academy has agreed with the LA to permanently increase its admission limit to meet basic need.

- The school or academy has agreed with the LA to provide a bulge class to meet basic need.
- The school or academy has agreed with the LA to expand in-year to meet basic need.

When an expanding school is in the process of converting to academy status, the Council will seek to ensure that legal mechanisms are employed to ensure that the needs of the City are fulfilled and any approved investment is secured for the future. Specifically the Council's legal representatives will seek to include reference to the enlarged capacity within relevant Commercial Transfer Agreements and representations will be made to the DfE to request that Funding Agreements reflect the capacity post-expansion.

Bulge Classes

In specific circumstances, where local demand is predicted to rise and then fall within a short period of time, the Council will consider the introduction of bulge classes. These are time limited expansions of the capacity of individual year groups within a school, for example, a temporary increase of a school's admission limit by one form of entry in an individual year group to meet demand. Bulge classes will only be considered when the permanent expansion of a school to meet demand would not be sustainable.

The Introduction of Additional Capacity into Existing Cohorts

As illustrated in Figure 2 (page 3), some existing primary school cohorts have recently grown significantly and levels of surplus in specific year groups have reduced accordingly. In order to ensure that pupils can access school provision within a reasonable distance of their home address, the Council has worked closely with schools to introduce additional capacity into existing cohorts to cater for rising demand as required.

It is recognised that introducing additional capacity, at points other than standard years of entry, can potentially destabilise both individual cohorts and the wider school estate; this strategy requires that the introduction of additional capacity into existing cohorts is only considered in response to significant demographic challenges and to support the needs of local communities.

In order to support the needs of pupils in schools that introduce additional capacity into existing cohorts, the Council will seek continued approval from Schools' Forum through the aforementioned Growth Fund to support the resultant revenue needs of schools that have provided additional places in order to meet demand.

Vertical Grouping

Vertical Grouping (or the employment of mixed age classes) is most commonly employed in primary schools with intakes of 45 or 75 and works successfully in a number of schools across the City. However, the use of this structure can increase the complexity of planning and delivering the curriculum.

When an opportunity or need arises consultation will be conducted with Headteachers and Governors to consider increasing or reducing admission limits in schools with existing 45 or 75 admission limits. This Strategy recommends that the introduction of additional 45 or 75 admission limits only be considered once other practical solutions have been exhausted.

All-through Schools

An 'All-through School' is a school which provides both primary and secondary education.

In order to improve the diversity of the school estate in Wolverhampton the introduction of all-through schools will be explored where appropriate. Successful all-through schools can offer a number of benefits including:

- Reducing the number of transitions children face and reducing the risk of delayed learning at the start of secondary school
- Extending opportunities available to primary pupils; all-through schools can offer primary age pupils early access to specialist subject teaching and facilities
- Providing an additional opportunity to fully utilise the whole school estate to meet the anticipated future primary basic need challenge
- Providing school staff with wider career development opportunities
- Offering cost savings through economies of scale.

The introduction of all-through provision will only be considered where there is a demonstrable need for additional capacity in the local area and all-through provision would be an appropriate solution.

Temporary Accommodation

Across the primary school estate in the City a small proportion of schools' schedules of accommodation include temporary facilities. Whilst it is recognised that the quality of temporary accommodation has improved significantly in recent years, this strategy requires that the replacement of temporary accommodation is prioritised, where appropriate.

Intervention

The Council will consider proposing the adoption of structural solutions (including both federation and sponsored academy status) in order to improve standards in underperforming schools.

Federations:

Federations offer schools the opportunity to share best practice and support one another. The term federation is used to describe the creation of formal shared governance structures, which enable schools to raise standards and enhance provision by sharing resources, staff, expertise and facilities. There are a variety of federation models that allow schools to choose which model best suits their needs.

Regardless of the federation model adopted, individual schools retain their identity, continue to receive individual school budgets, have separate Ofsted inspections and report on performance individually.

Federating schools can have a number of benefits, including:

- Providing a structured way for schools to learn from each other and share best practice
- Offering opportunities for improved teaching and learning through increased specialism
- Building capacity across the federation
- Saving on planning and administration time
- Offering better support and development opportunities for School Governors
- Providing broader career opportunities across the federation
- Extending curriculum entitlement.

Sponsored Academies:

In certain circumstances, the Council will facilitate the sponsorship of schools to become academies or support eligible schools to convert to academy status. Such steps will only be taken to support the overall improvement of education in the City, including the raising of pupils' attainment and progress.

Where appropriate, the Council will work with other agencies to identify locally sourced sponsors to support the conversion of schools.

In order to improve the quality of education across the City the Council will continue to recommend the adoption of structural solutions (including federations and sponsored academy status) and seek to influence the implementation of effective governance arrangements that promote school improvement.

Specialist Provision

This Council recognises the value of some specialist provision being attached to primary schools. For example, sensory resource bases are the most appropriate way to meet the needs of pupils with sensory needs and this Strategy requires that any primary school reorganisation does not detrimentally impact on such provision.

Please note that resource base provision across the City is commissioned by the Council and service level agreements are in place with individual providers/schools. Council representatives are currently undertaking a review of specialist provision across the City. This review is aligned to the Council's Joint Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Strategy which aims to promote inclusion, maximize young people's opportunities to be independent and enable young people with special educational needs and disabilities to be recognised as fully integrated citizens with the ability to contribute to their local community.

Infant and Junior School Provision

This Strategy recommends that the Council invites responsible bodies (e.g. Governing Bodies or Trusts) to consider the merger or amalgamation of infant and junior schools whenever the Headship of a school becomes vacant. For merger to be considered, the leadership of the establishment that is proposed for expansion must be at least 'Good'.

Bringing infant and junior schools together offers a number of advantages, including:

- Reducing the number of major transitions that pupils face
- Reducing the likelihood of lost learning at the beginning of Key Stage 2
- Increasing the opportunity for specialist teachers to work with a wider range of pupils
- Providing the opportunity for a consistent approach to the curriculum to be adopted
- Ensuring the continuity of teaching, learning and achievement
- Cost savings through economies of scale.

Please note that, in this context:

- The 'merger' of infant and junior schools is the process of joining the schools together by discontinuing one establishment and expanding and altering the age range of the other.
- The term amalgamation relates to the process of joining the schools together by discontinuing both establishments and creating a new school.

Removal of Maintained Provision

In certain circumstances the Council will consider the removal of maintained provision.

This Strategy requires that the Council considers the closure of a school if the school meets two or more of the following criteria:

- The school is judged Inadequate by Ofsted
- The performance of pupils at the school is unacceptably low
- The school has a significant number of surplus places
- There are significant suitability issues in respect of the school's accommodation and/or site
- Closure could be effected without denying any pupils access to at least one alternative school with available places within a maximum of two miles (walking distance) of their home.¹
- The substantive Headteacher has left or is leaving.

Prior to initiating any statutory processes to close a school, the Council will consult with the School's Headteacher and the Chair of the School's Governing Body to discuss how the criteria may apply to their school. As part of this process the Council will review and consult with schools' Governing Bodies regarding:

- The likely impact of a school's closure on other schools in the local area, taking account of numbers on roll and the capacity of schools to enhance provision for children and families
- Projected levels of future demand
- The importance of the school to the wider community
- The condition, suitability and sufficiency of school facilities.

Estate Management

It is recommended that a long term approach is taken to the management of educational assets in order to ensure that fluctuations in demand can be effectively and efficiently catered for. Where appropriate, sites should be reserved as contingency to cater for anticipated increases in demand, such as that resulting from new housing developments. However, it should be recognised that adopting a longer term approach will result in short-term budgetary pressures as sites must be secured and maintained.

Where circumstances arise that present the opportunity to use existing school accommodation in different ways, this Strategy would require that priority is given to the provision of statutory school places.

Change Management

Whilst any primary school reorganisation or development scheme seeks to minimise disruption to pupils and parents and avoid any longer term detriment to pupils, it is recognised that making significant changes to individual establishments can have a disruptive effect on the delivery of education.

This Strategy requires that schools are effectively supported through the change process; schools can request additional school improvement support as required.

¹ If the closing school is denominational, then alternative denominational provision should be available within a maximum of two miles of pupils' homes, where appropriate.

Other Considerations

This strategy requires that when considering primary school organisation:

- The Council works closely with Diocesan Authorities and other bodies representing local schools' religious denominations to ensure that an appropriate balance of denominational and community places are available.
- That, if at all possible, the need for compulsory redundancy is avoided.
- Equal opportunities are promoted and that particular groups of children are not disadvantaged.

Strategy Review

The Strategy will be subject to review on a biennial basis.

Appendix A: School Locations

