

October 2000: Triggers for Review

The Audit Commission recommends that review should be considered when a school drops below a minimum number on roll (100 in the primary sector and 500 in the secondary sector); or where there are 25% or more unfilled places and these represent more than 30 places; or where there is a 6th form of 150 or fewer. These figures **may not** be appropriate in the Buckinghamshire context but, if not, other “threshold” figures will be required.

The Authority has identified 15 planning areas relating to the primary sector and 9 planning areas relating to the secondary sector which will form the basis for analysis and possible review. In the each sector, there are fundamentally different patterns of organisation and quite different issues. Any consideration of the secondary sector, if not at an individual school level will be either at education area or whole County level. Primary school provision would be reviewed on a “planning area” basis. For special schools, which are County-wide resources, review will be at the County level or even at regional level as changes in the pattern of SEN and special school provision outlined in “Excellence for All” come into effect.

It is also the case that where OFSTED deems a school to be in “special measures” or “serious weaknesses”, the Authority is required to consider whether the school should be retained because the presumption under the New Framework is that a school deemed to require special measures should close.

As an example of how local triggering criteria might be developed, in the report of the Director of Education to the Planning and Development Sub-Committee in December 1997, criteria for initiating review of small schools were proposed as follows:

- a minimum threshold pupil number on roll;
- a consistent falling of pupil numbers (over three to four years);
- significant difficulties in the recruitment of a headteacher;
- an adverse OFSTED report including serious weaknesses/special measures;
- serious concerns identified through the LEA’s own monitoring processes.

Other triggers, in addition to the above, might include the following:

- staff turnover and difficulties in recruitment
- governor turnover and difficulties in recruitment
- pupil progress eg poor and/or declining SATS results
- decreasing numbers of first preferences for admission
- inability to set a balanced budget; deficit budget; rapidly decreasing budget carry forward
- poor buildings which are uneconomic to refurbish/upgrade
- demographic downturn experienced across a group of schools within a locality
- paired infant and junior school at which either one or both are experiencing difficulties in respect, for example, of pupil standards, recruitment, budget and buildings

Clearly many of these triggers will occur together, overlap and are likely to be manifestations of one or a small number of fundamental and underlying “difficulties” facing the school such as poor standards, poor management or simply significant and unavoidable demographic decline. Accordingly any set of triggers need not include all of the factors listed and probably should be refined down to around 5 or 6.