

### The decline of small schools and village schools

Neil O'Brien MP

#### Summary of the findings

- 1. In recent decades the number of small primary schools has halved, while the number of very large schools has increased dramatically.** In 1980 there were 11,464 small primary schools in England with 200 or fewer pupils. In 2018 there were just 5,406. In contrast, the number of primaries with over 600 pupils has increased from 49 to 780 over the same period. There are now over 100 primaries with over 800 pupils. This dramatic change has happened with little public discussion and it is not clear what rationale there is for this transformation, which has also happened in Scotland and Wales.
- 2. Rural schools have been twice as likely as urban schools to close without replacement.** Since 2010 nearly two thirds (61%) of primary schools which shut were rural. Since 2000 alone nearly 150 rural primaries have closed. This increases travel time for parents and small children, and has a negative effect on village life.
- 3. Small schools are better or equal to larger schools in terms of OFSTED rating.** A third of primaries have fewer 200 or fewer pupils – they are just as likely to be good or outstanding as other schools. One in eight schools is really small, with 100 or fewer pupils. They are slightly more likely than average to be good or outstanding.
- 4. A broken planning system has meant it has been hard to get developers to pay for new schools.** Instead, schools expand beyond their intended size: build onto playing fields, and cover a wider catchment. More travel by car to locations not planned for many cars means more congestion.
- 5. Reforms to the National Funding Formula are needed to protect the future of small and village schools.** We should increase the lump sum element of the formula to help small schools.

With no discussion or public debate, a dramatic transformation has come over our schools in recent decades.

Primary schools in particular have seen a transformation in their scale. Data unearthed by the House of Commons Library for this research note shows how the number of small primary schools has collapsed over recent decades, while the number of very large schools has increased.

Two factors are at work. First, small schools have been more likely to close. Second, we have dramatically expanded schools that used to be small, rather than creating new small schools.

The trend towards much bigger schools overlaps with another trend: the decline of village schools. Just under a fifth of primary schools are in a hamlet or a village. On average they have just over a hundred pupils, compared to just under 400 for primary schools in major conurbations. As such they have been more likely to close than the bigger urban schools.

If we include those in rural towns, about 29% of all primary schools are in rural areas, but since 2010 61% of the primary schools which have shut and not reopened in another form have been rural. So rural primaries have been twice as likely to close as the national average. In fact, since 2000 alone nearly 150 rural primaries have closed.

Many people will feel uneasy about these trends towards large scale institutions for very young children, because they regard small schools as a more human scale for the very young. Others will be concerned about the effect on community life or on commuting times and congestion.

For all kinds of different reasons we need to have a debate about what we really want.

The growth of multi-academy trusts - families of schools working together, should enable small primaries to combine the advantages of small scale (community life, unthreatening for small children) with the advantages of operating at a bigger scale (sharing of resources, spreading of good practice.)

But if we wanted to shift back to smaller schools we will need to change the way planning works, and also potentially make further reforms to the national funding formula to support smaller schools.

## The number of small schools has declined dramatically across England, Scotland and Wales, while the number of large schools has increased.

I am grateful for the Commons Library for digitising older data for me, which reveals the transformation in the scale of our schools over recent decades, and the dramatic decline in the number of small schools. Detailed data tables are included in the appendix to this note.

In England the number of pupils at state primary schools is similar to the number in 1980. But the schools they attend are quite different. In 1980 there were 11,464 small primary schools with 200 or fewer pupils. In 2018 there were just 5,406 – the number of such schools has more than halved.

In contrast, in 1980 there were 949 large primary schools with over 400 pupils. But in 2018 there were 4,024 – the number of large schools has tripled.

The number of really gigantic primaries with over 600 pupils has increased from 49 to 780 over the same period. There are now over 100 primaries with over 800 pupils.

For Wales, data only goes back to 1985. But the same trends are visible.

In 1985 there were 1,329 small primary schools with 200 or fewer pupils. In 2017 (the most recent year of data) there were just 642 – the number of such schools has more than halved.

On the other hand, in 1985 there were just 15 large primary schools with over 400 pupils. But in 2017 there were 162 – the number of large schools has increased tenfold.

For Scotland data only goes back to 1996.

In Scotland the number of small primary schools with 200 or fewer pupils increased to 2002 but then fell back. In 1996 there were just 1,299 which then increased to 1,327 before decreasing to 1,081 – so nearly a fifth fewer than in 2002.

In contrast, in 1996 there were just 210 large primary schools with over 400 pupils. But in 2018 there were 614 – the number of large schools has tripled.

For more recent periods regional data is available in England. Comparing Scottish and Welsh data to English regions we can see that Wales, the North West and Yorkshire & the Humber saw the largest proportional declines in the number of small schools with 200 or fewer pupils. The South West, East Midlands and London saw the smallest proportional declines.

For Great Britain as a whole, there were over 2,000 fewer small schools with under 200 pupils.

**Table 1: Number of primary schools in England, Wales and Scotland with 200 or fewer pupils**

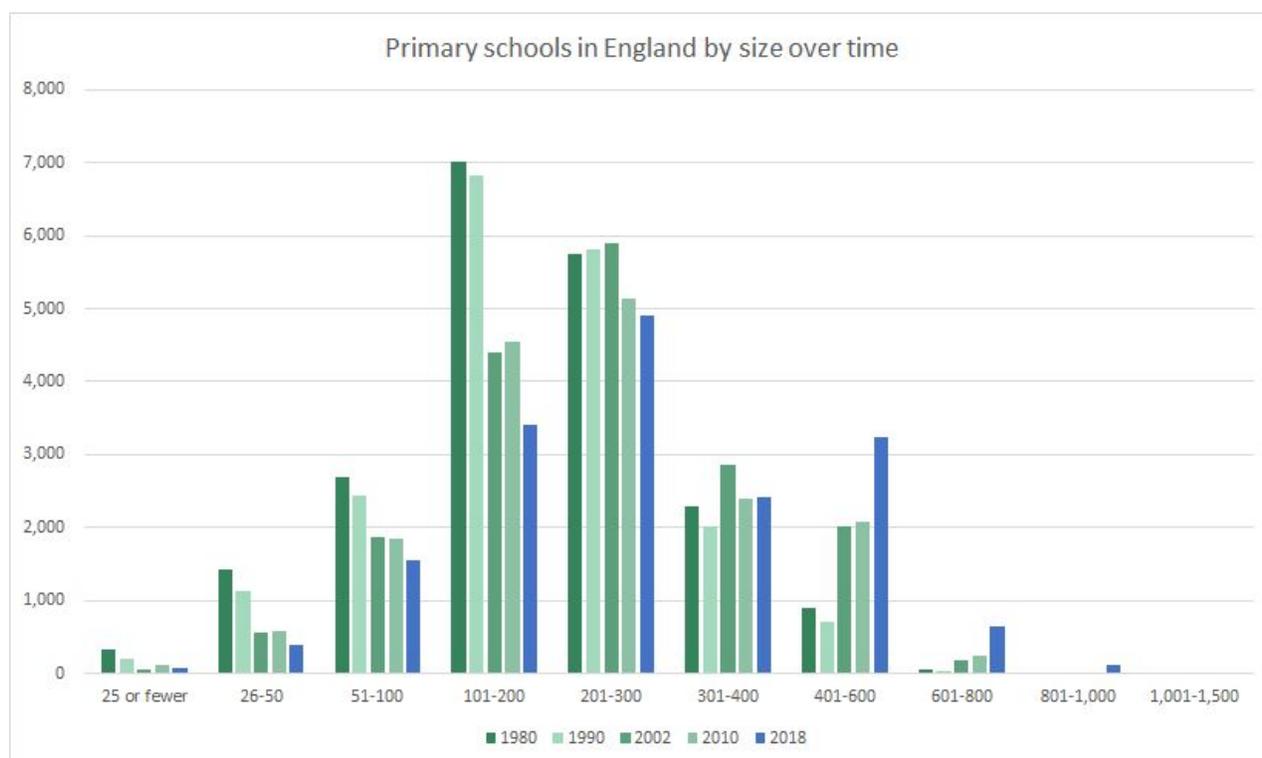
Source: Commons Library analysis

	2002	2010	2018	Change 2002-2018 (number)	Change 2002-2018 (%)
Wales*	996	927	642	-354	-36%
North West	1,002	1,045	712	-290	-29%
Yorkshire and the Humber	742	769	532	-210	-28%
West Midlands	658	688	486	-172	-26%
North East	381	388	286	-95	-25%
South East	1,134	1,040	863	-271	-24%
England	6,895	7,083	5,406	-1,489	-22%
East of England	916	1,000	731	-185	-20%
Scotland	1,327	1,282	1,081	-246	-19%
London	159	112	133	-26	-16%
East Midlands	814	852	690	-124	-15%
South West	1,089	1,100	973	-116	-11%
<b>Great Britain</b>	<b>9,218</b>	<b>9,203</b>	<b>7,129</b>	<b>-2,089</b>	<b>-23%</b>

\*data for Wales is for 2017

**Figure 1: Size of primary schools in England over time**

Source: House of Commons Library analysis



## Rural schools in England were twice as likely to close as urban schools since 2000. This increased distance travelled to school.

Just under a fifth of primary schools are in a hamlet or a village.

On average they have just over a hundred pupils, compared to just under 400 for primary schools in major conurbations.

Through a written answer the department for Education has provided a list of schools which closed and did not reopen in a new form.

If we include those in rural towns, about 29% of all primary schools are in rural areas<sup>1</sup>, but since 2010 61% of the primary schools which have shut and not reopened in another form have been rural.

So rural primaries have been twice as likely to close as the national average. In fact, since 2000 alone nearly 150 rural primaries have closed.

The closure of a rural primary school has a dramatic effect on community life, but also increases journey times for parents and children. It will typically lead to more car based travel as the distance to the nearest school is often too far for a primary school age child to walk.

Looking at the average distance between a closed school in a village or hamlet, and the nearest school, the average walking time is around 52 minutes, which makes transport essential in most cases. In some cases this will have a knock on impact in terms of public transport costs for pupils.

## Rural schools are more likely to be judged good or outstanding by Ofsted, while small schools perform similarly to other schools, and the smallest do best of all

Just under a fifth of primary schools in England are in a hamlet or a village. On average they have just over a hundred pupils, compared to just under 400 for primary schools in major conurbations.

Village schools are typically good schools. Only 8% are not good or outstanding, compared to 11% nationally and 15% in towns and small cities.

Ofsted ratings of schools are typically lower for schools in smaller towns and urban areas. The highest rankings are found in villages and hamlets, and in major urban conurbations - effectively a U-shaped distribution.

Looking by size, the very smallest schools are most likely to be good or outstanding. A third of primaries have fewer 200 or fewer pupils – they are just as likely to be good or outstanding as other schools.

One in eight schools is really small, with 100 or fewer pupils. They are slightly more likely than average to be good or outstanding.

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<sup>1</sup> Hansard, Written Answer 272250, 10 July 2019

**Table 2: OFSTED ratings of schools by rural / urban classification**

Source: Analysis of Department for Education, Get Information About Schools database

Rural / urban classification	% Good or Outstanding	% Outstanding	% of schools
Rural hamlet and isolated dwellings	94%	13%	5%
Rural village	92%	13%	13%
Total: village and hamlet	92%	13%	18%
Rural town and fringe	88%	11%	11%
Urban city and town	86%	18%	38%
Urban minor conurbation	85%	13%	3%
Urban major conurbation	90%	10%	29%
<b>Total</b>	<b>89%</b>	<b>13%</b>	<b>100%</b>

**Table 3: OFSTED ratings of schools by size**

Source: Analysis of Department for Education, Get Information About Schools database

Number of pupils	% Good or Outstanding	% Outstanding	% of schools
100 or fewer	91%	10%	12%
101-200	87%	12%	20%
All small: 200 or fewer	89%	11%	32%
201-300	90%	17%	29%
301-400	85%	14%	14%
401-600	89%	14%	19%
601+	89%	17%	5%
<b>All</b>	<b>89%</b>	<b>14%</b>	<b>100%</b>

“Lump sum” funding for small schools through the national funding formula is typically less generous than before, and sparsity funding affects few schools.

Recognising the fixed cost of running a small school, school funding in England has for many years included some element of a “lump sum”, which schools receive on top of any per pupil amount.

While lump sums prior to the National Funding Formula (NFF) varied by local authority, in the consultation exercises carried out before its introduction in 2018-19, the DfE confirmed that the lump sum value proposed for the NFF was lower than the national average: a consultation document confirmed that<sup>2</sup>, the NFF would “continue to provide every school with a lump sum, but at a lower level than the current national average so that we can direct more funding to the pupil-led factors.”

The reduction in the lump sum has had quite a large effect on some small schools. For example, in Leicestershire the local formula prior to the NFF included a lump sum of £150,000 per primary. In the National Funding Formula this is just £110,000, which makes a huge difference to small schools.

<sup>2</sup> DfE, Schools national funding formula Government consultation - stage 2, December 2016

At present the NFF is operating in a “soft” form. The NFF is used to work out how much a school attracts to its local authority, based on school and pupil characteristics. Individual school allocations are then aggregated up and passed to the local authority.

At present there is a second step. The local authority sets a local funding formula, essentially to share out the overall pot. In drawing up the local formula, LAs do not have to exactly mirror the DfE’s National Funding Formula; some NFF factors are optional, and there is scope for LAs to vary the values of many of the factors, albeit within defined limits. In the expectation that this second step will be removed at some point (known as making the NFF a “hard” formula) local authorities are typically bringing their own local formulas more into line with the national formula over time.

As a result, as local authorities converge on the NFF, the issues for small schools are likely to intensify. This is already happening to some extent: the proportion of the core schools budget going through the lump sum fell slightly last year, from 7.3% of core revenue in 2017-18 to 7.0% in 2019-20.

One way to support smaller schools would be to increase the lump sum. This would cost a little over £800 million a year if savings were not found elsewhere. It would tend to benefit less urban authorities, which are typically lower funded at present.

A fifth of primary schools have more than 20% of their income from the lump sum, and for them an increase could make the difference between staying afloat and shutting.

**Table 4: Lump sum funding as a share of primary schools’ total income from the schools block allocation**

Source: Hansard, Written Answer 273497, 9 July 2019

	Number	%
Less than 1%	0	0%
1% to 5%	601	4%
5% to 10%	5,332	32%
10% to 20%	7,482	45%
20% to 30%	2,060	12%
30% to 40%	808	5%
40% to 50%	326	2%
Over 50%	147	1%
Number of schools	16,756	100%

There has been some discussion about increasing sparsity funding as an alternative. However, this would require the sparsity element to have a much wider definition and larger amount.

Less than 6% of primaries get sparsity funding, and just over 1% the full amount.

At £14,800, the average award is not going to change much for those schools. For those kinds of reasons, only a third of local authorities have even chosen to include a sparsity element in their local formulas.

## Thanks

Many thanks to the staff of the House of Commons Library for unearthing the older data contained in this note, particularly Shadi Danechi. Thanks also to Nerys Roberts for guidance on the National Funding Formula.

Thanks to Ivan Ould, Lead Member for Children, Families, and Safer Communities at Leicestershire County Council for advice. Thanks to the staff of the DFE for data they provided me on school closures in a written answer, and also to Pippa Allen-Kinross at Schools Week for helping analyse it by date of closure. All mistakes are the author's own.

## Appendix

**Table 4: State primary schools in England, Wales and Scotland by size**

Source: Commons Library analysis based on: Schools, pupils and their characteristics: Jan 2010 & Jan 2018, DfE; Schools, pupils and their characteristics (transparency data): Jan 2002, DfE; Statistics of Education: 1990, Statistics 410.75, Table A4/90, Department of Education and Science; Statistics of Education: 1980, Statistics 410.73, Table A4/80 (Part A), Department of Education and Science; Schools census: 1974-2005, Stats Wales; Historical schools rolls: 1996-2018, Gov.Scot

### England

	% of all schools							Number of schools								
	1980	1985	1990	1996	2002	2010	2018	1980	1985	1990	1996	2002	2010	2018	change 2002 - 2018	change 1980 - 2018
25 or fewer	2%		1%		0%	1%	0%	333		209		63	118	65		
26-50	7%		6%		3%	3%	2%	1,426		1,137		568	576	387		
51-100	13%		13%		10%	11%	9%	2,697		2,431		1,869	1,846	1,544		
101-200	34%		36%		25%	27%	20%	7,008		6,819		4,395	4,543	3,410		
201-300	28%		30%		33%	30%	29%	5,752		5,809		5,892	5,148	4,914		
301-400	11%		11%		16%	14%	14%	2,289		2,016		2,852	2,401	2,419		
401-600	4%		4%		11%	12%	19%	900		714		2,015	2,080	3,247		
More than 601	0%		0%		1%	1%	4%	49		27		203	259	780		
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>		<b>100</b>		<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>20,454</b>		<b>19,162</b>		<b>17,857</b>	<b>16,971</b>	<b>16,766</b>		
All small (200 or under)	56%		55%		39%	42%	32%	11,464		10,596		6,895	7,083	5,406	<b>-22%</b>	<b>-53%</b>
All large (401 or over)	5%		4%		12%	14%	23%	949		741		2,218	2,339	4,027	<b>82%</b>	<b>324%</b>

Wales

	% of all schools							Number of schools								
	1980	1985	1990	1996	2002	2010	2017	1980	1985	1990	1996	2002	2010	2017	change 2002 - 2017	change 1985 - 2017
25 or fewer		6%	3%	3%	3%	4%	2%		114	56	48	54	59	25		
26-50		13%	12%	12%	10%	10%	7%		240	214	204	169	145	92		
51-100		19%	19%	16%	17%	17%	13%		338	321	262	277	248	171		
101-200		35%	34%	32%	31%	32%	28%		637	594	531	496	475	354		
201-300		20%	22%	25%	27%	22%	27%		363	389	424	432	316	348		
301-400		5%	7%	9%	8%	10%	10%		89	122	153	130	141	135		
401-600		1%	2%	3%	4%	5%	11%		15	31	56	63	75	148		
More than 601		0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	1%		0	2	3	3	3	14		
<b>Total</b>		<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>		<b>1,796</b>	<b>1,729</b>	<b>1,681</b>	<b>1,624</b>	<b>1,462</b>	<b>1,287</b>		
All small (200 or under)		74%	69%	62%	61%	63%	50%		1,329	1,185	1,045	996	927	642	<b>-36%</b>	<b>-52%</b>
All large (401 or over)		1%	2%	4%	4%	5%	13%		15	33	59	66	78	162	<b>145%</b>	<b>980%</b>

Scotland

	% of all schools							Number of schools								
	1980	1985	1990	1996	2002	2010	2018	1980	1985	1990	1996	2002	2010	2018	change 2002 - 2018	
25 or fewer				9%	10%	7%	7%				208	194	201	180		
26-50				11%	11%	9%	9%				256	263	239	216		
51-100				14%	14%	10%	10%				314	316	294	242		
101-200				23%	26%	18%	18%				521	554	548	443		
201-300				21%	21%	18%	18%				493	479	442	438		
301-400				13%	13%	13%	13%				309	286	281	314		
401-600				9%	4%	6%	6%				199	155	85	159		
More than 601				0%	0%	19%	19%				11	10	8	455		
<b>Total</b>				<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>				<b>2,311</b>	<b>2,257</b>	<b>2,098</b>	<b>2,447</b>		
All small (200 or under)				56%	61%	44%	44%				1,299	1,327	1,282	1,081	<b>-19%</b>	
All large (401 or over)				9%	4%	25%	25%				210	165	93	614	<b>272%</b>	