

Branscombe C of E Primary School: consultation on the future of the school

Frequently Asked Questions

Consultation Information Session

1. What has the Trust done to keep the school open and how has the Trust attempted to increase pupil numbers?

Before formally consulting on the future of the school, the academy Trust has undertaken a thorough review of all possible alternatives, including:

- **Strengthening educational provision and school reputation.** The Trust invested in an experienced and highly successful Executive Headteacher, whose leadership contributed to the school's positive SIAMS inspection outcome in 2025/26. Alongside this, the Trust's Education Improvement Team has provided robust challenge and support across key areas, including safeguarding, curriculum development, teaching quality, attendance, and pupil outcomes. This sustained investment has helped to improve the quality of provision and enhance the school's reputation within the local community.
- **Raising the profile of the school within the community.** Staff and pupils have been supported to take part in a wide range of educational visits, community events, and enrichment opportunities. These activities have increased the visibility of the school, showcased pupils' achievements, and strengthened community awareness and confidence in the provision.
- **Developing a distinctive and attractive curriculum offer.** The Trust has worked closely with school leaders to explore innovative approaches to curriculum delivery, creating a unique offer that reflects the context of the school and its community. This has helped to differentiate the school from other local providers and make it a more attractive choice for prospective families.
- **Targeted support to maintain school viability.** The Trust has provided significant leadership, school improvement, and operational support to ensure the school remains open and sustainable. This has included strategic oversight, financial support, governance input, and the deployment of specialist expertise where needed.
- **Promoting the school to prospective families.** Leaders have engaged proactively with current and prospective parents through open events, community engagement, positive publicity, and consistent communication about improvements within the school. These efforts have helped rebuild confidence and support pupil recruitment and retention.
- **Increasing income.** Efforts have been made to boost pupil numbers through marketing and engagement in the local areas including the provision of a free minibus service that was advertised via social media and banners.
- **Achieving efficiencies.** The Trust has implemented cost-saving measures across staffing, procurement, and shared services. Options such as amalgamation with nearby schools were explored to maintain viability.

- **Use of Farway CofE Primary School as an alternative venue.** Parents were offered the opportunity to access certain curriculum elements at the closest academy, Farway CofE Primary School. This option aimed to provide continuity of education within an existing Trust setting, minimising disruption for pupils. The proposal was not warmly received by families. Feedback indicated concerns about travel distance, logistical challenges, and the impact on pupils' sense of belonging.
- **Expansion of Early Years Provision.** Consideration was given to growing the Early Years element within the school to attract additional pupils and meet potential local demand. Early Years provision can often serve as a feeder into primary education, supporting long-term sustainability. Analysis showed very limited local need, with established Early Years providers already operating successfully in the area. As a result, there was no uptake for this option.
- **Introduction of a Mother and Toddler Group.** A community-based mother and toddler group was offered to strengthen engagement and create a pipeline for future enrolment. Despite initial promotion, take-up was very limited, suggesting insufficient demand or competing local alternatives.
- The Trust has continued to support the school despite ongoing financial challenges and falling pupil numbers. As part of this commitment, the Trust has provided leadership, operational, financial, curriculum and school improvement support beyond that normally available to a school of this size. Significant efforts have been made over a number of years to maintain a sustainable future for the school. However, despite these interventions, pupil numbers have continued to decline and projections indicate that this trend is unlikely to reverse in the foreseeable future.
- **Creation of an Alternative Education Space.** Discussions with Devon County Council explored the possibility of establishing an alternative education space to deliver a modified curriculum. This approach aimed to retain educational provision in some form, even if the traditional school model was not viable. It was agreed that the remote location would not support a sustainable or viable provision, given accessibility challenges and projected low enrolment.

Despite these extensive efforts over a number of years, pupil numbers have continued to decline, and forecasts indicate that this trend is unlikely to reverse. The Trust has worked closely with the Department for Education, Devon County Council, the Diocese of Exeter and other Multi Academy Trusts to explore every realistic alternative to closure, including the possibility of transferring the school to another academy trust. No viable alternative solution has been identified that would provide a sustainable educational and financial future for the school. The consultation is therefore seeking views on what is considered, at this stage, to be the only realistic option available.

2. Why did the Trust take on the school in 2024?

The school joined Link Academy Trust as part of the transfer of the former Jubilee and Pebblebed Federation. At that time, neither the Department for Education, Devon County Council, the Diocese nor the Trust considered closure to be the appropriate course of action. The Trust accepted responsibility for the school in good faith and committed significant

leadership, financial and school improvement resources to support its future. Since joining the Trust, further work has been undertaken to explore options for increasing pupil numbers and improving long-term sustainability. Unfortunately, despite these efforts, pupil numbers have continued to decline beyond the levels anticipated at the time of transfer.

3. Why was the consultation meeting not properly advertised?

There was no requirement to undertake a consultation as part of the Department for Education's processes. However, the Trust, DCC and the Diocese of Exeter considered that it was important that a formal consultation should be held so that the views of all stakeholders could be heard and responses to the consultation could inform the Cabinet of Devon County Council in their role as a decision-maker for the closure of a rural academy school. The consultation, including details of the information session, were circulated to all parents/carers, staff, governors, all county councillors, the district councillor for Branscombe, Diocese of Exeter, all schools within the local learning community and neighbouring schools, cross border local authority, Department for Education, Parish Council of Branscombe and Seaton, MP, early years providers and the local neighbourhood. The consultation and details of the information session were published on the school's website as well as Devon County Council's Have Your Say public consultation forum.

4. Why is there no early years teaching on school site? Surely that is how you grow a school.

There is no early years teacher on site simply because there are no early years children to teach. During the Spring 2 term, an Early Years practitioner was employed following a child joining the school however they did not remain at the school owing to no other similar aged children being enrolled. The school has also tried running a mother and toddler group but again provided nil growth. Analysis shows very limited local need, with established Early Years providers already operating successfully in the area. As a result, there has been no uptake of early years places.

5. Why was the school's signage removed during the consultation?

The Trust is unaware of any school signage being removed and is unable to ascertain why this has occurred.

6. Who is the final decision maker on a proposal to close the school? Does Link academy trust have a role in decision making?

As Branscombe C of E Primary is an academy school and not maintained by the Local Authority then the final decision as to whether or not to close the school and terminate the Funding Agreement rests with the Secretary of State. However, as Branscombe C of E Primary is designated as a rural school, Devon County Council need to agree to the closure as well as the Diocese of Exeter in its role as the religious authority and site trustees as it is Church of England School. Link Academy Trust does not have a decision-making role.

7. The school is run down and is not a welcoming environment, why hasn't more been done to create a more welcoming environment?

The Trust does not accept that the school has been deliberately allowed to deteriorate. During its time within the Trust, the school has continued to receive investment in maintenance, health and safety compliance, curriculum resources and staffing. As with many older school buildings, there are ongoing maintenance requirements, but all necessary statutory obligations have been met and the school remains safe and operational. During the academic year 24/25, a total of

£27,791 was spent on the upkeep, maintenance and grounds of the school with a further £19,851 in academic year 25/26. Given the uncertainty regarding pupil numbers and the school's long-term viability, it would not have been prudent to commit significant capital expenditure without confidence that the school could remain sustainable.

8. Why wasn't the consultation meeting run in the format of a panel meeting?

Consultation drop-in sessions have been very successful in the past and provide all stakeholders the opportunity to ask questions individually to the Trust/School, Devon County Council and the Diocese of Exeter and provide feedback. The format also allows for parents/carers to have more personal discussions regarding their children which can include more detailed conversations regarding specific school admission and school transport questions. Panel meetings can sometimes not allow for all stakeholders to have a voice giving a distorted outcome to the consultation.

9. Why wasn't the District, County Councillor and Parish Council invited?

The Parish Council, District Councillor for Branscombe and all County Councillors were sent the consultation, including details regarding the information session held on 9 July, on the day the consultation commenced on 11 June 2026. The meeting has always been published as a drop-in session between 4 – 6pm.

10. What happens with the consultation responses received by the Trust?

All consultation responses will be considered by the Trust. All consultation responses will also be shared by the Trust with Devon County Council so that the Cabinet of Devon County Council can be informed of stakeholder's views. The report and minutes of Cabinet will be shared with the Trust, the Diocese of Exeter and the Department for Education Region's Group.

11. Is this a done deal, is the school closing?

This is a formal consultation and the closure of a rural academy school must be considered by Devon County Council's Cabinet before a final decision is made by the Secretary of State. It is scheduled to be considered by Devon County Council's Cabinet at their meeting in November 2026.

12. What is the Diocese's role and what is their role in decision making?

As Branscombe is a Church of England School the Diocese (as the religious authority and in its role as site trustees owners) will be required to confirm to the Department for Education if it consents to closure of the school. The Diocese will consider the information provided by the Academy Trust, Devon County Council, consultation responses from the local community and church, and from its own education and property officers in developing its response. The Department for Education is required to consider the Religious Authority and Site Trustee's responses (with any evidence submitted) when making its decision regarding the future of the school.

13. Who owns the school site?

The Diocese of Exeter (Exeter Diocesan Board of Finance Ltd) holds the Freehold of the school site on Trust. The site was originally gifted by members of the local Ford family and was made under provisions in the School Sites Act, which results in a reversion of the site to their dependents (likely to be certain members of the Tucker family) if no longer used as a school.

14. What are the pupil number forecasts for the school? There is a housing development coming forward. Are you taking account of the pupils that may be generated by the houses for sale in Branscombe as a number of second home owners are selling up due to the changes in council tax for second home owners?

DCC review Area Health Authority data and forecasts to analyse future demand for school places from in-catchment area. Account is also taken of allocated housing in the adopted Local Plan and windfall housing consents, as well as parental preference.

Area Health Authority data, which provides the number of 0-4 year olds living in the school's catchment area, show very low numbers of pre-school aged children that are well below the school's published admission number (PAN): please see Table 1. Data shows low parental preference for the school.

Table 1: Area Health Authority, September 2025 - the number of 0-4 year olds living in the school's catchment area.

Reception Cohort	Number of children	PAN
2026/27	2	10
2027/28	2	10
2028/29	3	10
2029/30	6	10

There are no allocated sites for housing development in the adopted Local Plan for Branscombe and its wider catchment area. Ten dwellings have planning consent at Branscombe on land adjacent to The Fountain Head, Berry Hill but a development of this size is only anticipated to generate circa 2.5 primary aged children. It was raised at the consultation information session that there are a number of houses for sale in Branscombe, following a change in Council Tax rules for second home ownership. The 17 family sized homes in Branscombe currently on the market can only be expected to generate circa 4.25 pupils and noting that some of the homes are in excess of £1,000,000.

Even if all known housing developments and properties currently for sale generated families with primary-aged children, the projected increase would remain significantly below the numbers required to secure the long-term sustainability of the school. Forecasts are therefore based on a combination of demographic data, birth rates, housing growth and historic parental preference trends rather than any single factor.

15. Are there sufficient places locally for displaced children?

Capacity at other local schools, including Church of England schools to ensure diversity of provision, as well as the quality of other local schools has been analysed in the event that Branscombe C of E Primary School closes. There are sufficient good quality school places locally for all children on roll at Branscombe C of E Primary School in all year groups. There is also sufficient good quality local provision for all future known pre-school aged children living in the catchment of Branscombe C of E Primary School.

Table 2: Area Health Authority, Pre School Cohorts for neighbouring and schools within the Local Learning Community, September 2025.

Schools	PAN	In area cohorts starting Reception in			
		29/30	28/29	27/28	26/27
Beer CofE	15	4	5	11	6
Seaton	60	41	58	52	62
Sidbury CofE	25	8	11	18	11
Sidmouth C of E	90	39	55	47	44

16. Why have the school turned away potential new admissions to the school?

All enquiries for school places have been offered tours with advice that any applications for a place would need to follow the normal admissions process. No new admissions have been turned away.

17. Why is the implementation date part way through an academic year?

Following strong opposition at the consultation meeting to the proposal to close the school during an academic year should a decision be made to proceed with closure, the proposed implementation date has now been changed to 31 August 2027 recognising that this is in the best interests of pupils and their families.

18. Can the school transfer to another multi academy trust to secure its future?

Discussions have taken place with the Department for Education and other Multi Academy Trusts. Unfortunately the school's viability poses a challenge in securing an alternative academy sponsor.

19. What is the 'golden number' to keep the school open and viable?

There is no single pupil number that determines whether a school is viable. Sustainability depends on a range of factors including pupil numbers across all year groups, staffing requirements, curriculum delivery, availability of leadership capacity, educational outcomes and financial sustainability. While very small schools can and do operate successfully, sustained low numbers can create challenges in providing the breadth of educational opportunities that pupils deserve while also maintaining financial sustainability..

20. Can the consultation be extended to allow more time?

Having carefully considered feedback, it has been agreed to extend the consultation period to 30 September 2026.