

Response ID ANON-2P9K-KXNV-D

Submitted to **Schools national funding formula: changes to the sparsity factor in 2022-23**

Submitted on **2021-04-09 08:52:59**

Introduction

Personal information

1 What is your name?

Name:

Natalie Cole

2 What is your email address?

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3 Are you responding as an individual or on behalf of an organisation?

Organisation

4 What local authority area are you based in? Please select not applicable if you are not responding on behalf of a local authority.

Please select:

Cheshire West and Chester

5 If you are responding on behalf of an organisation that is not a local authority, what is your organisation?

Organisation:

6 What is your role?

Text field:

Finance Manager

7 Would you like us to keep your responses confidential?

No

Reason for confidentiality:

Section 1. Current support for small and small and remote schools in the NFF

Section 2. Increased support for small, remote schools

8 Do you support our aim to allocate sparsity funding to a greater number of small schools in rural areas?

Yes

9 Do you agree to us targeting additional sparsity funding to roughly 900 more schools nationally than at present?

Target a greater number

Section 3. The design of the sparsity factor in 2022-23

10 Do you agree with our plan to measure sparsity distances by the road?

Agree

11 Do you agree with our plan to maintain the same sparsity factor distance thresholds as in 2021-22?

Unsure

12 Do you agree with our proposed increase to the primary and secondary maximum sparsity factor values of £10,000?

Unsure

13 Do you have any further comments regarding the design of the schools NFF sparsity factor from 2022-23?

Text field:

We are generally pleased at the DfEs proposals to support small rural schools. This is a particularly issue in Cheshire West and Chester where we have more than average number of schools in the small rural category yet surprisingly only 5 schools are supported through the current sparsity factor. The proposed changes would see this increase to 17 schools, many of which are facing financial difficulty under the current funding mechanism.

We have 17 more schools that are below the average year group threshold but are not deemed as sparse but face similar challenges to staffing efficient class sizes as sparse schools. This is an issue driven by parental preference for small schools that are not necessarily sparse. Could the DfE review some of those schools to substantiate whether the 2 mile distance was appropriate or whether this factor should be widened to cover more small schools?

In relation to the proposed value, could the DfE substantiate the sparsity factor value of £55k for primary schools and on what basis it considers it a sufficient additional sum for smaller schools? Many small schools are unable to structure class sizes efficiently however the proposed amount would not cover the average cost of teacher and teaching assistant to support those schools. However, the proposed value should also not make those schools financially better off than schools that are slightly larger and do not qualify for sparsity.

In 21-22 we have seen the value of the sparsity factor as one of our small rural schools was facing closure. Due to them becoming eligible for sparsity funding for the first time in 21-22, they have been given an opportunity to progress with options to secure their future viability. However, due to the current mechanism being reviewed annually, schools can be sparse one year and not the next which provides no assurance on the affordability of structures they need to put in place over a longer period. We are therefore very pleased that the proposal includes a measure to protect schools through the funding floor from fluctuations in this funding under the proposal.

Section 4. Measuring sparsity distances by the road

14 Do you have any comments on our methodology to calculate sparsity distances by the road?

Text field:

As a Borough neighbouring Wales, some of bordering schools will be affected by the proposal to exclude pupil postcodes in Wales. The complexity of this calculation would be timely and difficult for an LA to replicate to ensure these schools were appropriately deemed as sparse. Would it be possible for the DfE to analyse such schools individually if a request were made?

Also, in the calculations accompanying the consultation, we have a number of schools with a lower sparsity value than under the current methodology which we would not expect to be the case. Please can the DfE ensure that schools are not disadvantaged by limitations in calculating the sparsity distance.

Under the NFF many small schools face financial difficulty because they attract a higher proportion of SEN pupils and have lower levels of deprivation. The DfEs minimum per pupil factor is distorted for these schools because the inclusion of the lump sum inflates the per pupil amount for these schools. Could the DfE look to amend the MPPFL calculation in order to support small schools, either in addition to or as an alternative to the increase to sparsity? This would enable smaller schools to be funded for their structures where they otherwise have no alternative options to create efficiencies.

15 We welcome any additional comments about our proposals and our equalities impact assessment (Annex D of the main consultation document), including any evidence, examples, or data of possible equalities impacts of the proposals.

Text field: