



# Let our schools carry on transforming lives

## The three island CofE schools scheduled for closure are vital hubs in their communities. We argue that all three should stay open

FOR some of these two, three and four-year-olds, Forest School is one of the few times they play in a green space.

Around half of the pupils at Oakfield C of E Primary School are classed as disadvantaged, and many live in houses or flats without proper gardens in the eastern half of Ryde. For those families, the school is a godsend. Among other things, the beautiful grounds offer children the chance to explore nature and take part in team sports.

And Forest School is just one of the activities offered regularly at the school. Staff also help to feed hungry families, offer a safe space during school holidays, and help children to get free sailing lessons they couldn't otherwise afford. The school has become a vital hub in its local community.

These are just some of the reasons

why staff, pupils and parents were shocked when the Isle of Wight Council announced that Oakfield C of E Primary was one of six schools earmarked for closure, to deal with an island-wide problem of surplus places. Three of the six schools are church schools – the others are Brading C of E Primary and Arreton St George's C of E Primary.

Bishop Jonathan and our diocese's Board of Education are opposing the plans, arguing that all C of E schools offer a distinctively Christian ethos – and that there are specific reasons for all three of these schools to remain open.

The bishop said: "Church of England schools offer something vital and distinctive that could easily be lost. They aren't there to fill our pews or force religion onto people, but to serve their local communities, welcoming those of all faiths and none who come through their doors.

"I wish to resist the proposal to close Arreton, Brading and Oakfield C of E schools. I believe there will be damaging, unintended consequences on the wider economies. There is an unfounded presumption that families possess the finance and mobility to transport children to other schools. This is transparently not the case.

"There is also the disproportionate impact on Church of England schools – three of the six named are C of E. And for two of the schools named, the suggested destination schools are not church schools. I would urge a pause, for significant reconsideration."

Vikki Reader was appointed as headteacher at Oakfield C of E Primary in 2020. She challenged staff to rethink the way they educated children, as it caters for one of the highest areas of poverty on the island. Since then, it has set up a nursery, meaning

## This specialist support is vital

MADDIE Wells wasn't coping at her school. She had been diagnosed with autism, and kept having meltdowns because she couldn't deal with the emotional stress of being in the classroom.

She was on a reduced timetable anyway, but her mum and dad kept having to pick her up early from the headteacher's office. She was struggling with mental health issues.

In May, they decided to switch her to Brading C of E Primary School, which has specialist, small classes for children with special educational needs.

Within two weeks, Steph and Matt Wells could see that staff really understood her. Maddie, who is now aged eight, was placed in a class with others who have physical and sensory needs, where pupils intersperse their learning with physical activities to help them to concentrate.

"They are on Maddie's wavelength," said Steph. "The class sizes are smaller, she has been able to bond with experienced staff, and she is engaging with lessons and learning things. She is happy and wants to go to school, and she's having no meltdowns, which is a major step forward.

"And she is doing full days there. I couldn't remember the last time she'd done five full days in a week at school. She's even come home with three merit certificates, which brought tears to our eyes."

However, two days into this term came the announcement from the Isle of Wight Council that they are considering closing the school. It was devastating for the family, who now worry that Maddie will have to go through a major upheaval.



Above: pupils at work in Brading C of E Primary School; below: Maddie Wells

"It's a great place as the school's ethos revolves around the children," said Steph. "It's so worrying for us when we can see how happy she is now. If the school closes, we'll have to home-school her.

"Given that the council have said that special needs is a big issue on the island, I don't know why they want to close a school that is so good at helping children with special needs."

Families come from across the island to Brading C of E Primary because of its specialist provision. It has a class for those children who are non-verbal, as well as one for those with physical and sensory needs.

More than one in five pupils there need an Education and Health Care Plan. The school has the island's only Thrive practitioner, offering a

trauma-informed, whole-school approach to improve pupils' mental health and wellbeing.

Headteacher Bev Gilbert, who has been there for 21 years, maintains that she has always balanced her school's budgets while also providing additional support in each classroom.

Governors also argue that pupils can't easily transfer to The Bay C of E School as they won't qualify for free transport, and the road is cut off by flooding for 50 days each year.

"Staff here are very professional and care for each child," she said. "A lot of families deliberately choose us because of a whole range of specialist support that we can give. We have significant deprivation issues here, so parents can't just jump in cars to take them to other schools."

Church of England inspectors have also praised the school for its rich curriculum, inspiring worship and the deep sense of trust and respect. They noted one pupil's observation that its Christian vision ensures that 'no one is unseen'.

