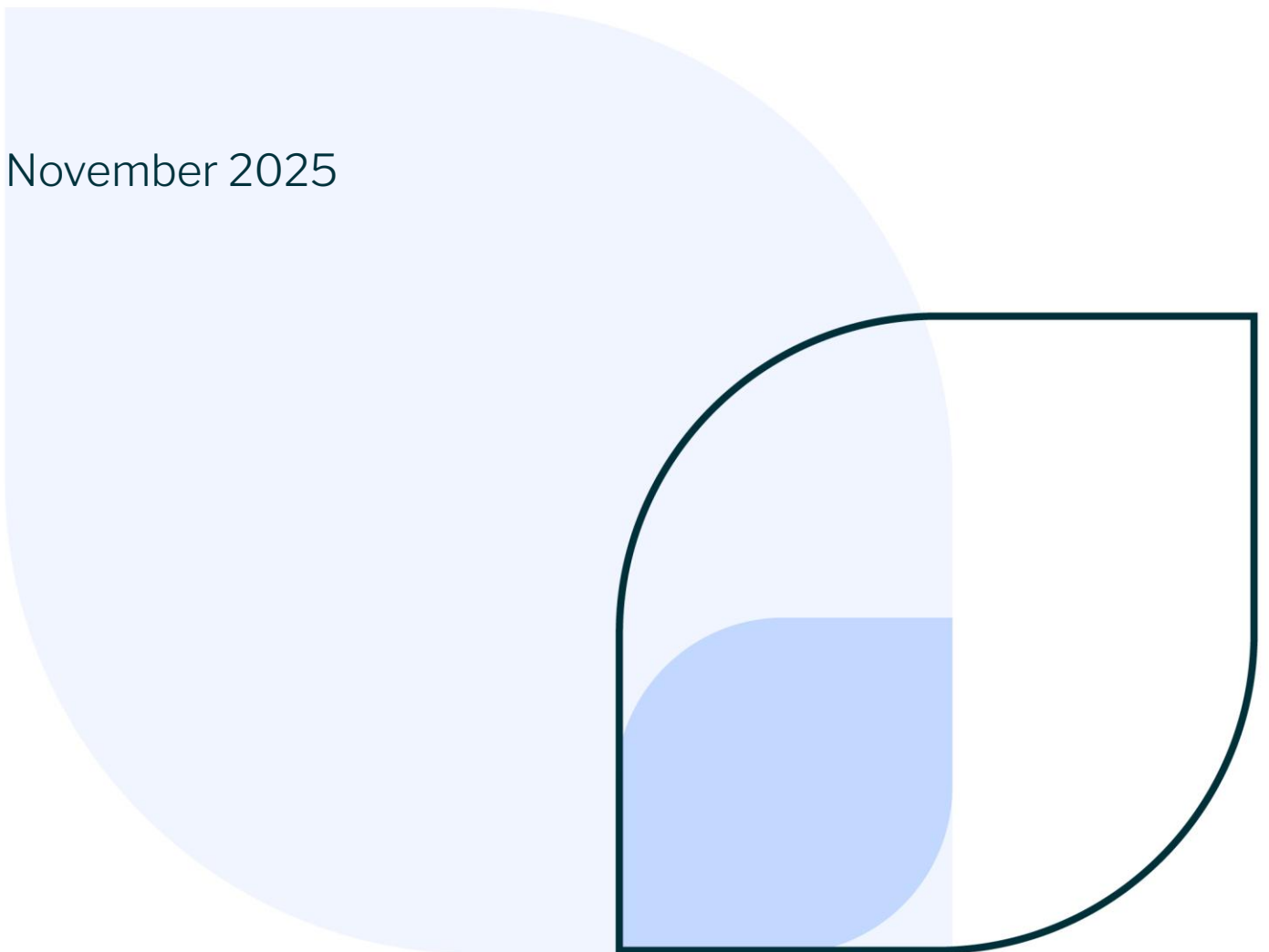


Fully Human: AI and the Flourishing (Small) School of the Future

November 2025





1. Introduction and Context

The Church of England provides approximately two thirds of very small (under 110 pupils) rural schools across the country, and overall provides approximately 2760 schools with less than 210 pupils. The majority of our pupils are in larger urban schools, but the majority of our schools are smaller, often rural schools.

The Church of England (through its rich ecology of DBEs, NSE, MATs, and other working groups) is therefore the key national lead organisation for the flourishing of these schools in which pupils can achieve and thrive. These schools are in a variety of structural arrangements, including school trusts, federations, and in many cases, no formal structures. Evidence suggests that the small schools are less likely to be in a strong trust or group structure than larger schools, with the forthcoming White Paper expected to clarify the government's position on school groupings, with particular implications for those schools not yet in a group.

In order to re-imagine a new future for smaller schools which enables them to thrive we seeking to lead a partnership of key stakeholders to secure and sustain high quality education in small school contexts, through reshaping the nature of that education and embracing AI/technological opportunities in the coming 5-10 years. We believe this vision for partnership is completely aligned with the government's opportunity missions and offers the potential of genuine change without requiring significant shifts in funding methodologies.

Our proposal in this paper is to engage a scoping activity involving a combination of DBE leaders, MAT CEOs (and headteachers within their MATs), NSE staff, and those leading small schools outside of the Trust system, supported by leading expert thinkers, commercial providers and practitioners working in AI. This proposal recognises the significant challenge and opportunity of this area of thinking, and suggests a practical way to gather leading thinkers and practitioners for a 12-month 2026 task-and-finish group, funded by the NSE.

Note: All of the key issues we are seeking to address in this work are clearly applicable to all schools – not just smaller schools. Therefore we imagine everyone involved in this project to be considering the implications for each and every school in their context. However, we are suggesting a key focus on small schools for this work as we are collectively the most likely organisation to address the specific issues facing small schools. The ripples and implications of this work will then very naturally come through DBEs/MATs etc. for their medium and larger sized schools.

2. Small Schools Context

The NSE has held the future of small schools as a central concern for many years – for example our 'Embracing Change' report (2018), and the focus given to the future of smaller schools in 'Our Hope for a Flourishing Schools System' (2023). Despite this focus, our current policy landscape is marked by the significantly high proportion of small schools not yet in a school trust, and the lack of genuinely clear solutions to this problem at a local, regional or national level. Additionally, the exponential and irresistible rise of AI as a key lever for technological, social and educational change has emerged rapidly as a central strategic concern and opportunity.



Demographic modelling (through the reducing birth rate, net migration etc.) over the coming 10-20 years suggests that there will be 300,000 fewer pupils in UK schools by 2030 and rural populations are extremely unlikely to become younger. Therefore, the sustainability of these schools will become more complex in the next generation. Depopulation is predicted to take place more quickly in rural contexts than urban contexts, with obvious challenges for school rolls. There is no obvious methodology for solving this problem through increased per pupil funding, even if there were the political will or fiscal climate to imagine this happening. Equally, small schools generally perform a hugely important role in their communities, frequently standing as the central remaining institution in rural settings. Demographic change in larger urban areas is also having a significant impact on one-form-entry and smaller schools, e.g. in central London.

There are both challenges and opportunities offered by small schools in relation to quality of education. We want to ensure that pupils in these schools receive the highest quality of education, including excellence in teaching, feedback, curriculum and assessment, and that they are led effectively at all levels. We have already created bespoke NPQ adaptations (NPQ Small) for leaders, and are now working with UCL on a small-school specific ECTE programme delivery model. Despite these activities, small school leadership will tend to require those who are very agile/wearing multiple hats (frequently with significant teaching commitments) and therefore sometimes less capacious to think and act strategically in medium/long-term planning.

As the Church of England and Church in Wales provide such a high proportion of these schools, there is no other national body for whom the flourishing of small schools is such a central concern. We are the only organisation (through our collective rich ecology of DBEs, MATs, Federations, NSE and individual schools) which has the collective voice and potential to influence significant change – if we are prepared to be bold at this cultural and technological inflexion point at which we find ourselves.

3. What makes us fully human?

There are significant proportions of the traditional task of running effective schools which will be (and are being) rethought because of the rise of AI and the exponential pace of change, quality and accessibility of the technology. As across every sector, this is leading to efficiency opportunity reviews (reducing administration tasks/time, exploring reduction in staff costs for roles traditionally requiring humans – for example minute taking in a meeting, for which a whole industry of clerks and secretaries may no longer be needed). It is also leading to schools thinking creatively about how to use AI to improve the quality of education (for example enabling far greater personalisation of learning experiences for pupils of varying prior attainment, online tuition of specialist subjects not currently delivered by substantive classroom staff).

Additionally, there are huge ethical and moral concerns which organisations are exploring in relation to online safety and parameters for wisdom in decision making. Recent DfE AI guidance (2025) written together by two of our core NSE partners – Chiltern Academy Trust and Chartered College of Teaching – has enabled school leaders to think wisely about these issues.



Surface level thinking on this subject can quickly become an economic race to the bottom, whereby school leaders are invited to consider potential economic savings, or pedagogical improvements – both of which are hugely positive. At first glance, this can lead to a view that would question even the existence of schools in the future.

This is why instead of asking the question – how should we embrace AI, or how can we use AI more effectively in schools, we are posing a very different question – **what makes us fully human, and assuming the technology continues to accelerate in effectiveness and affordability, what can only humans do?**

Considering such a deep question is completely aligned with our 2016 Vision for Education, and indeed builds strongly on the 2024 Flourishing Together paper and its vision of the Class of 2040, asking what could only happen in the long-term, by taking a long-term view now? The very nature of focusing on flourishing deepens our commitment to the broader, richer, social, moral, ethical, spiritual development of our pupils, and recognises these aspects can never really be done without humans, and outside of genuine community.

However, when we consider these deeper questions, our hypothesis is that the rise of AI could potentially be a game-changer for small (and indeed all) schools (bringing efficiencies and transforming learning experiences) through enabling the humans to focus much more tightly (and with more realistic resource) on what only humans can do. Pastoral care, building communities of belonging, SEND provision, character development, spirituality, growing faith, family connection, and many more aspects of flourishing schools simply may be more effectively supported by technology.

As we consider these two elements – rise of AI, and the challenges of small school sustainability, our wondering is how might we explore a complete paradigm shift in small school education. In this shift, AI would be fully embraced, collaboration within and between schools (at significant scale) would release excellence in pedagogy across all curriculum specialist areas, efficiencies in school leadership/management would be enabled – allowing staff to focus on what only humans can do, and what, we imagine, small schools are better placed to do than any other kind of school.

4. Embracing AI in small schools

The growth of the impact of AI is providing schools the opportunity to begin to think differently about their operational models and classroom practice. Smaller schools may tend to have less capacity for enabling change on their own (particularly those outside of formal structures). Indeed schools within MAT structures may find these changes more achievable through working together within their group. This technological revolution may offer a unique opportunity to:

- **Realise operational and pedagogical efficiencies**, thereby saving costs (at scale) through effective collaboration at regional/national scale



- **Improve quality of education through leveraging at scale subject-specificity**, tailored learning in mixed age settings, teacher expertise and leadership development – re-thinking the very nature of education and its delivery in a new paradigm
- Access high quality AI/digital learning resources which can and will take some of the heavy lifting of teacher workload (in relation to **planning/curriculum delivery/assessment and feedback**)
- Enable **small schools to create capacity for the adults to focus on what ‘only humans can do’** in terms of relationships, support for SEND, and lifting pupils out of poverty (which in rural contexts is sometimes more hidden than urban contexts), spirituality, pastoral care, love/care/individualised interventions
- **Contribute positively to the recruitment and retention of teachers for small schools** – building collaborative cultures in which adults can expect to flourish, enabling children to achieve and thrive.

All of these possibilities could potentially be embraced by individual schools. However, this all seems significantly more likely with larger scale collaborations in leadership and practice – regardless of the school’s formal grouping. This is therefore not a proposal solely for schools in trusts/federations, or for those outside these groupings.

5. ‘Fully Human’ AI and the Flourishing Small School of the Future

We are therefore seeking to bring together a scoping activity involving a quartet of strategic stakeholders to re-imagine the quality of education experience that can be delivered by small schools over the coming years. This quartet would be made up of:

- The **Church of England and Church in Wales** (through a combination of DBE teams, MATs, Federations, NSE staff and small schools not currently within any structures)
- The **DfE** (including policy and school improvement leads – potentially focused on particular areas of lower performance)
- **Big Tech** capacity (our understanding is that all major tech providers – Apple, Google, Microsoft etc – would find significant opportunity in this collaborative work)
- Appropriate **regional strategic stakeholders** in target improvement areas (such as RISE teams, local authorities, existing school trusts etc.)

Through a series of roundtables, research, data analysis, financial modelling etc., this group would scope out a renewed vision for the flourishing of small schools nationally that could include exploration of issues such as:

- **Effective models of collaboration on technological change (including higher scale structural collaborations by school/pupil numbers, not limited to school trusts, with small school specificity at the heart of collaborative vision)**



Example focus – could large informal groups of schools (who are unlikely to be in trusts) collaborate at scale in ways that drew efficiencies and improved quality of education with a small school specificity – e.g. clusters of 50, 100, 150 small schools either in regional areas (or nationally?)

- **Cost saving through effective use of AI/other digital technology at scale across small schools (which could only be done effectively at scale)**

Example focus - Most larger organisations will undertake this work to potentially reduce costs – small schools may be much less likely to do this on their own. However, could a shared approach save operational costs of XX% per school for example, thereby creating headroom for improving quality of education/learning experience?

- **Improvement of quality of education (curriculum, teaching, assessment, marking, feedback, supporting pupils with SEND, other pupil groups etc.) through leveraging effective AI/other digital technology at scale**

Example focus – how could AI radically improve quality of education in a range of ‘under-represented’ subjects within teacher expertise in small schools – e.g. technology, creative arts, science – how might it help with the challenges of mixed-age teaching, and adaptive teaching to enable mainstream flourishing of pupils with SEND? And how might this relate strongly to the recently published CAR and its implications for smaller schools in terms of curriculum breadth and depth?

- **Developing small schools as thriving community hubs around which other services could be built more strategically (but only possible at scale), including but not limited to effective early years provision, social care, health, commerce/small enterprise**

Example focus – as many public sector services are stretched/under threat, how might small schools with maintained buildings be able to become more community hubs, including but not limited to, education?

In depth exploration of how embracing AI could enable humans to focus on ‘what only humans can do’ – including for example spirituality, pastoral care, relationship building, community engagement, personalised support and intervention with the most vulnerable

Example focus – what are the key elements of education that only humans can do (when considering for example models of multiple intelligence etc.) and how might the Church of England be particularly well placed to lead in this area, including partnership/exchange with our faith-based providers such as Catholic Education Service? What might be learnt internationally through conversations with other faith-based Christian education providers around the world?

- **Partnership at scale with big tech organisations who would provide technological expertise and solutions specifically to reduce cost and drive quality in small schools**

Example focus – which big tech firms may engage in this to enact CSR strategies, and how could they add capacity to tech development in terms of infrastructure, training, software/AI tools etc. (again only really possible at scale)



- Regional variation of provision – whereby rural/small schools/resourcing/school improvement is quite different in rural Cornwall versus Cumbria etc, and school improvement mechanisms are very different in terms of school trust reach/capacity

Example focus – work with a small group of RDs to look at the specific school improvement needs of small schools in contrasting rural areas of the country, and how this could help bring tailored solutions that could be brokered more efficiently at scale

This is simply a starting point for the working group's consideration, which would need to fully embrace the views and perspectives of a wide range of different stakeholders. The NSE will fund the initial 12-month work of this group across 2026, supporting the costs of:

- NSE team capacity to lead this work at a senior level/project management work
- Secondments/consultancies from key stakeholders – Dioceses, MATs, individual schools etc.
- Consultancy from leading AI thinkers and practitioners
- Hosting of roundtables, conferences and events to lead to policy exploration and enactment.

This working party would have the following broad timeline:

October 2025	Approval of proposal/funding at NS Council
November 2025	Sharing with DDEs (4 November AADE/NSE development day), approaching key stakeholders
December 2025	Expressions of interest in working group/convening of balanced stakeholder group and confirming individual capacity for 2026
February 2025	Hosting initial gathering of 'Fully Human' Working Group – 24 hours residential
March 2026	Wider launch of work at the March FTN residential – 'Fully Human?' (19-20 March)
April to Aug 2026	Development and scoping work ahead of publication of interim findings
September 2026	'Small Schools and AI Summit' – launching formal development work in key regions, and commissioning of 'Flourishing Small School of the Future' Report
January 2027	Launch of Report/Potential Focus of 2027 National Conference

At this stage, we would welcome expressions of interest from DBEs, MATs, individual school experts to join this group, which **should be submitted to Andy Wolfe by 5 December 2025** for collation – please email Andy at andy.wolfe@churchofengland.org to express your interest and capacity for 2026. We might imagine each group member being able to give 10-15 days to this work (which will be funded by the NSE). From there, we would be in a position to finalise the membership of this group, and invite to the first gathering in February 2025.