

Second homes blamed for empty schools

MORE than a dozen primary schools in a picturesque area of Dorset are threatened with closure because owners of second homes have priced local families out of the market.

All 14 first schools on the Isle of Purbeck are under-subscribed and some are less than half full. The decline is being blamed on demand for holiday and retirement homes which has helped to push the price of the average starter home in the Purbecks to about £200,000.

Dorset County Council is preparing a review of every school in the Purbecks, which could lead to some schools closing or merging or being “downsized”.

Phil Farmer, education officer for the authority, said: “The problem is a demographic one. In Dorset we are currently experiencing the lowest birth-rate recorded but in the Purbecks the problems are more acute because of the house prices and population drifts. Young families who have probably lived in the area all their lives just can’t afford to buy or rent property and end up moving to towns like Poole and Bournemouth.

“A few years ago we started to notice more and more people who live elsewhere in the country buying holiday and second homes in the area. As a result the cost of property has risen and now the schools in the area are starting to feel the effects of that change.”

Estelle Smith, head of the West Lulworth First School, said: “The cost of housing in this area has a major impact on the number of young families here. The prices in this area are just too high. A lot of them are second homes that stand empty for most of the year and it is the schools that are now suffering.”

Oliver Miles, a local estate agent, said that 66 per cent of his clients were looking for a holiday home. He had very few young families on his books. “A lot of the jobs in the Purbecks are seasonal and young couples just cannot afford to buy a house,”.