

Small Schools Task and Finish Group

4 December 2019 – At a meeting of the Small Schools Task and Finish Group held at 2.00 pm at County Hall North, Horsham.

Present:

Ms Flynn, Mrs Hall, Mr Hillier, Ms Lord, Mrs Roberts and Ms Sudan

Also in attendance: Mr Jupp and Mr Fitzjohn

1. Declarations of Interest

1.1 The following personal interests were declared: -

- Mr Woodman as: -
 - Chair of the West Sussex Secondary Heads
 - Vice Chair of the West Sussex Schools' Forum

- Mr Ryder as: -
 - Chair of governors at Rogate Church of England Primary School
 - Chair of governors at Rake Church of England Primary School
 - Former governor at Stedham Primary School
 - Member of Trotton Parish Council
 - Chair of a Community Land Trust covering Stedham, Trotton and Rogate
 - Member of the West Sussex Schools' Forum

2. Notes of the previous meeting

2.1 Resolved – that the minutes of the meeting held on 24 October be agreed.

3. Consultation Process

3.1 The Group received a presentation by James Richardson, Programme Manager (copy appended to the signed minutes) showing the results of the consultation. He also reported that the Council had received petitions regarding Clapham & Patching Church of England Primary School and Rumboldswyke Church of England Infant School. Consultation headlines included: -

- 1069 responses
- Clapham and Patching 45% for no change, 21% for academisation
- Compton and Up Marden 87% for no change
- Rumboldswyke 90% for academisation
- Stedham 77% for no change
- Warninglid 42% for relocation, 23% for no change, 22% for closure

3.2 Summary of responses to Members questions and comments: -

- 'Other' respondents were people from the wider community, people from outside the area or those who chose not to be identified

- Allowance was made for multiple responses from families sharing an email address
- All information from the consultation and petitions would be available to the Cabinet Member for Education & Skills

3.3 Resolved – that the Task & Finish Group notes the presentation.

4. Stakeholder Representations

4.1 The Task & Finish group considered the following stakeholder representations: -

4.2 Peter Woodman, Headteacher, The Weald School and Sixth Form College, Billingshurst: -

- The secondary heads appreciated the strategic, systematic approach even if it resulted in tough decisions
- A lot of small schools were under great pressure and were being subsidised by others
- One of the smallest schools in the Weald catchment area had students who were largely out of its own catchment area. If it relied on catchment students alone, it would have very few students.

4.3 Kevin Jenkins, Chair of Interim Executive Board (IEB), Rumboldswyke Church of England Infant School, Chichester: -

- The IEB position was to remain neutral to help the school deliver good education and keep stakeholders well informed
- The IEB asks that Rumboldswyke be treated differently to other schools due to its OFSTED report and wants a clear decision so that the school can plan for the future

4.4 Trevor Cristin, Director of Education, Diocese of Chichester: -

- The process required good communication and an active dialog so that even if parties disagree a constructive way forward could be reached – the diocese and local authority were developing such a dialog
- Initially, communications were not clear about how the process would be carried out and it was challenging for both schools and the Board of Education
- Information from the local authority was controversial with some facts challenged and an opportunity for better cooperation was missed
- The Board of Education had a statutory duty to respond to the local authority's proposals and wanted to be actively involved going forward, in a challenging time for some schools
- Some schools were reluctant to address the challenge in this process, but some school leaders had shown creative determination

4.5 Neil Ryder, West Sussex Governors Association (WSGA): -

- The WSGA Working Group had attended all but one meeting of the schools affected as well as meeting governors and some of the local councillors
- Governors felt they were not being taken seriously enough

- The future of small schools should be judged over the long-term taking a much more strategic view
- Proposals to double the size of Easebourne school had been rebuffed due to lack of information and prior consultation with schools and the increase did not happen
- In 2016 Rogate school was put into special measures – the option of becoming an academy was raised but was not possible, the school therefore formed a partnership with Rake school with the intention of forming a federation. This had persuaded the DfE regional school commissioner to rescind the academy order – so other options can be opened up despite inadequate OFSTED judgements
- Decisions on schools shouldn't be rushed
- Not enough progress has been made on the School's Strategy due to lack of support for governors
- Many parents were upset at the thought that their children's schools might close because they had deliberately selected small schools
- Many children in small schools were vulnerable, and would probably need education, health & care plans if they were sent to larger schools
- We should not close off the option of small schools if parental choice is to remain a core requirement of both local and central government

4.6 Mr Fitzjohn, County Councillor for Chichester South: -

- OFSTED was not happy with the Interim Executive Board (IEB) at Rumboldswyke School
- Admissions at Rumboldswyke had reduced as it was a feeder school for Central School which had been in special measures for some years

4.7 Summary of responses to Members questions and comments: -

- The situation at Central School had had an influence on Rumboldswyke, but Rumboldswyke itself had been judged as 'Requires Improvement' in 2017 and as 'Inadequate' in 2019
- The monitoring letter from OFSTED in relation to Rumboldswyke acknowledged that the IEB was new and said it was performing well
- Parents did not always understand the difference between the Board of Governors and the IEB
- Funding for schools was a Government responsibility with the Schools' Forum deciding how it managed the flexibility it was allowed when allocating funds – this flexibility might reduce when the National Funding Formula is introduced
- The Schools Forum had discussed the impact of funding for small schools and had to make difficult choices about how to support each one
- The amount of funding schools received was only increasing to the level it was at five or six years ago and disproportionately disadvantaged small schools
- A lot of questions in the consultation were inappropriate for the audience and governors and head teachers should be more involved in strategic discussions. There was a lack of context e.g. high numbers of pupils from out of the local area could be good or bad – we need to know why parents have selected the schools

- The Rother Valley Group of headteachers and governors had agreed to examine information on school organisation in their area next year and make suggestions on the way forward
- The WSGA had discussed training on setting-up federations with the local authority and understood that work was happening to produce modules to help governors understand the process
- There had been work with some groups of schools regarding federations for two years – training and support regarding federations needed tightening – a seminar had been held with the WSGA and there would be a conference on federation next term
- Consultation questions were not necessarily inappropriate as they had been posed to a wide range of people with informed views
- The local authority's Governor Services Team and the National Governors Association have provided advice on many subjects, including federation – the WSGA had access to this advice
- The Schools Effectiveness Strategy considered the future of small schools and began tackling issues
- Timing of the process was an issue as December is near the time when applications for primary school places have to be submitted and confidence in schools affected could be undermined and rolls drop dramatically - schools need a decision so that they can plan for the future
- Meetings had been held to try to get the views of local communities including a workshop in October 2018 for many Rother Valley schools about the flow of pupils. Governing bodies were best placed to test what local communities wanted
- The process had started prior to June 2019 and had improved as it progressed
- The timing of the announcement of going to consultation and the releasing of information to communities had put pressure on schools who found it difficult to manage, and panic in communities leading to challenges on admission numbers as people thought schools might close
- Discussions had taken place with Chairs of governing bodies and head teachers a long time before the consultation was launched but were kept confidential to avoid rumours
- Consultations followed statutory guidelines and ran in parallel with the school year and the Council's processes
- Long consultations increased the risks of parents losing confidence
- Local Members wanted the names of the schools affected to be released as they feared that if not, everyone would think their school was included
- People thought the consultation was on closure of schools when it was on a range of possible options – in future attempts would be made to better explain the purpose of a particular consultation
- If a recommendation was made to close a school it would trigger a statutory consultation on the closure
- 14 January was the deadline for people to submit their choices for school admissions and could include schools that were part of the consultation in their three preferences
- Future phases should focus on clear geographical areas

5. Admissions

5.1 Ellie Evans, Head of Pupil Entitlement told the Group: -

- The schools admission round was open till mid January
- Parents could state preferences for three schools (one of which should be their local school)
- No accurate information was available as to the effect of the consultation as there were still 3,000 outstanding applications

5.2 Summary of responses to Members questions and comments: -

- Admissions to the five schools involved in the consultation had been volatile in recent years – **ACTION:** Ellie Evans to provide information on school admissions for the five affected schools this year compared to the past two or three years
- The 'Inadequate' OFSTED rating had influenced admissions to Rumboldswyke – a monitoring visit had taken place resulting in a letter from OFSTED saying that an appropriate action plan and support had been put in place to deal with safeguarding issues

6. Recommendations

6.1 Resolved – the Task & Finish Group recommends that: -

- i. There is improved communication between the County Council and named schools in future consultations, including early conversations
- ii. Training on school viability should be provided to school governors, as well as risk management, in order to ensure that governors have a good level of support
- iii. Any potential future consultations concerning schools include a clear context set as part of the consultation papers
- iv. The quality of data provided as part of any consultation process is thoroughly checked with any schools concerned to ensure accuracy, and that any data produced is received and understood by the schools
- v. The timeline for any future consultations is carefully considered alongside school holidays and other timelines, such as admissions, that affect schools
- vi. Future consultations are considered in a more strategic and geographical area context
- vii. That County Councillors are encouraged to have regular contact with the schools within their divisions

The meeting ended at 3.44 pm

Chairman