

<b>Cabinet Member for Education and Skills (and Deputy Leader)</b>	<b>Ref No: ES04 (19/20)</b>
<b>October 2019</b>	<b>Key Decision: No</b>
<b>Response to Dr O'Kelly's Notice of Motion to County Council on 19 July 2019 on Small Schools Federation</b>	<b>Part I</b>
<b>Report by Director of Law and Assurance</b>	<b>Electoral Divisions: All</b>

1. The Chairman of the County Council referred the Notice of Motion on small schools federation, submitted to the County Council on 1 July 2019, to the Cabinet Member for Education and Skills for consideration. The Cabinet Member met Dr O'Kelly on 11 September 2019 to discuss the Motion.
2. The aim of the Motion is to ask the Cabinet Member to provide more comprehensive advice and support to small schools about the federation process; full details of the Motion are set out in the Appendix.
3. The West Sussex County Council [School Effectiveness Strategy 2018-22](#) describes the need for a diverse supply of strong schools across the county. It sets out the objectives for school organisation and the criteria against which schools should be assessed in order to meet these objectives. Implementation of the Strategy will help ensure that in West Sussex:  
*"Primary schools will be of a sufficient size to be viable in the future, offer a high quality and broad curriculum, attract pupils from the local community and provide strong outcomes for children".*
4. The Strategy highlights that where schools are identified as being at risk, in terms of their viability to provide an effective and financially sustainable educational provision, options for change need to be considered. These options could include:-
  - amalgamating or merging two or more schools to become an all-through primary school
  - expanding the age range of a group of schools so each becomes an all-through primary school
  - federating two or more schools
  - finally, consulting on closing a school
5. The Strategy also recognises that due to the diverse nature of schools within West Sussex the Governing Body of the school will have the most comprehensive knowledge of the school and how it operates. Therefore they are best placed to lead on considering what option for change would work for their school. The benefits of federation are described in the Strategy along with the commitment that the County Council will support and challenge Governors who wish to move towards federation or any of the other options for change.

6. Over the last year the County Council has been engaging with Governing Bodies and Headteachers about the need for change. In October 2018, an engagement event with Heads and Chairs of Governors of schools across the Rother Valley and Chichester area took place where concerns were shared about declining pupil numbers at a number of small, rural schools. Attendees at these events were encouraged to have conversations about potential federation opportunities. Some Governing Bodies had successfully explored this, whilst others were unable to find suitable partnering schools and regrettably others chose not to take action in this regard. The County Council has also been proactive in improving understanding of federation and other options for change by responding to Governing Bodies' requests to discuss federation, producing draft guidance for school Governing Bodies on federation and the process involved in getting there. Particular visits have taken place to a number of schools to discuss potential future options for schools and to explore broader consultation. Such visits and discussions have also involved the Church of England Diocese where relevant. The Local Authority is planning a conference to take place in the spring of 2020 focused on federations with case studies, workshops and opportunities for Governors and Headteachers to network with colleagues from similar schools and to have many of their questions explored.
7. When the Local Authority is approached by schools exploring federation this is followed up with meetings with Governors if requested to outline the process and also to clarify questions and answers. Draft guidance is made available and also 'federation' generic job descriptions and associated paperwork where requested. Suggestions are made as to schools that the Governing Bodies may wish to contact. However, the responsibility for making such contact remains with Governors. Where the Local Authority has significant concerns relating to school performance and governance, through the Schools Causing Concern protocol, it can intervene to require Governing Bodies to enter into a partnership which may include federation. However, such intervention would only be used in exceptional circumstances. Schools can seek additional School Effectiveness visits through the Local Authority's traded offer to obtain support around federation if required.
8. In relation to the fourth requested resolution in the Motion, due to specific circumstances relating to five schools the Cabinet Member took a decision (reference ES02(19/20)) on 25 September to approve the commencement of a consultation in relation to proposals for change at these five schools. Further information about these specific circumstances and [details of the decision](#) can be found on the County Council website.
9. The Cabinet Member has considered the Notice of Motion. Taking into account the support already provided to small schools and the offer available to purchase further officer support where required, the Cabinet Member is minded to propose an amendment to the Motion at the County Council meeting on 18 October 2019.

**Tony Kershaw**

Director of Law and Assurance

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**Appendices**

Appendix – Notice of Motion

**Background Papers:** None

**County Council 19 July 2019**

**Notice of Motion from Dr O’Kelly**

**Small Schools Federations**

The current financial climate for small schools continues to be challenging. The government strategy for small schools is to aim to keep them open and includes exploring federation before considering closure. This Council itself recognises the need for small schools to consider federation in its School Effectiveness Strategy 2018-22. Closure of a small school can be devastating for children, families and the rural communities they are in and the School Effectiveness Strategy recognises this as only a final option.

The process of federation relies on school governors, who are volunteers, often with full time jobs and other commitments, and who do not always have the time and skill sets needed, to explore and develop the federation options fully themselves. Although the School Effectiveness Strategy outlines that the Council will support and challenge governing bodies who have considered the options, there is no formal process for assisting governing bodies in assessing the options open to them and developing possible federation agreements in the first place.

This Council believes that:

- 1) Small schools are at the heart of our smaller communities.
- 2) The federation process is not always straightforward and without significant input from this Council from the earliest stages of the process, governing bodies cannot easily explore federation on their own
- 3) A more proactive approach to federation is more likely to keep our small schools open and viable and at the heart of our rural communities.
- 4) Consulting on the possible closure of a school should only be considered where all other options have been exhausted

This Council resolves to ask the Cabinet Member for Education and Skills to:

- 1) Share knowledge about federation and how it can be achieved with all small schools including sharing best practice guidance from other local authorities
- 2) Provide officer support to governing bodies to consider federation including providing support to find possible partners and facilitate discussions

- 3) Provide practical tools and officer support during the partnership phase in helping to make all the transitional arrangements
- 4) Not consult with the public as to the future of any school in West Sussex without having gone through such a process with schools