

## **Children & Young People's Services Select Committee: Task and Finish Group to Review Small Schools**

18 September 2019 – At a meeting of the Group held at 12.00pm at County Hall, Chichester.

**Members present:** Mr Jupp (Chairman)

Mrs Flynn  
Mrs Hall  
Ms Lord  
Ms Sudan

**Apologies for absence:** Maria Roberts (Parent Governor Representative).

### **Officers present:**

Rachel Allan – Senior Advisor Democratic Services  
Natalie Jones-Punch – Assistant Democratic Services Officer  
Tony Kershaw – Director of Law and Assurance  
Graham Olway – Head of School Organisation and Transport Group  
James Richardson – Programme Manager  
Paul Wagstaff – Director of Education and Skills

### **Election of Chairman:**

Mr Jupp was elected as Chairman.

### **Declarations of Interest:**

Ms Sudan declared an interest as her husband is Chair of Governors at Langley Green Primary School.

Mrs Flynn declared an interest as Ingfield Manor School Governing Body.

### **Terms of Reference**

- Members noted the Terms of Reference and the agreement at the Children and Young People's Services Select Committee (CYPSSC) that the membership comprise six members of the committee, including two minority party members and one co-opted member.

### **Notes**

- Members noted both their own concerns and those received from parents, schools and governors regarding the information contained in the draft decision report, including the level of engagement preceding the consultation proposal.

- Although there was acknowledgement the report was very detailed, there were questions as to whom the consultation would be targeted and the factual reliability of some of the content and data.
- Members asked if WSCC owned the school buildings and if there would be financial gain arising from any decision to close. Officers advised that land ownership details had been provided in the maps in an attempt to be transparent.
- Members requested clarification on the relevance of the ambition in the School Effectiveness Strategy (SES) that all pupils in West Sussex were in Good or Outstanding Ofsted rated schools and, considered that 2 of the schools identified were rated Good. The Director of Education and Skills advised a change to the Ofsted inspection framework was imminent, giving West Sussex greater ownership on what they deem to qualify a Good or Outstanding school.
- Members of the TFG sought clarification on the figures of children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND), and whether this included a mix of those with an Education and Health Care Plan (EHCP) and those identified within a school setting as requiring additional support or needs.
- The Director of Education and Skills advised the figures represented those formally recognised as holding an EHCP. He explained the criteria in the identification of additional needs significantly varied across schools.
- Officers advised members that efforts were made to be as transparent as possible, providing all collated information available at the time, with a caveat that pupil detail varied on a day to day basis. The Director of Education and Skills added that the number of pupils on role was taken from January census.
- The Chairman noted an appreciation for the dynamic nature of data and suggested source dates were included on the information sheets. Officers noted source dates were indicated in the report, however agreed a further effort could be made to uphold transparency with regards to the variability of data.
- The Head of School Organisation advised the TFG that conversations had taken place with governing bodies and teachers for a period of around one year. On 9 October 2018, an engagement event with Heads and Chairs of Governors 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 chose not to take action in this regard.
- The Head of School Organisation explained that the service was able to evidence that conversations with the schools involved had happened. The Director of Education and Skills advised there had been a mixed level of engagement from the five schools identified in the draft decision report.
- Members expressed concern that there may have been a disconnect between this engagement event in the context of the SES and the subsequent small schools assessment, and cited a potential lack of communication in terms of the thread between the SES and small schools. The Director of Education advised West Sussex Governor's Association undertook a survey of the five schools concerned to get a sense of the engagement, and that he undertook a number of visits to the schools to discuss future viability and organisation.

- Members noted that engagement had taken place, but suggested it was perhaps neither meaningful or supportive enough in terms of the conversations about possible federation. The Director of Education and Skills cited some unsuccessful and refused attempts to engage with schools and Chairs of Governors which had made the engagement process difficult in some circumstances.
- The Head of School Organisation advised federation guidance was provided to those governing bodies who requested it. He advised there appeared to be an expectation on the schools behalf that WSCC would take forward any federation or merger arrangements. The Director of Education and Skills advised Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education were clear that the management and administration of any federation was not the responsibility of the local authority.
- The Director of Education advised that effective networks did exist between some schools, and that there were no specific proposals to do anything to a particular school at the current time. This was not an exercise in consulting for closure.
- Members accepted this was not a firm proposal to close schools and considered how things would progress after the consultation.
- The TFG were advised that timing was crucial. There was a desire for a decision to be known as soon as possible to give families some certainty. Members were advised that due process would be given and that the timescales were based on guidance from the DfE.
- The Director of Education and Skills advised the consultation period would be completed by 22 November 2019. Stage 2 would involve the publication of proposals. Members of the TFG heard that if proposals emerge to close, relocate or merge one or more of the schools, there would be a requirement to undertake a formal statutory consultation process. The TFG recognised this as an important part of the process.
- Members were concerned about prospective pupils and parents of the five schools being discouraged because of this process. The TFG were advised the admissions booklet would indicate if a school was part of, or subject to statutory consultation. Parents were always encouraged to provide three school preferences; should a decision be taken to close a school that parents had applied to, the admissions team would consider their second and third preferences and other possible arrangements. Members were reassured that WSCC had a duty to ensure a school place for a child and any decision to make a fundamental change would not leave a child without a place.
- The Director of Education advised some of the schools concerned were being financially supported with protected funding on top of the normal local authority funding contribution. He added that small schools attracted different views of parents, being popular with some but not with others. Members heard that nearly 80% of children who lived in the catchment area for Stedham did not attend that school, and for Warninglid this was 94%.
- The Chairman considered why these 5 schools had been selected. The Director of Education and Skills cited the following reasons:
  - Rumboldswyke had received an inadequate Ofsted rating leaving it with the option to either close or academise.

Academisation was not a viable option for Rumboldswyke as it was too small.

- Each of the other schools were significantly below capacity and the number of pupils on role was likely to decline further.
  - In rural areas there was limited opportunity for the population to grow in terms of accessibility to housing, age-profiles, few children, and families moving elsewhere.
  - Most of the schools identified relied heavily on children from outside of the area to populate the school.
  - Surplus capacity in other local schools.
  - 2 of the schools considered had no full-time head.
  - 2 of the schools considered had a Requires Improvement Ofsted rating and were not making adequate progress at an appropriate pace.
  - Funding for schools was dependent upon the number of children on role, as the numbers decline, the costs become greater which was an unsustainable model.
  - There were concerns at some of the schools identified about the quality of education being delivered. If they continued into a financial deficit, poor academic results were a likely outcome. In one school, expected levels of attainment were not being met, and no children were achieving above the expected level.
  - Intensive intervention by WSCC had taken place in three of the schools outlined.
- The Chairman considered if the consultation would confirm these assertions, and how forward-looking viability had been considered. Officers advised projections had been made to 2022 using a standard practice model and hoped that the consultation period would deliver a broader view and understanding of the viability of these schools.
  - Members considered that should such an exercise be repeated in the future, it was important that learning was taken from this experience. The following points were considered as ways to improve the approach, which concurred with comments provided in public representations:
    - Provide greater context regarding any high-level review, for example background information that led to the consideration of twenty-five schools being reduced to five.
    - There was a general feeling that the information in the impact assessments for the schools represented generic detail that could be applicable to any school. Future decisions of this nature should provide detailed and specific assessments of the individual schools.
    - In some cases, there was a sense that some of the information demonstrated factual inaccuracies which put the reader in doubt. Members reiterated the requirement that the content be trustworthy and correct for effective and transparent decision making.
    - Clearer information and contextual landscapes would provide a platform for more effective and informed scrutiny.
    - Alongside options of federation, merger, relocation and closure, consideration of a 'do nothing' approach should be

incorporated. This would enable an understanding of the implications of a 'do nothing' option, highlighting in a realistic way the potential outcomes, including financial positions.

- Officers advised the TFG that factual inaccuracies would be corrected and stressed a mutual desire that members and the public have confidence in the information provided.

### **Recommendations**

- The TFG recommend to the Cabinet Member for Education and Skills that the consultation process includes a 'do nothing' option.
- The TFG recommend that the Cabinet Member for Education and Skills reflects upon and considers all representations received before any decision is taken and considers all options carefully so that TFG are assured that the Cabinet Member is fully informed.

### **Dates of future meetings**

The next meeting of the Small Schools TFG will be confirmed once arranged.

The meeting ended at 14.02pm