

Report on the Federation Consultation by Cople and Willington Lower Schools

Executive Summary

Following the consultation on the proposal to federate Cople and Willington Lower Schools, the Governing Bodies of both Schools have voted to proceed with the planned Federation that will take effect from 1st April 2016. As part of this process, both Governing Bodies discussed, at length, the feedback that they received. Written responses to all comments, questions and concerns are provided in this document. In regard to the specific question as to whether both schools should enter into a Federation, the overwhelming feedback was positive and supported the aspirations of both schools to leverage their respective resources and capabilities for the benefit of all children across both villages.

Many of the points raised throughout the feedback related to a potential merger of both schools and are therefore beyond the scope of this consultation. However, both schools feel that it is important to establish a dialogue with both village communities as the new Federated Governing Body plans for the future. The schools are particularly mindful of the concerns raised by a number of stakeholders as to the need for children and their parents or carers to move between schools in a manner that is both safe and convenient. The safety of our children is and will remain a top priority for both schools. The schools will raise these points with Bedford Borough Council as they seek to identify a satisfactory solution.

The final decision on merger will not be made until after another Consultation has taken place. At this time, a definitive plan will be presented by both schools and all stakeholders will be invited to provide their views.

Context

Cople and Willington Lower schools are within the administrative area of Bedford Borough Council, which is a unitary authority. Both schools are community schools. Each school serves the 4 – 9 year age range and has a Published Admission Number of 15. They are rural schools serving the villages of Cople and Willington respectively.

In July 2015 Bedford Borough invited all schools to consider reviewing their age range with a view to having a single transfer point at age 11, rather than the current 3 tier system which has 2 transition points. For lower schools this would mean extending their age range by 2 years to cater for years 5 and 6 who would then transfer to a secondary school for year 7. Following this invitation, the governing bodies of the two schools looked at how this could be delivered and decided that this was best achieved by the two schools working closely together to deliver high quality primary education in the area. There would be three steps to this:

1. Each school would consult on extending its age range

2. Each school would consult on Federation
3. If 1 and 2 went ahead, the federated governing body would look very closely at the two schools merging and that step would be subject to further consultation in line with the relevant statutory process.

Federation

The consultation with stakeholders proposes that Cople and Willington Lower schools will federate under a single governing body from 1 April 2016.

The constitution of the Federated Governing Body would be:

- Each headteacher would be able to be a governor
- 2 parent governors
- 2 staff governors
- 1 LA Governor
- 8 co-opted Governors

Objectives for Federation are:

- A unified governing body, accountable to both communities, will be dedicated to ensuring access to high quality education with sustainable schools for both villages.
- Under a federation, there will be more opportunities to share experience and expertise of staff, resources and facilities to further improve educational standards.
- There is potential for children to be taught in single aged classes in the future, allowing a greater focus on the age related expectations of the National Curriculum.
- It will be possible to appoint one Executive Headteacher to give the professional leadership to create a merged school with a seamless transition from the two existing schools.
- There will be opportunities to work collaboratively on developing a high quality curriculum for upper Key Stage 2 and broader curriculum and extra-curricular opportunities for all the children.
- Staff will be able to share training and development opportunities.
- We can look at ways as to how we can better use each site to the best advantage of our pupils, with each one being developed to meet their needs.
- Collaboration would help recruit and retain good staff by offering more opportunities for training and professional development.
- Shared expertise would enable staff to support each other and tackle challenges together.

The Consultation ran from 9 November to 18 December 2015. The consultation report is in Section 2. The consultation document, originally sent to parents and interested parties, is enclosed at Appendix 1.

Who did we inform?

We informed and invited comments from a wide range of stakeholders and the wider community through a number of approaches. The major consultees were:

- Bedford Borough Council
- Parents of every registered pupil at the schools
- Parents of potential pupils in our catchment areas and in Early Years provision
- Staff who work at the schools
- Both Parish Council
- Our local communities
- All other schools within Bedford Borough
- The Department for Education
- Anyone else who has an interest in the proposal

A public meeting was held for parents and stakeholders: **17 November 2015**

A staff meeting for all staff was also held at both schools on **1st December 2015 at Cople and 4th November 2015 at Willington.**

A meeting between representatives of Willington Parish Council and the Headteacher and Chair of Governors at Willington Lower School was held on **30th November 2015**

An electronic version of the consultation was placed for all stakeholders and interested parties on the school websites and village community websites and hard copies were made available at the schools and in other locations.

Consultation Response

The consultation with stakeholders regarding federation asked the following:

PROPOSAL TO ENTER INTO A FEDERATION WITH COPLE LOWER SCHOOL

Please record your point of view and reasons for it in the space below. We understand that there will be many questions that parents and stakeholders need answering before a considered response can be made. We therefore urge you to attend the consultation meeting to raise your questions before making a response. Questions raised at the meeting and responses given by the governing body will be circulated after the meeting for those unable to attend.

Both schools invited stakeholders to submit questions in advance of the consultation meetings held on 17 November. A copy of those questions and those raised at the meetings themselves as well as the answers is attached.

Many of the responses to the 'Federation' question relate more to the implications of the two schools merging into one school than federating. In a federation, where the two schools would remain separate but would have one Governing Body setting the strategic direction for both schools. It is currently envisaged that were the schools to merge into one, provision for reception and key stage 1 would be at Willington (years R to 2) and Key stage 2 would be at Cople (years 3 -6)

Responses from Cople Stakeholders

In addition to the questions shown in the annex to this report, 11 written responses to the Federation proposal were received. As mentioned earlier, when asked to comment on federation, most respondents commented on a merger.

Comments were as follows:

- How are you going to accommodate the children getting between the two sites? Are you planning on getting buses for those children that live in Willington but whose parents cannot collect/take their children because it is a long way to walk from say Cople (which would be more likely to walk home eg years 5 and 6) to Willington
The governing body and other stakeholders will continue to liaise with the Local Authority to provide safer routes between the two sites. A minibus may be a consideration to help with transport.
- Concern that Cople Lower School could be affected adversely if federated and Willington not fully subscribed.
We believe that working together will strengthen both schools.
- If federation takes place and schools become separate infant and juniors the following would need to be addressed:
 1. Shuttle bus – impossible for parents to drop off schoolchildren if have a child in both schools. Possible implication of traffic chaos as already not ideal at drop off/pick up times
As previously stated, a minibus would be considered to provide shuttle transportation between the two sites. Staggered start and finish times would also be a likely solution.
 2. Moving from infant to junior school on a separate site in many ways still a 3 tier system would this impact on them settling into junior school
This would only happen under a merger, when the schools would become one, with a clear ethos and consistent practices across the two sites. There would be activities involving the whole school and the likelihood of some staff working across both sites, providing lots of opportunities for a smooth transition.

3. Younger children in a lower school look up to the older children as 'role models' – would this be lost if infant /junior settings are separated?
Opportunities would be exploited for buddy systems, sports leaders and other development of school citizenship, so that the older children were regularly involved with the younger ones. In addition, the oldest children on an infant site would have greater opportunities for leadership and responsibility.
 4. A staggered pick up/drop off time would be in place for parents with children at both sites (this is raised by one other respondent)
This would certainly be considered.
 5. Would TAs who are used across the whole school have to relocate to a different site? Swap/Change on different days to different sites
All staff would be deployed according to their experience and expertise, which would mean a mix of TAs based mainly on one site and TAs who may work across both.
 6. Whole school get-togethers – where would they be accommodated as Village Hall is only just big enough to accommodate Christmas concert at present?
Both Village Halls and Churches would be big enough to accommodate the whole school for assemblies and other events. It is likely that performances would be split between different sections of the school to accommodate audiences
- I am uneasy regarding the federation with Willington. My main concern is possibly losing our headteacher, this makes no sense as she has been the backbone to Cople Lower and I value her leadership above all else.
Both headteachers and governing bodies have worked hard to consider what is best for the schools into the future. Postholders can change at any time.
 - I think travel between sites will be dangerous. The A603 is a major problem that won't go away. (three people cited the dangers of the A603 and possible traffic measures)
As previously stated, we will continue to work on and lobby for safer routes.
 - I feel our school is strong without a federation, taking Willington is going to create more problems for Cople Lower.
With uncertainty around schools funding and on how schools will be organised in the future, both governing bodies believe that working together makes us stronger.
 - I do not agree with a federation with Willington Lower School. I have many concerns over a proposal in the future with a merger with Willington and because of this I feel it is better to stand on our own. With federation we stand to lose several excellent Governors and our excellent head. Will this be in our best interests?

Please see comment above regarding the headteacher post. A federated governing body would retain the strengths of the both existing governing bodies.

- In favour of federating with Willington Lower school as long as my child who is starting Cople Lower School in September 2016 will remain at Cople Lower School and not have to change part way through.

It is envisaged that changes would be staggered to alleviate disruption.

- I feel a federation is the right move to make in order to protect the future of both schools. The single classes would also be of benefit as teaching and learning would be suited to the year group rather than the key stage. There will be lots to consider too. Obvious things would be transport, change of Uniform/logos and keeping that small village feel which is vital to the community.

These issues are already under consideration.

- One response raised a range of issues as follows:
 1. Is the council prepared to widen and improve the walkways between the villages and provide a walkway in Willington between the two sites to make sure pupils can travel safely?
See above regarding safer routes.
 2. How committed is the council towards maintaining two village schools given the proposed changes to larger neighbouring schools.
The local authority support our proposals.
 3. With the emphasis on healthy lifestyles, and initiatives such as walk and bike to school week how will this be facilitated given the dangerous stretch of road that separates these two villages.
We hope that a safe route can be established over time. We would continue to promote healthy lifestyles through the curriculum and wider school activities.
 4. What guarantee is there that the council will not decide to close one school and sell of the site for development?
Neither site could accommodate all the children at present. Future policy is unknown.
 5. How will the schools cope with the projected expansion of the villages with the proposed housing development sites highlighted during the Council's 'Call for Sites'?
We believe that the schools offer enough capacity to accommodate pupils from an increase in the size of the villages under current plans. It may mean there will be less spaces for out of catchment children in the future.
 6. Will the council proceed with the purchasing of additional land around Cople School to allow the school flexibility of growth?
The council are amenable to land purchase options. They are currently still pursuing the purchase of a plot at the rear of Cople School.

7. Will the council support a withdraw from the federation should it become unworkable trying to manage both schools?
This is possible up to the point of a merger.
 8. Will the council provide additional funding to facilitate the proposed merger and will they offer top up funding throughout the transition period.
The council will provide capital funding for the building of additional classrooms. Any additional funding is not clear at present. The federated governing body will analyse funding carefully.
 9. Will the council fund transport between the two sites? – if it doesn't will that not discriminate and disadvantage residents from rural villages who do not have their own transport
This is a Local Authority decision. They have been asked to investigate this.
 10. What will be the new catchment area?
It is likely that the catchment area will be a combination of the two current catchment areas. The Local Authority is, however, reviewing catchment areas Borough wide.
 11. Does the governing body have the final decision in appointing the head teacher of the federated school?
Yes, with support from LA advisors.
- I have no problem with it (federation). Think it's a good solution as the villages are so close
 - A practical solution (federation) for two small village schools that opens up the opportunity for single form intake should the schools and the community decide to merge.
These points are noted.
 - I have no objections to the proposal (federation) if the size of Cople School remains unaffected.
Any change in size relates more to the change of age range. Please see the separate report on this consultation.

Responses from Willington Stakeholders

In addition to the questions shown in the annex to this report, 6 written responses to the Federation proposal were received. As mentioned earlier, when asked to comment on federation, most respondents commented on a merger.

Comments made were as follows:

- The consultation document mentions better utilising facilities at each school – which and where?

Emphasis would be more on sharing of resources and skills with the benefit of staff expertise across both schools.

- How would pupils travel between the schools to use the alternate facilities?

Travel between sites would be kept to a minimum. Arrangements would be made in the same way as we organise trips out currently. A minibus may be a consideration in the future

- The suggested merger is the only solution because:
 1. Neither school have the space or scope for facilities to accommodate 10 and 11 year olds. Years 5 and 6 are crucially important years for children academically and emotionally/physically. They change hugely in this period and need to be going into school every day in a space that allows them to develop/breathe and flourish, not cramped in with little ones.
 2. Both villages already have successful/beneficial parish links and with a simple shuttle bus twice a day, this would help anyone lacking transport
 3. Children would benefit from more focus on their age range at the same time as being able to come together as a whole school easily for assemblies/trips/buddy sessions etc
 4. The separated key stages totally make sense

The governing body agrees with these comments. The governing body has approved the proposal to form a federated governing body with Cople Lower School in order to pursue a merger of the two schools into one primary school on two sites in conjunction with approving the extending the age range proposal.

- There is a strong case to support Willington Lower standing alone without entering into a federation with Cople Lower School. This should not be addressed separately from the Local Plan which will need to consider the impact of an additional 50 to 150 new homes within the village on the school. Appropriate forecasts of the likely intake of numbers (in the school) over the next 16 years. Assuming Willington School will need to accommodate a raised pupil intake together with pupils remaining at the School for an additional two years, there will be additional classrooms required to support this.

The Governing Body has debated the issue of going it alone at length. However, the challenges for very small schools are uncertain budgets; small numbers of children in catchment; mixed age classes; less resources; restricted sites. Opportunities for federating with Cople Lower School include sharing best practice, expertise and resources. We would then be able to make best use of staff and the sites whilst retaining the small village school ethos and atmosphere. The governing body needs to make the decision at the same time as all other schools and this is based on the information presently available. We will continue to monitor local developments that may affect the school, but we believe that pursuing a merger of the two schools remains the strongest option available to us.

To prevent the already significant problem of parking in Church Road being significantly exacerbated by the additional pupil numbers, I would strongly suggest that the land behind the school should be acquired to support the additional classrooms, a staff car-park and an area for parents to pick up and drop off pupils. The pickup/drop off area could be along the Northern boundary of the additional space, with access for vehicles from Church Road at the Eastern end of the School and vehicles leaving the area via Jakes Lane (between 26 and 28 Church Road) to the west of the school.

The Governing Body has requested Bedford Borough Council to assist in the possible acquisition of land behind the school. We have been informed that this is a lengthy and complicated process and they will keep us informed of developments if any arise.

- I am unhappy about Willington becoming an infant school. We will have to walk to the next village (4 miles twice a day). There will also be disruption with staff having to re - apply for their jobs

The Governing Body considered delivering primary education on the current school site but, as was said and accepted at the consultation evening, this was not a preferred option due to the site space restrictions. It was thought that considering a federation/merger with Cople Lower School was preferable and would still retain a sustainable village school in Willington albeit with less year groups

- Support in principle but concerns are: will Cople have enough room and get permission to expand to allow for larger numbers? Will one school running two buildings be viable long term? Can federation really deliver a coherent school across 2 sites or will they work in isolation?

Cople Lower School is supportive of the federated governing body with Willington and has applied for funding for additional classrooms to accommodate the increased number of pupils. The whole new school would come into being with a new name and shared opportunities, with community involvement and social/joint trips

- The Parish Council raised several points as follows:
 1. Nowhere is the case argued – for or against – for an all through primary aged school at Willington; all is subsumed in paragraph 4 on the potential benefits of federation

The Governing Body considered delivering primary education on the current school site but, as was said and generally approved at the consultation evening, this was not a preferred option due to the site space restrictions. It was thought that considering a federation/merger with Cople Lower School was preferable and would still retain a sustainable village school in Willington.

2. No reference is made to finance. Some operational savings may be apparent, but are there any other financial advantages – or losses – in federation

The decision to federate was not based on financial grounds but on site space considerations and sustainability to meet the two tier initiative.

3. On page 6 of the consultation document reference is made to ratification of the proposals by other bodies. These bodies are?

This was a generic statement and referred to, for example, a church school needing diocesan approval on such matters. For Willington Lower School, any Governing Body proposals would be ratified by the Borough Council and the DfE/Secretary of State.

Analysis

In the written responses from Cople stakeholders where a specific view was expressed, 6 supported federation and 3 were not in favour of federation. The remainder of responses related to the practical implications of a merger and did comment specifically on federation.

In the written responses from Willington stakeholders where a specific view was expressed, 3 responses were in favour of federation and one was against.

For both groups of stakeholders, there was considerable feedback on the possibility of a merged school. Much of it asked questions about how particular issues would be tackled. In summary these were:

- Travel between sites
- The adverse impact of the A603
- Impact of planned new housing
- Viability of two sites
- Facilities
- What will happen to staff
- 2 sites

Both schools have wanted to be very clear with stakeholders about the reason for considering federation: it is to enable a single governing body to look at how the two schools could be merged to sustain high quality primary education within the two villages. If satisfied that this is the best way forward, there would then be a further consultation process in line with the relevant legislation. Therefore whilst the comments and questions on merger may seem premature, this feedback will be very helpful in how any merger proposal could be developed so as to address the key points for families. This would help and inform that consultation process.

Some of the points relating to merger, particularly to do with transport and traffic measures will need to be discussed further with Bedford Borough, others can be considered within the context of any merged school's internal arrangements.

Governors' Decision

At the respective meetings on 8th January 2016 at Cople Lower School and 13th January 2016 at Willington Lower School, each Governing Body considered the Consultation Report, addressed the areas of concern and fully debated the proposal. A formal recorded vote was then taken and there was unanimous agreement to support the proposal.