



# Northumberland

## County Council

### **CABINET**

**Date: 12 October 2021**

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### **Proposal to amalgamate Seaton Sluice Middle School and Whytrig Middle School**

Report of the Executive Director of Children's Services - Cath McEvoy-Carr  
Cabinet Member for Children's Services: Councillor Guy Renner-Thompson  
Report prepared by

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### **Purpose of Report**

This report sets out the request of the Governing Body of the Seaton Valley Federation to the Council to carry out informal consultation on a proposal to amalgamate Seaton Sluice Middle School and Whytrig Middle School on the current Whytrig and Astley Community High School site in Seaton Delaval or alternative site, should one be identified as part of the site option appraisal. This proposal has arisen in the light of the capital project to reprovide new buildings for Astley and Whytrig Middle School on their current site, these two schools already being co-located on the high school's site in Seaton Delaval. Although the initial project was limited to the reprovision of new buildings for Astley and Whytrig, in the course of planning this project the federated Governing Body has identified a number of significant educational and financial benefits for all students within the Seaton Valley Federation to be co-located on one site in new buildings, and these are included in this report.

Furthermore, the proposal would require the expansion of the capacity of the planned new buildings for Whytrig in order to accommodate students relocated from Seaton Sluice and this would be included within the informal consultation. Therefore, the report also notes that Cabinet may be requested to permit the publication of a statutory proposal in line with the requirements of *The School Organisation (Establishment and Discontinuance of Schools) Regulations 2013* and *The School Organisation (Prescribed Alterations to Maintained Schools) (England) Regulations 2013* following the outcomes of informal consultation at a future date.

### **Recommendations**

#### **It is recommended that Cabinet:**

- 1) Note the proposal outlined in Key Issues.

- 2) Approve informal consultation on the proposal to amalgamate Seaton Sluice Middle School with Whytrig Middle School in planned new buildings shared with Astley High School.
- 3) Should it be required, agree to delegate the power to extend the informal consultation period if necessary to the Cabinet Member for Children's Services and the Executive Director of Adult Social Care and Children's Services.
- 4) Note that a further report following informal consultation would be submitted to a meeting of the Cabinet at which a decision on whether to progress to the issue of a Statutory Proposal may be requested.
- 5) Note that should Cabinet agree to the publication of a Statutory Proposal, Cabinet would be required to determine the proposal on behalf of the County Council at a later date.

### **Link to Corporate Plan**

This report is relevant to the Council's Corporate Plan 2018-2021, in particular in relation to the value "We want you to feel safe, healthy, and cared for".

### **Key Issues**

1. Seaton Sluice Middle School forms part of the Seaton Valley Federation of schools, together with Whytrig Middle School and Astley Community High School. The federation has one Executive Headteacher supported by a head of school at each of the 3 schools, overseen by one Governing Body.
2. Cabinet has already previously approved funding to be included in the Council's Medium Term Plan to reprovide new buildings for Astley High School and Whytrig Middle School. During the process of developing an Outline Business Case (OBC) for this capital project, the Governing Body of the Seaton Valley Federation identified that the educational benefits already being achieved from the co-location of Whytrig and Astley could be extended to include all students in the federation by amalgamating Seaton Sluice Middle with Whytrig Middle in the planned new buildings.
3. The OBC would be amended to include additional provision to accommodate the students from Seaton Sluice Middle should this consultation be approved. However, as the proposal to amalgamate the two middle schools requires statutory consultation, it is proposed that the capital building approval process runs parallel but separately to the statutory process in order to avoid any delay to the reprovizion of buildings for Astley and Whytrig, should the proposal to amalgamate the two middle schools not be approved for consultation at this point or at a later date following consultation. In short, the proposal to reprovide new buildings for Astley and Whytrig is not dependent on the outcome of consultation on the inclusion of Seaton Sluice Middle in the proposal.
4. The benefits identified by the federated Governing Body from the amalgamation of the two middle schools are set out in a document submitted by the Governing Body to the Council and this is included as Appendix 1 of this report; a summary of the benefits identified is as follows:

- Students on roll at Seaton Sluice would be able to benefit from a modern educational environment within new buildings together with their peers who on roll at Whytrig and Astley;
- Transitions from first to middle and middle to high will be improved by having one middle school for all pupils to feed into at Year 5; students would then move altogether as one cohort into the high school phase;
- The new Additionally Resourced Provision (ARP) at the current Whytrig and Astley site would be able to be accessed by students identified with special needs who are currently on roll at Seaton Sluice Middle;
- Curriculum development would be consistent across the federation;
- One system of continuous professional development (CPD) for all staff across the federation would lead to improvements in the quality of teaching and learning;
- All students within the federation would benefit from the improved sports facilities at the shared site; *“It is the governors view that a swimming pool must be part of the facilities provided in the new build along with the other high quality sports facilities associated with new builds that have occurred in the County.”*
- Student support systems across the federation would work more consistently and effectively;
- Whilst not the most important reason, there would be financial benefits arising from economies of scale that would mean more funding would be directed towards teaching and learning.

Overall, the Governing Body believes the above benefits would ultimately lead to improved outcomes for students currently on roll at Seaton Sluice Middle.

5. Should Cabinet at some point in the future approve the implementation of the proposal to amalgamate Seaton Sluice Middle and Whytrig Middle and approve the proposal to reprovide new buildings for the federated schools, Seaton Sluice Middle would close as a separate entity and Whytrig Middle would expand its capacity from 3 forms of entry (FE) to 5FE to accommodate the students from Seaton Sluice. The PAN of Whytrig Middle would also be increased from an annual intake of 90 students to 150 to accommodate students from the current Seaton Sluice catchment area; the catchment areas of the two middles would also be combined into a larger catchment. While Whytrig Middle would continue as an entity and would retain its current school number, the Governing Body has indicated that it would plan to change the name of the school once amalgamated with Seaton Sluice Middle to reflect all the communities served by the amalgamated schools.
6. In the light of the above, the federated Governing Body has requested that the Council approve a period of informal consultation on the proposed amalgamation of the two middle schools on the current site of Astley High and Whytrig Middle schools.
7. If approved by Cabinet, a six week period of informal consultation within term time would begin on Wednesday 13 October and would conclude on Wednesday 1 December. A document containing the rationale for the proposal and other relevant information would be circulated directly to stakeholders and would be made widely available electronically and in hard copy to other interested parties where requested. The methods by which consultees could respond with their views of

response would also be included. Separate meetings would be held for the Governing Body and for the staff of both middle schools at the schools, which may need to be held via electronic means if COVID restrictions on the number of people able to meet are in place at that time. Also subject to any existing COVID restrictions, mechanisms would be put in place to enable stakeholders and other interested parties to pose questions and gather further information on the proposal from the Governing Body and Council officers.

8. Following feedback from informal consultation, there may be a need to consult on a modification to the proposal. Approval is requested from Cabinet to delegate any decision to carry out further informal consultation to the Member for Children's Services and the Executive Director of Adult Social Care and Children's Services.
9. Permission is now sought from Cabinet to initiate informal consultation on the proposal to amalgamate Seaton Sluice Middle and Whytrig Middle School in new buildings on the current Whytrig and Astley site or alternative site with effect from September 2024, necessitating the closure of Seaton Sluice Middle.

## **Background Information**

### **Implications of the proposal**

10. Should Cabinet at some point in the future approve the Governing Body's request to amalgamate Whytrig and Seaton Sluice Middle Schools, it would necessitate the following:
  - Closure of Seaton Sluice Middle School as stand-alone entity with effect from 31 August 2024.
  - Expansion of the capacity of Whytrig Middle School within the proposal to reprovide new buildings for it and Astley High School on their current shared site or alternative site in Seaton Delaval from 360 to 600.
  - The PAN of Whytrig Middle would also be increased from 90 to 150 to accommodate the additional students from the Seaton Sluice catchment area.
11. Should the two middle schools be approved for amalgamation, the catchment areas of the schools would be combined to form one large middle phase catchment area, thus in effect mirroring the current catchment area of Astley High School.
12. It is envisaged that any decision to amalgamate the two middle schools would be taken ahead of the time when applications for places in Year 5 in the newly provided buildings would open to ensure parents have clarity on the proposed educational pathway of students in the Seaton Sluice area.
13. As the staff of both Seaton Sluice and Whytrig are managed by the federated Governing Body, should the proposal be approved the latter would need to draw up and consult on a new staffing structure at the continuing school to reflect its significant increase in size. The federated Governing Body is keen to maximise employment for staff in the current middle schools, keeping redundancies at a minimum; they would look to appoint staff as fairly and equitably as possible using the staff of both schools. Should Cabinet approve consultation on this proposal, the federated Governing Body would adhere to the relevant requirements regarding consultation on staffing structures, including consultation with relevant staff representatives (Trades Unions).

14. There may be financial implications for the Council's Home to School Transport policy should Seaton Sluice Middle be approved for closure, depending on where current and future students living in the school's catchment area reside I.e. under the Council's Home to School Transport Policy in general secondary age students are eligible for home to school transport if they live more than 3 miles from school or where there is no safe walking route to school. Should Cabinet approve consultation, work to identify detailed costs would be carried out and reported to Cabinet with the outcomes of the consultation.
  
15. The building and playing fields at the Seaton Sluice middle site are both in the ownership of the Council. Should Cabinet approve Seaton Sluice to close the school as an entity at some point in the future, the Council would need to have regard to the Education (School Premises) Regulations 1999 and Section 77 of the School Standard and Framework Act 1998 in relation to any potential loss of playing fields. It is proposed that the possible future use of the Seaton Sluice building and/or the playing fields should the school close form part of the informal consultation process with stakeholders and the local community.

### **IMPLICATIONS ARISING OUT OF THE REPORT**

<b>Policy:</b>	The actions set out in this report support the vision and values set out in the Council's Corporate Plan 2020/21, particularly in relation to the value of "We want you to feel safe, healthy, and cared for"
<b>Finance and value for money</b>	The OBC for the reprovision of buildings for Astley and Whytrig would be amended to include additional provision to accommodate the students from Seaton Sluice Middle should this consultation be approved. However, as the proposal to amalgamate the two middle schools requires statutory consultation, it is proposed that the capital building approval process runs parallel but separately to the statutory process in order to avoid any delay to the reprovision of buildings for Astley and Whytrig, should the proposal to amalgamate the two middle schools not be approved for consultation at this point or at a later date following consultation. In short, the proposal to reprovide new buildings for Astley and Whytrig is not dependent on the outcome of consultation on the inclusion of Seaton Sluice Middle in the proposal.
<b>Legal</b>	N/A
<b>Procurement</b>	N/A
<b>Human Resources:</b>	Should the two middle schools be approved to amalgamate, there would be potential redundancies for some staff within the Seaton Valley Federation. However, the Governing Body are committed to keeping the need for redundancies to an absolute minimum.

<b>Property</b>	All property implications will be considered as part of the OBC.
<b>Equalities</b>	An Equalities Assessment would be carried out concurrently with consultation should Cabinet approve this proposal to go ahead.
<b>Risk Assessment</b>	A Risk Assessment would be carried out should Cabinet approve this proposal to go ahead.
<b>Crime &amp; Disorder</b>	This report has considered Section 1 (CDA) and the duty it imposes and there are no implications arising from it.
<b>Customer Considerations:</b>	The proposal set out in this report is based upon a desire to improve outcomes for children and young people and their families in Northumberland.
<b>Carbon Reduction</b>	It is not envisaged that the processes set out within this report will have any impact on positive or negative on carbon reduction.
<b>Consultation</b>	This report has been considered by the Executive Director for Adult Social Care and Children's Services and the Member for Children's Services.
<b>Wards</b>	All

## Appendices

**Appendix 1 -** Submission from Seaton Valley Federation Governors with regard to the proposed new build

## Background Papers

None

## Report Sign Off

Finance Officer	JW
Monitoring Officer/Legal	NM
Executive Director of Children's Services	CMC
Chief Executive	DL
Portfolio Holder(s)	GRT

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**Submission from Seaton Valley Federation Governors with regard to the proposed new build**

The governors of Seaton Valley Federation (SVF) are very excited about the proposed new build as they see it as a means of ensuring continued high quality education and community provision in the Seaton Valley.

It is the preference of the governors that a solution can be found where all the pupils of the federation are educated on one site. The governors do not want to change to the two tier system as they feel there are many benefits of the three tier system and that it works for the pupils of the SVF. Nor are the governors wanting to create a through school.

It is the governors wish to create, on one site an educational environment where there is one middle school and one high school, as can presently be found on Elsdon Avenue where Whytrig Middle School (WMS) and Astley Community High School (ACHS) share the same site with much success.

The governors desire is to replicate this in the new build, but also include the pupils from the federation's other middle school Seaton Sluice Middle School (SSMS) thus creating one large middle school of between 5 to 8 form intake.

The governors are very aware of the fact that if a site is found for such a provision it will mean the closure of Seaton Sluice Middle School, as the new middle school will be the 2 middle schools coming together. The proposal is that all the schools will be renamed following the completion of the new building. Closing a school is never a decision that is taken lightly and will of course arise a lot of heated debate and passion, but the governors feel that this is the right decision based on the following reasons.

- 1) There will be financial savings made from the combining of the 2 schools. This is not the most important reason, but it is the easiest to see.
- 2) The quality of staff development and continual professional development will be better. Already, ACHS and WMS being on the same site has seen far better opportunities for staff development and closer working and learning from each other to happen. The staff at SSMS are missing out on this.
- 3) The pupils at SSMS will experience the additional facilities of the new build, which they will not if the proposal does not happen.
- 4) It will mean that SSMS pupils and staff will work in an environment fit for the 21st century, which they currently do not and will not, if the school stays open on the same site as it is now.
- 5) It will mean that the proposed ARP will service pupils from SSMS area as well as those from ACHS and WMS.
- 6) It will mean that there are better sports facilities for all members of the SVF.
- 7) The transition from middle school to high school will be even better for the SSMS pupils. Whilst the present transition is good, it is clear that the WMS pupils transfer even better as they are used to being on the same site and using the same facilities already. They have also had lessons with ACHS so they are used to these members of staff. It does take the SSMS pupils a little longer to settle.
- 8) It will ensure that the systems that are in place at Elsdon Avenue with regard to curriculum development will be available for the SSMS staff and pupils.
- 9) There will be the opportunity to ensure that the support systems across the federation are working better as they will all be on one site.

- 10) Finally and most importantly it will mean that all the pupils in the SVF can use and enjoy the most up to date facilities in their education.

The governors are aware that there will be doubts and objections to this proposal and they have thought long and hard about these, but it is felt that the positive options outweigh the negatives. The governors feel that there are possibly 5 main areas of objection and these are:

- 1) Removing a school from its local community. This is true, but in all honesty the school does not play that big a part in the local community. The fields are only used once a week by a local football team. The school has plays/concerts, but these are generally school based and attended by the parents of the school. Furthermore the school catchment is made up more of pupils who live outside of Seaton Sluice than those who live in Seaton Sluice. These areas are New Hartley, Seghill and Blyth.
- 2) Pupils will have to be bussed to the new school. This is true there will have to be a bus service put on. However pupils are currently bussed down from Seghill and New Hartley and these are pupils aged 9 to 13. The new proposal will see pupils bussed from Seaton Sluice and New Hartley but not from Seghill.
- 3) Staff will lose their jobs. There may well be the possibility of this but the proposal is to combine the 2 middle schools so there will be a need for staff to teach in this bigger school so it is envisaged that most staff will still have a job at the end of the process.
- 4) We should just invest in SSMS buildings. It has been made very clear that there is no money for SSMS update and the buildings are now becoming not fit for purpose for a school in the 21st century. Nor does it solve the issue of SSMS not having the same CPD and development opportunities that are presently afforded to ACHS and WMS.
- 5) The school is a good school and does well it should not be closed. Again this is true, but financially the school's position is not as strong as we would want and it will become ever more difficult to provide the education that the pupils at SSMS deserve.

The governors are clear that they know this will be a difficult decision, but they feel it is the right decision and they are also concerned that a new build for ACHS and WMS and not for SSMS would see parents of pupils at feeder first schools for SSMS decide to send their children to WMS due to the new build and this would exasperate the issues for SSMS with its intake at year 5.

### **Community Facilities**

The governors are also very clear that any new build must continue to provide strong community sports facilities for the Seaton Valley. There is a belief in many of the residents that the Seaton Valley does not get the things that Cramlington or Blyth get and if there was the removal of the community sports facilities then this would have a negative impact on the Seaton Valley. The governors are absolutely certain that a swimming pool must be part of the facilities provided in the new build along with the other high quality sports facilities associated with new builds that have occurred in the County.

### **Public Library and County Support Services**

Presently the public library and support services are located within the ACHS building. The governors are aware that a consultation is on going with regard to the future of public libraries etc. Whilst the governors would not wish to interfere in this process, they would like to make it clear that they would welcome these

services staying in the new school buildings, as long as they were planned in from the start and there were no safeguarding issues for pupils.

Should the decision be made that there will not be a new build for all 3 schools on a new site then the governors are clear that the next best option is to build a new school for ACHS and WMS on new land as this will allow the opportunity for developing the site in the future if it was decided to move SSMS onto the same site. If that is not an option then the governors choice would be the development of the Elsdon Avenue site and leave SSMS where it is and try and secure funding for future development but the governors are aware that this is a very poor choice compared to what potentially is available.

### **Conclusion**

The governors of the SVF have thought long and hard about this proposal and it is not a decision that has been made lightly. However, the federation has now developed to the extent that it can based on its current site. The SVF has a great reputation for being inclusive and giving its pupils the best education that it can, but we are aware that we can and want to do more and for us the next stage is providing a new school environment where all of the federations pupils, staff and parents can enjoy an education and facilities fit for purpose in the 21st century.

Therefore the governors would like to formally request the council to carry out the consultation in order to bring the 2 middle schools together.

The governors of the Seaton Valley Federation February 2020.