



Northumberland County Council

Wellbeing and Community Health Services Group
Education and Skills Service

Proposals for Amalgamation of Seaton Sluice and Whytrig Middle Schools

**Notes of the meeting held with Seaton Valley Community Council on
Monday 15th November 2021 at 5.00 pm (virtual)**

Present: Cllr. Susan Dungworth (Hartley) - Chair
Cllr. David Ferguson (Hartley)
Cllr. Jill Henderson (Hartley)
Cllr. Les Bowman (Holywell)
Cllr. Eva Coulson (Holywell)
Cllr. Ann Stanners (Holywell)
Cllr. Sue Bowman (Seghill with Seaton Delaval)
Cllr. Eve Chicken (Seghill with Seaton Delaval)
Cllr. Graham Eastwood (Seghill with Seaton Delaval)
Simon Potts (Clerk & Responsible Financial Officer, Seaton Valley Community Council)
John Barnes (Executive Headteacher, Seaton Valley Federation)
Karen McSparron (Headteacher, Seaton Sluice Middle School)
Sue Aviston (Head of School Organisation and Resources, NCC)
Lorraine Fife (School Place Planning and Organisation Manager, NCC)
Deborah Anderson (Project Support Officer, NCC)

Cllr. Dungworth welcomed everyone to the meeting and advised that she would chair the meeting and answer any questions but would not take part in any discussion nor take part in the agenda item at the forthcoming Council meeting.

The reason for the meeting was to give councillors the opportunity to hear the rationale behind the proposal to amalgamate the middle schools on the current Astley/Whytrig School site or another identified location.

Background and Rationale to the Proposal

- The federation was formed in 2008/2009 and consists of Astley High, Whytrig Middle and Seaton Sluice Middle Schools.
- About three/four years ago it was agreed to relocate Whytrig Middle onto the site of Astley High School.
- A new build for Astley High School was proposed in 2012 and as Whytrig is on the same site was included in the plans.
- Unfortunately, there is no funding for a new/re-build at Seaton Sluice Middle School.
- Whilst looking at creating a new build for Astley and Whytrig Middle Schools it was apparent that it had the potential to discriminate against a third of the federation.
- The federation approached the local authority to see if there was a way to include Seaton Sluice Middle.
- Following discussions, the Governing Body came up with the proposal that we are consulting on.
- Morally couldn't see two-thirds of the pupils in the federation accessing fantastic facilities and opportunities and one-third not.

- Educationally it is the right thing to do.

What are the pupil numbers, per village, attending Seaton Sluice Middle School?

Smallest numbers come from Seghill with New Hartley next. Of the currently pupils attending Seaton Sluice Middle School, 27% live in Seaton Sluice village with the other 73% coming from Seghill, New Hartley and Blyth. John Barnes would be happy to provide a detailed breakdown if required.

Perspective from Seaton Sluice Middle School

Seaton Sluice Middle School is a lovely school in terms of its setting which includes lovely grounds and fields. The school has fantastic pupils and great teachers. Unfortunately, the building is no longer fit for purpose.

Facilities are woefully lacking (eg. no sports facilities and leaking roof) and pupils deserve better. Layout of school is not good and there are issues with the single glazed windows and asbestos. How do you drive up aspirations and get pupils to better themselves if the school building is in a poor condition?

If there were any assurances that funding was available for Seaton Sluice Middle to be refurbished/rebuilt the school would be pushing to remain where they are. There are also concerns that if they aren't part of the proposal Seaton Sluice Middle could lose pupils to the new school which would impact on their funding and viability.

County Council's perspective around Funding and Consultation

Astley High, Whytrig Middle and Seaton Sluice Middle School are all local authority maintained schools, this is the reason why the County Council is carrying out this consultation. It was stressed that this is not a County Council proposal, but a proposal brought to the local authority by the federated Governing Body.

As well as the previously mentioned rationale in relation to buildings and facilities, there were another six reasons put forward to the local authority by the Governing Body when they requested the amalgamation of the middle schools.

The local authority supports what has been said about the condition of the buildings at Astley and Whytrig Schools. Acknowledged that they are in the most need for investment with over £14 million of backlog maintenance. Although Seaton Sluice Middle School would also benefit from investment it is not deemed a priority for the Council over the next four years due to the condition of the building and other schools being a higher priority. Understand what the federation are saying regarding its suitability and maintenance (eg. new roof etc) but unfortunately, it doesn't meet the criteria for replacement.

The other reasons for the consultation are based on what the Governing Body told us regarding the wider educational benefits:

- Improved transition from first to middle and middle to high;
- Consistent curriculum development across the federation;
- One system of CPD for all staff;
- Student support systems working more consistently and effectively;
- ARP provision benefiting pupils at Seaton Sluice the same as it does for pupils at Whytrig and Astley;
- Financial benefits arising from economies of scale.

Consultation is required because we can't merge two schools, nor close two schools and re-open a new school. Local authorities no longer have that power. Therefore, for the two schools to come together, with a new name, one school would need to close, and, in this proposal, it is Seaton Sluice Middle School. The role of the local authority is to manage that consultation. The consultation is not a referendum but asking for opinions from individuals or groups, including requests for alternative options

to achieve the same benefits. The consultation will close on the 1st December 2021. Feedback will be analysed, and a report presented to Elected Members. Elected Members will then come to a conclusion. There will be a number of stages where any recommendation will be scrutinized before a decision is made.

A councillor stated that they were puzzled as there is no clarity regarding the proposal. Asked about building on a new site but new site doesn't exist yet. Location of site will have an impact on pupils, especially from Holywell. Will there be a library or council office on the new site? Will a nine-year-old be expected to walk up the Avenue?

The biggest issue with the Astley site is the parking. Get complaint after complaint and already had a near miss early this year. In the consultation document it states that safety issues will be managed with a drop-off plan. What is this plan and is the plan being done for the current site or the new site?

Where is the money coming from? Is it coming from the sale of the land at Seaton Sluice Middle School?

Sue Aviston advised that there are currently two processes being undertaken. The local authority is asking people's views on the two schools coming together and the educational benefits. The second process is the development of the outline business case, which includes site appraisals. Information will be available in the spring next year and will be the subject of a separate consultation process. The local authority is unable to share any details as there is still a lot of work to do and it is commercially sensitive and would not be in the interest of the public purse to share this information. As soon as we can share more details we will do so. Currently looking at a number of sites, including the current site.

There will be a 12-week consultation ahead of any planning application which will address any concerns/issues and cover transport, parking etc.

What we are doing here is seeking opinion on the organisation of education, not about the location.

In terms of school transport, the Council has a Home to School Transport Policy which we must apply across the county. Every child who applies for transport will have their individual circumstances taken on board (eg. where they live, whether there is a safe walking route). It is difficult for us to say who would/wouldn't be eligible as it is done on an individual basis.

With regards to the library and customer services currently on the Astley site there hasn't been any information from those services about whether they want to be involved or not. It was noted that any money for the library/customer services centre would need to come from that service and not from the education/schools' budget. However, the federation is more than happy to have a public library on site.

John Barnes stated that the new build would have more impact in the community with the updated facilities which would include all weather pitches, dance studio and weight training areas. The aim is to make the site a community facility, similar to what Cramlington has.

This is the best chance to get the best facilities and provide the best educational opportunities for all Seaton Valley students.

In relation to the statement that Seaton Sluice Middle School wouldn't get funding for a new/re-build, that is not a local authority officer's decision to make. It is a Members' decision and something that could be discussed at a later date.

Councillors' felt that they were only getting half the picture and were being asked to make a decision about something that they were not fully informed about. Don't know where the other site is, how do we know if it is in the best interests of the villages or pupils if the impact is not known. Need to know everything before a decision can be made. What happens if planning permission is not granted but a decision was taken to close Seaton Sluice Middle School and amalgamate the middle schools?

John Barnes asked whether, as Councillors, they were happy for there to be £37 million investment for a new build for pupils in Seaton Valley.

Sue Aviston advised that decisions that Cabinet make, in principle, are subject to several things and planning permission would be one of them. If planning permission was not received any changes would not be implemented.

As officers we are taking on board these comments but ultimately it is Cabinet that need to hear them together with the reasons why (eg. if educational impact was site specific Cabinet would need to know why it was site specific).

Nobody is in any doubt about what the process is about – it's about the organisation of education for Seaton Valley. No one at this meeting wants anything less for the pupils and parents of Seaton Valley. It is also about the development of community services which we lack throughout Seaton Valley. Appreciate the vision in relation to development of community services outlined earlier in the meeting, however what is of concern is the funding. You can plan for the best state of the art facilities, but you can't do anything unless you have the funding. Understand that in the past there has been business cases, guarantees of money and for the last three/four years Astley has been promised a re-build. However, the money seems to disappear. There had also been a promise of £31.6 million put into the budget and spades in the ground in 2022. Now we are hearing figures of £37 million – where is this money coming from, is it in the budget and is it guaranteed? Where is this additional funding coming from?

Sue Aviston advised that the funding for a new school for Astley has been in the Council's Medium Term Financial Plan. The commitment and funding had been there for the last six years in some form although acknowledged that the amounts had differed due to changing markets and scopes of work.

Currently in the construction industry there are increased costs due to the reduction in labour available and increased costs for materials. As a Council we are reviewing our Medium Term Financial Plan to take into account market influences and increases.

A rebuild for Astley, Whytrig and Seaton Sluice, if it is to be included in the scope of works, is in the Council's Medium Term Plan. There is commitment from the current Administration to that funding. Astley is seen as a top priority due to the backlog of maintenance required and it is the worst conditioned building in the County.

As stated previously in the meeting by a Councillor it is not up to local authority officers to make decisions, however, they are the professionals that make the recommendations to Elected Members. It is up to Elected Member whether they take on board those recommendations. It is firmly officers' recommendation and agreed by the Executive Director for Adult and Children's Services, to invest in the school in Astley as it desperately needs investment. Unfortunately, due to Covid we haven't been able to undertake the work required over the last 18 months.

How many parents have come forward with concerns and are those concerns the same?

John Barnes confirmed that he had not been approached directly by parents with any concerns. Not sure how many have responded to the online consultation.

The local authority is not in a position to comment as the consultation is still open but would encourage everyone to respond. We are interested in everyone's views. Local authority would be interested in receiving a collective response from the Parish Council if possible, but it wouldn't prevent you, as an individual, from responding as well.

Confirmed that it was on the agenda for the Parish Council meeting next week.

If schools don't amalgamate where would Seaton Sluice Middle sit in terms of investment for repairs to the building?

Advised that there was £180 million of backlog maintenance in Northumberland schools. However, the Council, regardless of the Administration, is committed to investing in our schools and buildings. Can't say where Seaton Sluice sits within the table of priorities but will investigate. Do receive funding from Central Government towards maintenance projects and the local authority will continue to invest in its school estate. This will be answered in more detail in the committee report.

Has the two-tier system been considered with investments made into the first schools to turn them into primary schools? Had this option been considered?

John Barnes stated that as a federation they are committed to the three-tier system. Feel it benefits children and there are a number of students coming to the federation from Blyth and Cramlington as they are not suited to the secondary model.

As a federation we can't comment on whether or not the first schools want to become primary schools. Middle Schools keep children younger for longer and we are focussed on keeping that system.

Sue Aviston noted that there had been no approach from the first schools to the local authority in respect of them becoming a primary school. As with previous Administrations the Council does not influence structures – any approach would need to come from the headteacher/governing body. If approached the local authority would support and find additional funding if it was in the educational interests of the pupils.

If new school got built for Whytrig/Astley as a parent from Seghill/Hartley I can't say I would send my children to Seaton Sluice Middle School. If that happened what would the knock-on effect be for finances.

Seaton Sluice Middle School has a better Ofsted judgement than Whytrig Middle School. That is what parents would look at. Although a new building might be good it would not necessarily mean better teaching. It is about their education and safety. Seaton Sluice is judged 'good' whereas Whytrig is rated as 'requires improvement'. Seaton Sluice might be a rundown school, but they are doing something right.

John Barnes asked when any of the Councillors had last visited Whytrig Middle School. He would love for Councillors to see the quality of teaching and learning which takes place at Whytrig. It was also confirmed that Ofsted had inspected Whytrig Middle School two weeks ago. Not in a position to share the outcome as it is not available yet but will be happy to discuss further once available.

Extended an invitation for any Councillor to visit any of the three schools within the federation to see the fantastic teaching and learning going on and any new build would have staff from both schools involved.

New school buildings would not bring better education.

Agreed that it wasn't new facilities that made a good school but the teachers and teaching

Assuming if you were inspected two weeks ago that you have met all the recommendations?

John Barnes apologised but reiterated that he couldn't make any comments. Report should be available by 16th December 2021.

The schools in Blyth and Cramlington are all primary/secondary schools. Did all the headteachers approach the local authority?

That happened a number of years ago following the inspection of the local authority where there had been criticism that it didn't have a strategic view of education and outcomes. The education system is

very different now with the introduction of academies and Free Schools. Any changes now are driven by the headteachers since 2016. Every Administration since then has not had a strategic view but go on what the educational professionals believe is the right system.

Cllr. Dungworth thanked everyone for attending. As the public consultation event had to be cancelled it was an opportunity for Councillors to hear the background and ask questions.

Sue Aviston advised that some of tonight's questions may be used to update our FAQs on the Council's website.

Meeting closed at 6:40 pm.