



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 Federated Governing Body on
Wednesday 10th November 2021 at 5.30 pm (virtual)

Present:
Sue Aviston (SA) – Head of School Organisation and Resources Lorraine Fife (LF) – School Place Planning and Organisation Manager Deborah Anderson (DA) – Project Support Officer John Barnes (JB) – Executive Headteacher, Seaton Valley Federation Governors from Seaton Valley Federated Governing Body

		Action
1.	<u>Welcome and Introductions</u>	
	<p>JB welcomed everyone to the meeting and informed attendees that the meeting would be led by Sue Aviston on behalf of the local authority.</p> <p>SA briefly outlined her role and advised that she would running through a standard presentation, which had been used with staff at their meetings. During the meeting SA was supported by colleagues from NCC and the team briefly introduced themselves.</p> <p>Governors would have the opportunity to ask questions during the presentation.</p>	
2.	<u>Purpose of this meeting</u>	
	<p>SA outlined the purpose of this meeting:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Local Authority is currently consulting, at the request of the governing body, on proposals to amalgamate Seaton Sluice and Whytrig Middle Schools.• Providing an opportunity for governors to say how they feel about the proposals. The local authority did re-confirm prior to launching the consultation that the governing body were still supportive of the proposals.• Will outline and explain what needs to happen statutorily and why the proposal is around the closure of Seaton Sluice Middle School.• All details were outlined in the committee report presented to Cabinet in October 2021.• Opportunity as a governing body to ask questions about the implications.	

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Notes (not verbatim) will be taken and these will form part of the consultation feedback and will be made public. 	
<p>3.</p>	<p><u>Rationale for the proposal to amalgamate the middle schools</u></p>	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The rationale for the proposal was taken from the letter the governing body sent to the local authority requesting the consultation. That information was also used in meetings with staff and unions this week • Benefits behind the proposal included: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ The investment, already identified from the local authority, to provide new buildings for Astley and Whytrig Middle and the opportunity it afforded to include Seaton Sluice Middle School; ○ Improved transition (first to middle/middle to high); ○ Consistent curriculum development across the federation; ○ One system of CPD for all staff which will lead to improvements in the quality of teaching and learning; ○ Student support systems more consistently applied and thereby more effective; ○ The opportunity to make the ARP, currently being piloted at Astley, a permanent provision and with the ability for Seaton Sluice Middle pupils to access it; ○ Financial benefits arising from economies of scale which have already been evidenced by bringing Astley High and Whytrig Middle together. • Reiterated that the Council had initially identified funding for the two schools. However, when we reset the budgets last financial year there was an opportunity to increase the funding to allow for the full scope of works requested in the governing body's letter (eg. swimming pool and Seaton Sluice Middle). This funding currently sits in the Medium-Term Financial Plan as £37.2 million. <p><u>Questions or Comments:</u></p> <p><i>Disappointed at how the rationale for the proposal was put across to the community. No mention within the rationale that there was no money for Seaton Sluice Middle. The only way the governing body could ensure equality and opportunity for those pupils to access quality teaching facilities and resources, as well as the financial viability of Seaton Sluice Middle, was to put forward the proposal it did. However, this has been perceived by some people in the community as a land grab by the governing body. If there had been a funding commitment for Seaton Sluice Middle School, the governing body would have supported the maintenance of Seaton Sluice Middle.</i></p> <p>SA noted that had not been clearly set out in the letter from the governing body. As the local authority didn't want to misrepresent the governors the wording for the proposal was taken directly from the letter. SA advised that there was an opportunity to rectify this as the authority is pulling together a number of "frequently asked questions" arising from responses to the consultation and this point can be covered within them.</p> <p>SA also mentioned that during consultations there would normally be an opportunity to hold a public event. Unfortunately, due to Covid-19, this has not been possible this time, but any additional information, frequently asked questions and animations would be available on the website.</p>	

	<p><i>Is the swimming pool secured?</i></p> <p>It is included in the business case, but a decision is still needed, and it won't come to committee until March 2022. Doing work in the background and two options are being drawn up (Option 1 – Astley and Whytrig and Option 2 – Astley and the expanded middle school) both options have the swimming pool included.</p> <p><i>What is happening with the library?</i></p> <p>We consulted the service at the time, but they weren't interested in being part of the solution. Happy to take back and have another conversation. However, it needs to be noted that there was no budget for the library, and we wouldn't want it to come from the schools' budget.</p>	
4.	<u>What are the proposals?</u>	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Legally, as a local authority, we are unable to open a new school due to those powers being withdrawn. Any new school would need to be a Free School or an Academy. • Therefore, to achieve the amalgamation of both middle schools one school would need to close. In the current proposal Seaton Sluice Middle has been identified to close from 31st August 2024. • The intention is, if the amalgamation is approved, to rename the merged middle and high schools as well as introduction of a new uniform. • The proposals also include the expansion of Whytrig Middle School's capacity from 360 to 660 places and an increase of their planned admission number from 90 to 165. • Would also see an increase in Astley's planned admission number but that would be picked up under the standard admission procedures. 	
5.	<u>What are the implications of the proposals for staff in the Seaton Valley Federation?</u>	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Held meeting with staff from Seaton Sluice Middle School on Monday 8th November 2021 and with staff from Whytrig Middle and Astley High School on Wednesday 10th November 2021. • Invited representatives from teaching and non-teaching unions to both meetings. • Talked about the process the governing body would undertake in respect of developing a new staffing structure. Ensuring, with support and advice from NCC's HR team, that it is fair and equitable to all staff across both middle schools. 	
6.	<u>Timeline for staff Consultation</u>	
	<p>SA advised that the timeline would be as follows:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • End of summer term 2023 – Governors advertise the staffing structure and appointment process. • Autumn Term 2023 - Would consult on the proposed structure. • January to April 2024 – Proposed structure confirmed, and process of selection and appointment commenced. The aim, as always, is to redeploy existing staff prior to looking externally. • September 2024 – New staffing structure implemented. 	

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emma Watson from HR is supporting the process and JB has already had meetings with Emma and Christina Ponting. • Process will be open and transparent and follow existing practises. • Unfortunately, not in a position to give further details at present. <p><u>Questions or Comments:</u></p> <p><i>Wondered what the responses had been like?</i></p> <p>Staff meetings had been very quiet with not many questions asked. Had one query in respect of the new houses being built at New Hartley.</p> <p>Have encouraged staff to respond to the consultation either as individuals, collectively or both. There had been very little response from parents or staff. So far, the majority of responses had come from the community. However, it was noted that Elected Members particularly looked at what educational professionals think about the proposals.</p> <p>About to get the opinions of pupils to the consultation by asking them to complete a questionnaire which had been developed by JB. Plan is to share the questionnaire with pupils next week and pass information onto NCC.</p>	
7.	<u>What impact would the proposal have on Admission Arrangements?</u>	
	<p>LF explained what would happen in relation to admissions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No change to admission procedures until 2023. • For parents looking for a place in September 2024 there will only be one option, Whytrig Middle School, or an alternative school in another partnership. Seaton Sluice Middle School will no longer be an option for parents. • Newly formed middle school will open in September 2024. • There will be an automatic transfer for years 5, 6 and 7 pupils from Seaton Sluice Middle pupils into Whytrig Middle School's years 6, 7 and 8 respectively. • There will not be a staggered increase into the newly formed middle schools as undertaken in other partnerships. The change will happen all at once. <p><u>Questions or Comments:</u></p> <p><i>When providing further information to parents and the public are we making it clear that the school will effectively become a new middle school with a new name etc.?</i></p> <p>Yes, we are looking at the possibility of having pupil, staff and community input into the new name.</p>	
8.	<u>What would be the impact on catchment areas?</u>	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SA shared maps outlining the current and proposed catchment area. • By law must consult on changes to catchment areas. • Currently the catchment area is split between Seaton Sluice Middle and Whytrig Middle Schools. 	

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • As part of the consultation aim to implement a change to merge the catchment areas into one. • The merged catchment area would have the same footprint currently serving the high school. <p><u>Questions or Comments:</u></p> <p><i>Need to emphasis the catchment and how catchment areas work with the community. This proposal should be seen as a rationale approach to correct an anomaly that required some pupils to pass through one catchment area to attend their school.</i></p>	
9.	<p><u>What are the implications for buildings?</u></p>	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Funding is in the Council's Medium Term Financial Plan and that is not going to disappear. • Astley's building is in the worst condition with £14.8 million of backlog maintenance. • Officers are in support of the investment and the project moving forward. <p><u>Questions or Comments:</u></p> <p><i>Why was the decision taken to only include one middle school particularly given the level and extent of repairs needed to Seaton Sluice Middle School?</i></p> <p>Acknowledged that repairs to Seaton Sluice Middle are required but the need is not as great. There are other schools in greater need and therefore further up the list in terms of priority order.</p> <p>JB added that the project for replacement building at Astley/Whytrig schools would be going ahead. Why would we not want our students and staff in Seaton Sluice Middle School to access and benefit from better teaching facilities?</p> <p>If the proposals go ahead, buildings will need to be larger and work is ongoing to work up options, costs and implications. However, if the proposals don't get approved the Council would revert to the original plans to rebuild Astley/Whytrig.</p> <p><i>What options are part of site appraisals?</i></p> <p>Appraisals are currently being undertaken for sites in the ownership of the County Council and others that are not. Unfortunately, due to commercial sensitives, we are not allowed to give any further details or information. As soon as we can give further details we will do so.</p> <p>There will also be a separate consultation event held regarding the agreed site and that is being targeted for April/May 2022.</p> <p>Governors stated that they hadn't been talking about potential sites. However, these discussions have come from the MP and Elected Members. Elected members needed to be reminded about confidentially.</p>	

	SA advised that a Local Members Working Group would be set up and this would be used to share information. The first formal meeting of this group is planned for 2 nd December.	
10.	<u>What are the implications for home to school transport?</u>	
	<p>LF advised that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • School transport and eligibility is arranged in accordance with the Council's Home to School Transport Policy. • If proposal goes ahead, parents will be able to apply to see if they are eligible. • Currently students at Seaton Sluice Middle School may become eligible depending on where they live and the distance or whether it is judged to be a safe walking route. • As part of the decision-making process there will be an analysis of the impact on the transport budget. • Students on roll at Seaton Sluice Middle but who do not live within its catchment area are unlikely to be receiving home to school transport and will probably not become eligible. <p><u>Questions or Comments:</u></p> <p><i>It would be helpful to know whether parents would get transport as it would alloy fears.</i></p> <p>Unfortunately, it is not possible to give any further clarity regarding as eligibility as it's done on an individual basis. Can't say at present who would/wouldn't be eligible for transport.</p> <p><i>Noted that from Seghill the newly formed middle school would be closer. However, don't believe the route for an eight or nine year old is a safe walking route. In a two-tier system a pupil wouldn't undertake this journey until 12 years old.</i></p> <p>If had an individual's address it might be possible to undertake an exercise with our school transport team to determine eligibility and whether safe walking route.</p> <p><i>Has the consultation ignited any discussions on changes of structure from three to two tier?</i></p> <p>Don't believe there have been many comments received so far regarding the two-tier debate.</p>	
11.	<u>Next Steps</u>	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consultation closes on 1st December 2021. • As a governing body encouraged to submit a collective response but also welcomed to submit individual responses. • Feedback from consultation will be reported to the Family and Children's Services Scrutiny Committee on 6th January. Although not got decision making powers, they can and do make recommendations to Cabinet. • Cabinet will decide whether or not to approve formal statutory consultation on 11th January. 	

	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Statutory consultation will go ahead for four weeks and will include a clear proposal on what will happen, why and when.• Final decision will be made in March 2022.• Cabinet could decide not to go ahead with the proposal or could ask offers to look/consult on alternative options or suggestions.	
--	---	--

The meeting closed at 18:30 pm.