

CUMBRIA SCHOOLS FORUM – SCHOOL SIZE WORKING GROUP

Notes of the School Size Working Group held on Wednesday 5 May 2004 at Broughton Craggs Hotel, Cockermouth.

Present: Mr R Alston (Foundation Secondary), Ms R Bugler (Cumbria Governors' Council), Mrs T Eyre (Copeland Primary), Ms S Gaston-Parry (Copeland Secondary), Mr M Yearsley (Community and VC Secondary), Mr A Hodge (LEA). Mrs N Shiels (LEA) also attended.

Apologies: Mr J Douglas, Mr R Rogers, Mrs S Woodburn (representing Mrs R Denby).

Mr M Fox attended the meeting to give a verbal report on Federation issues.

Action

1. Chairman for Meeting

In the absence of Mr J Douglas, Chair of the Working Group, Mr M Yearsley was appointed as acting Chair for the meeting.

2. Notes of Meeting held on 8 March 2004

The notes of the meeting of the School Size Working Group held on 8 March 2004 were agreed as an accurate record.

3. Matters Arising

Any matters arising were covered by items later on the agenda. Two broad issues had emerged from discussions on 8 March – update on federation and information relating to the definition of a small school, eg how small could a school be and continue to be effective?

4. Small Schools - Definitions

A report which gave the definition of a small school in Cumbria and comparisons with other LEAs was considered by the group. In Cumbria small schools were defined at a smaller level than other authorities and there were high numbers of small schools in Cumbria. DfES defined a very small school as having fewer than 75 pupils. Based on this at least one quarter of Cumbria's schools were very small.

In considering the report the group discussed a number of issues including:

- Small Schools Agenda – some of the aims of the SOP were to amalgamate infant and juniors schools where appropriate, to deal with issues regarding surplus places and to carry out reviews either at the request of school governing bodies or when an identified trigger point was reached. Each case would be considered on its individual merits and there always had to be a viable alternative educational provision. Members of the group were not aware of any other small schools agenda, the issue was whether or not small schools were being funded appropriately.
- Comparisons – it was difficult to make comparisons because each authority had different funding mechanisms. There also appeared to be no pattern that illustrated that small schools had more or less in terms of surpluses or deficits.
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- Budget – in particular income generation. The Budget Working Group was looking at financial benchmarking that would include income generated by schools.
- Criteria – whether a school should exist, did it need to be there, geography, etc?
 - this was covered in more detail later on the agenda.
- Minimum Size/Budget – should there be a minimum size for a school regardless of the number of pupils, assuming that the school needed to exist?
- Teaching Commitment of Headteachers – this was unsustainable for some colleagues.

The group agreed that further modelling work be undertaken, starting at funding for 1.5 teaching staff and stepping up at appropriate intervals. Consideration would also need to be given to a “quid pro quo” or “trade off”. If small schools were to be supported in this way then serious consideration would need to be given to whether or not a particular school needed to be there. The working group would revisit this issue at a future meeting of the group.

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5. Federation Issues

Mike Fox had joined the meeting to update the group on federation issues and the current position in Cumbria. A federation was a group of schools (2-5) which were federated under single governing body. A larger federation could be formed by seeking approval from the Secretary of State. The decision of whether to federate would be made by the schools themselves following consultation with parents and interested parties. A federation could be dissolved if it was not working, one school could leave and the rest stay and federation could be with a school from neighbouring authority or could include schools from different phases. Federation could address collective issues to a particular area and provide opportunities for schools in an area to work together in a strategic context. It would not, however, provide a “quick fix” or answer to a problem. If terms of finance, the LEA could allocate under the current scheme an allocation to each school in the federation. That budget would be managed and allocated by the governing body. Alternatively, the scheme could be amended to create a “federation” stream which would allow a formula to be applied to federations.

There were no formal examples of federation in Cumbria. The closest example was the collaborative arrangements between Brough and Ravenstonedale schools.

The group discussed federation as an option. It could certainly be a solution in some areas although it would probably not be cheaper, but it could provide a broader aspect and better opportunities for the children. The group also considered how this could be taken forward and whether the LEA would be proactive in promoting federation. It was suggested that it may be appropriate to ask schools if they wanted to build collaborations or if there were groups that were interested in becoming involved. Also, GSS in conjunction with the Cumbrian Governors’ Council could perhaps work with headteachers to arrange events/activities to explore some of the issues.

T Eyre felt that this may be more a primary issue than a secondary one and asked that some further investigation be undertaken in an attempt to make progress. There may be little or no interest, but at least federation would have been given some proper consideration. During the debate there was a question regarding collaborative funding. A Hodge agreed to look at the collaborate funding in more detail and report back.

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M Fox would continue to work on possible promotion, dialogue and looking at costs with a view to possibly reshaping of budget to provide a pool of funding accessible by federations. It may be necessary for Schools Forum to consider this issue in more detail and if so it would be necessary to identify any advantages

WMAF

6. School Size – School Balances

The group considered a report which gave the expected budget balances for 2003/04 and the correlation with size. The figures illustrated no real pattern, however, the final column did give a more realistic teaching cost per pupil. The budget proforma that had gone to schools requested information relating to contact time, income generation etc. As the information was received, the document would expand and hopefully provide a better illustration of how a school operated, how many teachers it had, etc.

It was also suggested that if it was determined that a school needed to exist, then that school should be funded properly.

It was agreed that a further report, which would consider the possibility of minimum funding for schools, be presented to a future meeting of this group

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7. School Operation Criteria

One of the areas of work identified by the School Size Working Group was the development of criteria that should be met for a school to be in existence. The group considered a report which set out an initial list of criteria. Finance did not appear on the list because if it was felt that a school should exist then there was a view that the school be financed properly. During discussions, health and safety was added to the list. Changes in pupil numbers/birth rates were a problem, particularly for primary schools. The group agreed that a reasoned argument would be needed if there was a move towards a minimum size of school and strong criteria would be required to make any move away from pupil led funding.

8. Any Other Business

Cumbrian Governors' Council Conference – Schools and Community Stability – the conference had been well attended and a rural extended model had been produced which would enable access to regeneration funding. CGC would bring further information to a future meeting of this group if it was felt appropriate.

School Meals – some headteacher colleagues had been referred to School Forum members regarding decisions about school meals. It was noted that Schools Forum did not take decisions, it made recommendations to Cabinet, who then determined what action was taken.

**Nicola Shiels
Education Directorate
5 April 2004**