

Report on informal formative phase of consultation on a proposal to discontinue (close) Manley Village Primary School and a related proposal to initiate split site teaching across both school sites from Alvanley Primary School.

Report of: School Organisation Manager

1 What is the report about?

- 1.1 This report provides detail of the responses to the first formative pre-publication stage of consultation on a proposal to amalgamate Manley Village School and Alvanley Primary School. The consultation was initiated in response to a resolution of the governing body of the two federated schools.
- 1.2 The governing body and the Local Authority have concluded this proposal offers the best prospect for maintaining and sustaining the delivery of high-quality primary education in the villages of Manley and Alvanley.

2 Officer's Recommendations

- 2.1 That the proposal be progressed to the publication of a public notice, but that the planned date for implementation, should the proposal be agreed, be deferred until 01 September 2021.

3 Reasons for the Recommendation

- 3.1 No alternative proposal to address the financial challenges currently faced by the schools has been put forward during the formative stage of consultation.
- 3.2 A deferral of implementation from 01 April 2021 to 01 September 2021 will be financially advantageous to the amalgamated school on account of the additional eligibility for funding that arises from both schools continuing to exist at the beginning of the new financial year.
- 3.3 The criteria relating to the 'presumption against closure of a rural school' have been considered and do not provide sufficient grounds to prevent the discontinuation of Manley Village School.

4 Report Details

- 4.1 In response to the challenge of sustaining small rural schools in the face of falling demand for places these two schools were federated under a combined headship and a single governing body in 2006. Despite amalgamating budgets and introducing the teaching of a 'federated' cohort of children drawn from both schools on a single site the governing body has identified that in future years it will be unable to meet its responsibility to operate the two schools within the available budget.

- 4.2 Following discussion with the Local Authority the governing body has concluded that the most efficient way of deploying its resources would be to combine the teaching of all age groups; with Foundation (Reception) and Key Stage One (Infant) children being taught on one site and Key Stage Two (Junior) children being taught on the other site. Further savings could be made if the two schools were to be combined on account of there no longer being duplicated purchasing of support services.
- 4.3 The current 'federation' arrangement of cohorts drawn from both schools does not allow parents to make decisions based upon certainty about how and where their children will be educated and can cause confusion in the school admission process. An amalgamated school would provide transparency and certainty about future arrangement of teaching and learning and would remove potential confusion and ambiguity from the admissions process as a combined school will have a single catchment area.
- 4.4 A period of pre-publication consultation ran from 05 October 2020 until 08 November 2020 and provided the opportunity for consultees to respond by post, by email, by completion of an on-line questionnaire or through taking up the opportunity to have a face-to-face on-line meeting with LA officers and the headteacher. No-one took up the option of an on-line meeting.
- 4.5 A total of twenty-one responses were received to the on-line questionnaire of which thirteen advised that they were in favour of the proposal, five were unsure about it and three were opposed to it. Four emails were received, three were clearly opposed to the proposal, one expressed strong reservations.
- 4.6 The issues raised by consultees may be summarised as follows (full details of all feedback are appended to the report):
- 4.6.1 **The proposed arrangement whereby siblings may end up being educated on different sites will create logistical difficulties for parents and may lead to additional and increased car journeys. This is not environmentally sustainable and will lead to extra costs for parents. There will be a dangerous level of congestion at Alvanley.**

Transport issues were raised by several respondents, some of whom cited this as their reason for objecting to the proposals, others, including Alvanley Parish Council, were supportive of the proposal but were concerned about congestion at Alvanley.

The school propose to stagger the start and finish time for infant and junior children so that parents have adequate time to drop-off and pick-up at both sites. Currently the school believe there are four families who will potentially have to do this. Staffing arrangements will be implemented to ensure that no child needs to arrive at school before there is supervision in place or will be left unsupervised at school at the end of the day before being picked up. It is recognised that there will be a small element of additional travel; based on the current school population, the school have calculated this as a net increase of 12 return journeys (2.8 miles return distance) at either end of the school day. This is without consideration of whether any of these additional journeys would have occurred if the schools were to continue to operate 'federation' classes

without amalgamating. Coronavirus regulations currently mean the schools cannot mitigate this additional travel by promoting car-sharing arrangements between households or beyond a support bubble. The school is unlikely to be able to meet the cost of minibus travel between the two school sites as suggested by one respondent.

- 4.6.2 **Requiring my child to go to both schools is ignoring the choice that I made to send my child(ren) to a particular school. The proposal will mean larger class sizes, I chose for my child to go to a school with small class sizes. My child is anxious about having to go to the other school. More chance of making friends in a bigger class. Better for the children than being in a federation class that moves between the two buildings.**

Several of the objections were on the basis that the proposal removed the choice that parents had made for one or other school and that the basis for this choice had been the very small class size; other respondents felt that the increased class size that would result from amalgamation would be a positive benefit. Some parents expressed concerns about the anxiety that would arise from having to change buildings whilst others thought that this proposal would provide children (and parents) with greater certainty and stability than the current 'federation' class arrangement.

The proposed class sizes will be no larger than the class sizes that children in this LA and nationally are generally taught in. Children in reception class will continue to be taught in a significantly smaller class size. The current small sizes of the classes, with a consequently expensive teacher-to-pupil ratio, is at the heart of the financial challenge the schools face. The necessity of creating 'federated classes' drawn from pupils at both schools means this aspect of parental choice is already being disregarded with the potential for child and parental anxiety.

- 4.6.3. **There is already a shortage of primary school places in Helsby and this proposal will make the situation worse.**

A respondent from Helsby raised this issue.

A 'spike' in the size of the birth cohorts that recently entered and will be imminently entering primary education is leading to a short-term pressure on places in some cohorts at the two Helsby primary schools. It remains probable that most Helsby residents will be able to secure a place at one of these schools although the historic ability for Elton residents to access a primary school place in Helsby rather than at their local school may be compromised. Historically there have been surplus places at Alvanley or Manley even when either of the Helsby schools has been fully subscribed. Whilst the formal Published Admission Number (PAN) for the amalgamated school would be slightly less than the combined PAN of the existing schools there will remain scope for 'over-PAN' admissions to the majority of cohorts.

4.6.4 Amalgamation means both schools will remain open. Manley is a perfect size for infants and Alvanley is for juniors. Will mean better use of limited resources. Sadly this will mean staff cuts.

Whilst some respondents gave no specific reason for their agreement with the proposal others supported the proposal on the basis that it made best use of resources whilst retaining the use of both school buildings.

These respondents recognised that the motivation for the proposal is to make best use of the limited resources available to the federated governing body whilst maintaining an educational presence in both communities (although there was a suggestion that an amalgamated school might consider adopting a name that transcended the locations of the buildings). It is recognised that amalgamation will result in the need for fewer staff, where possible it is hoped that this reduction can be achieved through natural wastage or voluntary redundancy.

5 Consideration of the Presumption against closure of a Rural School

- 5.1 Manley Village School is classified as a rural school and will technically be closed if these related proposals are agreed. Closure of a rural school requires that due consideration be accorded to specified factors before making a decision in favour of closure.
- 5.2 The proposal has been formulated to minimise the impact on the local community by ensuring that education continues to be delivered in both villages and remains accessible to children from the local community, with both school buildings remaining available for community use.
- 5.3 Both schools have been found to be 'Good' schools by Ofsted, the proposal has been formulated to enable available resources to be most efficiently used to support the delivery of effective education. The nature of the proposal is such that it is highly unlikely to have an impact upon the standard of education at neighbouring schools.
- 5.4 The proposal has been formulated to sustain the deliverability of education in the two villages and to avoid the potential for children from the villages to have to be transported to a more distant school to receive their education in the event of closure without amalgamation of either or both of the federated schools. It is possible that some families not currently eligible for travel assistance could become eligible for such assistance when their children are members of the year group attending the more distant school, although it is likely that such eligibility will already exist for a large proportion of pupils on account of the hazardous routes that many children currently have to take to reach either school.
- 5.5 Although proposed for 'technical' closure Manley Village School will remain essential to the LA's ability to discharge its duties to secure a sufficiency of primary school places in the local area through its role in accommodating younger children attending the proposed amalgamated school.

- 5.6 It is recognised that there is potential for a marginal increase (based upon the current school population the school have calculated this would impact upon a maximum of twelve sets of daily journeys) in the distance travelled by motor vehicles to transport children in the years in which they would attend the further school. The distance between the schools is 1.4 miles. Whilst this would be considered a walkable distance a short section of the route is likely to be considered hazardous unless the safety of walkers can be improved. The Council's Highways Commissioner has been requested to consider the viability of improving the walking route.
- 5.7 The schools were federated in 2006 as an alternative to a proposal for closure at the time. Whilst this arrangement provides many financial benefits these are no longer sufficient to enable the federated governing body to discharge its budgetary responsibilities.