

# Education and Children's Services Scrutiny Committee

## Federating Schools in Carmarthenshire – Draft report

January 2020



# Education and Children's Services Scrutiny Committee One Day Investigative Scrutiny Review

## Federating Schools in Carmarthenshire

At the Education and Children's Services (ECS) Scrutiny Committee Forward Work Programme meeting held on the 5<sup>th</sup> June 2019, Members asked for a focused scrutiny review on the federating of schools within the Authority. The ECS Scrutiny Committee held on the 4<sup>th</sup> July 2019 agreed in principle that the review would be held on the 6<sup>th</sup> November 2019.

The Committee has a key role to play in monitoring services, development of key policies and strategies, as well as identifying areas for improvement or development within their remit.

Guidance for governing bodies and local authorities on the process of federating maintained schools in Wales was issued by the Welsh Government in May 2014. The guidance outlines the process in relation to governing body led federations and local authority led federations, and to date, this authority has not led the federating of schools. However, it is likely that the authority would lead schools to federate as part of future plans.

### **Elected & Co-opted Members**

At the meeting of the Education and Children Scrutiny Committee on the 4<sup>th</sup> September 2019 the Committee agreed to endorse the scoping document and appoint a review group to consider the evidence required to fulfil the main aims of the review. The Committee also agreed that all Committee Members should attend the review.

Membership of the review group –

Cllr Darren Price (Chair)

Cllr Kim Broom

Cllr Jean Lewis

Cllr Dot Jones

Cllr Ieuan Davies

Mrs Melanie Jones

### **Advisors / Support Officers**

Officers from the Department of Education and Children's Services and Democratic Services.

### **The main aims of the review**

1. To gather and consider evidence from staff, parents and governors of schools who are, or have been, involved in the federating process.
2. To review the support currently available for federating schools.
3. To identify good practice and common issues encountered.
4. Assist Members in gaining a clear understanding of the issue, to identify possible best practice, evaluate current process and shape future process.
5. To consider whether available support is sufficient to meet the needs of schools.

### **Scope of the study**

The study considered the views and experiences of four schools that have been through, or are going through, the federating process, and the viewpoint of officers involved in the process.

## **Overview**

The ECS Scrutiny Committee appointed six Members to form a working group to review the evidence required to satisfy the scope of the study and the main aims of the review. The Working Group met on two occasions, and in collaboration with the Department of Education and Children's Services developed a format for the investigation and a shortlist of schools to invite to submit evidence. To gather as much evidence as possible an online survey was also circulated to all primary school federations, to which eight responses were received from four schools.

The following reports were considered or referenced in forming the investigation –

1. Federated Schools – Common features of effective federation - Published by Estyn (July 2019)
2. Federation process of maintained schools in Wales- Guidance for governing bodies and local authorities. Published by Welsh Government (May 2014)

The group noted that the first of these reports contained examples of good practice in Carmarthenshire. The group also referenced the 'Self-evaluation questions for federation', (Appendix 1) of the report by Estyn when developing a format for the investigation.

Seven outline areas of investigation were identified, and a set of questions (Appendix 2) were developed based on the following –

- The experience of federating
- Impact on staff and pupils
- Impact on performance, curriculum and wellbeing
- Impact on leadership and administration
- Governance and community
- Finance
- Future arrangements

Questions were circulated in advance to those federations and schools invited to give evidence to the ECS Committee and separately to all other federated primary schools as an online survey.

The group invited two formal federations and two schools which had informally federated and subsequently decided against formally federating -

- Federation of Carwe, Gwynfryn and Ponthenri Primary Schools
- The Abernant, Cynwyl Elfed and Llanpumsaint Primary School Federation
- Swiss Valley C.P School
- Dafen Primary School (Unable to attend)

The inquiry was held on the 6<sup>th</sup> November 2019 over two sessions. The morning session heard evidence from the school and federations listed above. The afternoon session reviewed the evidence heard during the morning session with representatives from the Department of Education and Children's Services and Mr Andi Morgan, the former Head of Education Services.

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**Following a review of the evidence gathered, the Committee recognised the following as good practice in relation to federating schools –**

**1 - Through consultation and engagement, develop a clear vision of the federation, with a focus on improvement of provision, opportunity and standards; and develop and share this vision effectively with schools, parents, Local Council Members and Governing Bodies.**

Of the federations and schools reviewed, the most successful federations had a clear understanding of the purpose of federating and the long-term benefits for pupils and the communities involved. The most successful federations also shared the vision openly and were transparent in their reasons for federating.

Most federations noted that in the early stages there was some resistance to federating, with the most common reasons for opposition being loss of identity and a negative impact on standards. However, the committee noted that at the end of the process almost all federations reported that parents and the local community were in support of the federation and viewed the experience positively and noted the increased opportunities for all pupils.

**2 - A proposed management structure should be agreed between Governing Bodies ahead of a progression to formal federation and a senior leader identified for each site.**

Almost all federations reported the sharing of Headteacher time, particularly across sites, as a significant issue in the early stages of federating; due in part to concerns from parents over the absence of a Headteacher on each site, and the view that this equated in the long term to a reduction in standards and quality of learning. Some schools also noted that parents were often unsure who to approach in the absence of the Headteacher which caused some frustration. The Committee reviewed the arrangements in a number of federations and agreed that a single leadership structure that would not suit all. However, it was noted that once a leader was appointed at each site within a federation, concerns decreased, and a more positive view of federating was formed. As such the Committee noted the importance of implementing a management structure as soon as practicable at the outset of the process.

**3 – Arrangements should be in place within formal and informal federations to allow sufficient non-teaching time for headteachers or leaders.**

All federations shared some concerns regarding the additional time required by headteachers to deal with the practicalities of maintaining multiple budgets, sites and staff. This was often compounded by the amount of time spent travelling between sites on a regular basis. As such, federations should have a clear understanding of the role of the headteacher within a federation and allow additional provision of non-teaching time.

**4 - Undertake regular formal reviews of Finance, Human Resources, Operations and Governance; and where possible consider available specialist support for schools within formal or informal federations.**

Almost all federations reported that they had received a good level of support from the Local Authority and felt supported throughout the process. However, some federations reported that the process was confusing and there were long periods of time where very little progress would be made. The Committee believed that the introduction of formal reviews would provide the federation with an opportunity to monitor progress and plan for the next review period.

**5 - A clear timescale of any federation should be considered early in the federating process.**

In considering the good practice identified in point 4, the Committee received some evidence from some federations in relation to the amount of time taken to complete the process of federating. To ensure that the process does not take longer than necessary the Committee considered that a timeline should be set at the outset and incorporated as part of the review noted above.

**6 - Consider relevant training and support for existing and proposed members of the Governing Body.**

In reviewing the evidence gathered the Committee acknowledged that Governors of federated schools experience some challenges when federating; from the evidence gathered the main challenge related to progressing from governing a small rural school to governing several schools across different sites. The Committee heard evidence from the Department of Education and Children's Services in relation to the support available from the Local Authority and also through ERW and the Welsh Government. The Committee considered that federations and the Local Authority should make good use of the guidance available throughout the process and ensure that Governing Bodies are supported through this period of change.

**7 - Plan to share good practice with other federations.**

Almost all federations agreed that sharing best practice with other schools or federations helped improve working practices. Most federations sought similar federations to their own to share experiences and obtain practical support.

Members considered the initiatives of an established federation in the creation of an app to share information with parents, the creation of a blog for pupils to share news across sites and recognised the creative use of IT within classrooms. The Committee were keen to ensure that good practice initiatives such as these were shared, and federations encouraged to continue with any current arrangements and remain open to new opportunities.

From the evidence gathered it was unclear whether federations share good practice between Governing Bodies. The Committee viewed that federations and the Local Authority should endeavour to do so.

**8 – Take steps to fully understand the financial implications of federating and how budgets and finances can be shared.**

Almost all federations listed sharing pooled resources as one of the main reasons for federating and usually federating had a positive impact on overall finances. The Committee noted that costs relating to transporting pupils between sites was an additional cost, usually shared between all schools within a federation.

A few federations gave evidence referencing the workload in relation to maintaining several budgets and the increase in administration as a result. In instances where there was insufficient administrative support the work often fell to the headteacher. The Committee noted that there was some funding available for federations which could be used for this purpose.

As noted at point 6, a significant amount of support is available from the Local Authority and federations should make use of this to fully understand the financial implications of federating.

**9 – Consider employing all future staff through the formal federation, and the transfer of existing staff from employment by individual school to employment by the federation.**

The most effective federations evidenced considerable sharing of staff expertise to increase learning opportunities and standards across all sites. To facilitate this, staff were employed by the federation and not by an individual school; this can impede deployment to another site. The Committee noted that sharing skills was a key benefit of federating and that being able to do so freely should be a priority; and moving all staff to federated contracts should be undertaken as soon as possible.

The Committee acknowledged the restrictions relative to Voluntary Aided and Voluntary Controlled schools.

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**Reference Documents**

Federation process of maintained schools in Wales- Guidance for governing bodies and local authorities (May 2014). <https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2018-03/federation-process-of-maintained-schools-in-wales-guidance-for-governing-bodies-and-local-authorities.pdf>

Estyn Thematic Report- Federated schools - Common features of effective federation- <https://www.estyn.gov.wales/sites/www.estyn.gov.wales/files/documents/Federated%20schools%20en.pdf>

Scrutiny in Carmarthenshire – Scrutiny Committee and Task & Finish Group Participants Charter and guidance for participants.

<file:///A:\ntcarmcc\cftp\Democracy\DEMOCRATIC%20MLG\Scrutiny%20Committees\SCRUTINY%20PARTICIPANT%20CHARTER\Scrutiny%20Participant%20Charter%202019%20Working%20Document.doc>

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### Appendix 1: Self-evaluation questions for federation

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When engaging in the federation process, governors, the local authority and senior leaders should consider the following key questions:

- Are they clear about the long-term aims of the federation and how these will secure good outcomes for learners?
- How will they work with all stakeholders, including parents, learners and staff from all schools, to shape the vision and aims for the federation?
- How will they ensure a balance between maintaining each school's individual identity and developing a sense of a larger, combined learning community?
- What arrangements will they put in place to ensure that stakeholders are clear about the meaning of federation, the process and the implications for each school?
- How will they use existing federations to illustrate existing good practice?
- Have they considered the success of any previous collaboration between the schools?
- Have they gauged whether the schools are in close enough proximity to support effective collaborative working?
- How will they use federation to generate financial efficiencies to improve outcomes for pupils?
- How will they share existing good practice from all schools to support improvements in standards of teaching and learning?
- How will they use the opportunity of federation to improve leadership at all levels?
- What arrangements will they put in place to ensure the appointment of an effective and well-informed executive headteacher?
- How will governors and senior leaders ensure effective arrangements for the leadership and management of each school in the headteacher's absence?

### **Question 1 - Please could you share with the panel your experiences of the federating process?**

**The panel would like to find out about the experiences of schools during the process of becoming a federation. Please consider the following when formulating an answer -**

What has worked/hasn't worked?

What are the advantages/ disadvantages?

How easy did you find the process of federating?

Is there anything you would change about the process?

What arrangements did you have in place to ensure that stakeholders were clear about the meaning of federation, the process and the implications for each school?

Did you consider the experiences of other federations during the process?

How did you evaluate whether the schools were in close enough proximity to support effective collaborative working?

### **Question 2 - Please could you share with the panel any impact federating has had on staff and pupils?**

**Then panel would like to hear about the impact federating has had on the staff and pupils within the federation. Please consider the following when formulating an answer -**

How have the staff adapted to being part of a federation?

How have the pupils adapted to being a part of a federation?

How collaboratively do the schools work together and what are your examples?

### **Question 3 - Please could you share with the panel any impact federating has had on performance, curriculum and wellbeing?**

**The panel would like to hear about the impact federating has had on some specific areas within the schools, particularly in relation to standards, staff wellbeing, curriculum and resources. Please consider the following when formulating an answer -**

Have standards / outcomes at the schools improved as a result of being federated?

Do you think that federating has had an impact on staff health and wellbeing?

Does the federation provide a broader curriculum and offer wider social opportunities for pupils?

Are they clear about the long-term aims of the federation and how these will secure good outcomes for learners?

Has the federation had an impact on falling number on rolls and tightening school budgets?

Has federating enabled you to pool resources and expertise?

Has federating facilitated improved professional development opportunities for staff?

### **Question 4 - Please could share with the panel any impact federating has had on day to day leadership and administration?**

**The panel would like to gain an understanding on the impact of federating on the headteacher and/or administrative team, and how operational pressures are identified and resolved. Please consider the following when formulating an answer -**

What are the main challenges facing the headteacher of a federation?

How does the headteacher manage their time between schools?  
How does the headteacher manage their workload?  
How did governors and senior leaders ensure effective arrangements for the leadership and management of each school in the headteacher's absence?  
Has the federation provided staff with opportunities for professional development?  
What are the arrangements for administrative staff?  
Has federating led to improved leadership?

**Question 5 – Please could share with the panel your experiences of federating in relation to the Governing Body and the local community?**

**The panel would like to hear about the impact of federating on the Governing Body and the Community. Please consider the following when formulating an answer -**

How have the governors adapted to managing a federation?  
How did parents adapt to the federation?  
Has there been increased workloads for governors?  
How will they ensure a balance between maintaining each school's individual identity and developing a sense of a larger, combined learning community?  
What arrangements did you have in place to ensure the appointment of an effective and well-informed headteacher?

**Question 6 - How did federating affect financial management and budgets?**

**The panel would like to understand how finances are affected by federating and whether there are any financial benefits to federating schools. Please consider the following when formulating an answer -**

Does it provide value for money by pooling resources and expertise?  
Have budgetary reductions for small schools had a significant effect on the federation?  
Has federating allowed you to generate financial efficiencies?

**Question 7 - How might federating affect the future of your schools?**

**The panel would like to hear your views on your vision for the future of your federation, or how your decision not to federate will shape the future of your school. Please consider the following when formulating an answer -**

How will they share existing good practice from all schools to support improvements in standards of teaching and learning?  
How will they use existing federations to illustrate existing good practice?  
How will they work with all stakeholders, including parents, learners and staff from all schools, to shape the vision and aims for the federation?  
Would you recommend being part of a federation?  
Do you think your federation, as it is, will still remain in five or ten years?  
How could your decision not to federate impact on the future of your school?