

ESSEX PRIMARY HEADTEACHERS' ASSOCIATION

**MEETING OF THE EPHA SMALL SCHOOLS SUPPORT GROUP
HELD ON WEDNESDAY 16 MARCH 2023 3.30 – 5.10 pm**

Venue online

Clerk Pam Langmead [TEL: 01621-786359/07791 143277]

1. IN ATTENDANCE

Lisa Anstey	Chigwell Row Infants
Ruth Baugh	White Notley CE Primary
Ruth Cornell	Fingringhoe CE Primary
Judith Dale	Baynards Primary
Sam Dunne	Colne Engaine Primary
Emma Flin	Great Yeldham CE Primary
Julie Ingram	Chappel CE Primary
Jenny Kemp	Latchingdon CE Primary
Llewellen Lawson	Dr Walker's CE Primary, Fyfield
Becky More	Rivenhall Primary
Jinnie Nichols	Chorus Schools Federation – Chair
Sarah Stevenson	Langenhoe Primary
Kirsty Stuart	Ridgewell CE Primary
Pam Langmead	EPHA Professional Officer
Simon Wakeman	Coastal Together
Sean Tobin	Berlesduna Multi Academy Trust

2. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Phil Andrews	Rettendon Primary
Emily Bartram	Radwinter CE Primary
Charlotte Brown	Messing Primary
Pippa Edlin	Woodham Walter Primary
Martin Hawrylak	Stisted Primary
Becky Keitch	St George's CE Primary
Maire O'Regan	Roxwell CE Primary/Ford End CE Primary
Andrew MacDonald	Langham Primary
Samina Metsom	Finchingfield Primary
Stephanie Newland	St Margaret's CE Primary, Toppesfield
Melissa Taylor	Margaretting CE Primary
Danielle Welsman	Stisted Primary
Samantha Wilding	St Andrew's CE Primary, Marks Tey
Lyndsey Wood	St Cedd's CE Primary, Bradwell

Jinnie Nichols, Chair of the SSSG, welcomed everyone to the meeting.

3. **MINUTES AND MATTERS ARISING**

The minutes of the meeting held on 18th January 2023 were approved as an accurate record. The follow matters arising were noted:

a) **Small Schools Group conference (Minute 3b refers)**

The Professional Officer confirmed that this has been booked at the Lion Inn on Wednesday 18th October 2023. Minute 4 also refers.

b) **Suspension and permanent exclusion training for small school governors (Minute 3c refers)**

This took place on Monday 6th March with around 18 governors in attendance. The training was well received, and Pam has now organised three more dates for any governor across Essex to attend. the dates are

- Wednesday 29th March at 6.00 pm OR
- Wednesday 19th April at 4.00 pm OR
- Thursday 11th May at 6.00 pm

Governors (or staff) who wish to attend any of the sessions should email Pam to reserve a place, and to receive the links and paperwork in advance of the training.

Headteachers were also reminded that EPHA is running all-day training on suspensions and permanent exclusions, led by Tanya Callman. 110 headteachers attended the session held on 3rd March, and this will be repeated on Wednesday 3rd May; please contact Pam if you would like a place. Headteachers who attended in March noted that the training was extremely comprehensive and well delivered.

c) **National Association of Small Schools (Minute 4 refers)**

The Professional Officer confirmed that she has set up and paid the membership fee for small schools to join NASS, and headteachers confirmed that they had received a welcome email from the association. The Spring term newsletter was circulated in advance of the meeting and it was noted that Pam had written an article which had been published in that newsletter. NASS is holding online meetings on Monday 27th March at 6.00 pm and on Tuesday 28th March at 1.45 pm; the Professional Officer will attend one of the meetings, and small schools headteachers are also invited to join if they are available.

All other matters arising were addressed during the meeting.

3. **FEDERATION OF SMALL SCHOOLS**

Simon Wakeman, CEO of Coastal Together, was welcomed to the meeting. Jinnie noted that there has been a lot of interest in federation as an alternative to joining a MAT, though there are relatively few in Essex. She has just gone through the process of adding a third school to the Chorus Federation, but it has been a complicated and time-consuming process.

Simon introduced himself, explaining that he is a real advocate for federation, but not an expert. He noted that there are a growing number of federations in Norfolk, but there is also a mix of school structures, including maintained schools and MATs.

Simon shared a number of slides which will be shared with the group.

He outlined his professional journey to becoming Executive Director of Coastal Together, which is now a 6-school federation. His aim in federating is to improve outcomes for children. The six schools are all small, the smallest having just 34 children and the largest 134, with 650 children spread across the Federation. The Federation has grown over a timeframe of 8 years, starting with the federation of three coastal schools, and then including 3 additional schools from the Together Partnership. Since 2021 they have included a SEMH base and four pre-schools.

He explained his view of why governors decide to form federations, usually out of necessity:

- Protection of village schools which are at the heart of a community (together we are stronger and have greater capacity when working together)
- Improved outcomes for learners
- Economies of scale/shared procurement
- Flexible staff – shared expertise through Federation Subject leaderships or specialism in multiple schools
- Professional community – CPD
- Shared costs of in house training when schools are working together on improvement issues
- Depth for growth of leadership roles – improved retention of high quality staff
- Significant administrative roles will be dealt with centrally allowing Heads of Schools and their teams to focus on teaching and learning – leading to improved outcomes
- Local Governing will have a sharper focus on learning and community functions

The staffing structure across the Federation is specific and unique; Simon explained that it wouldn't have been affordable or sustainable to have an Executive head and 6 headteachers across the schools. Instead the following structure has been developed:



The structure offers significant benefits to teachers in small schools, who now have other colleagues in the same key stage to share planning and curriculum expertise.

The Federation pays as much as possible for the business manager roles, separated out to cover finance and HR, and premises management. The finance business manager is a qualified accountant, and she generates a lot of income through grant applications and so on. They employ a highly paid Site Manager, and an Assistant Site Manager; as they are well qualified they are able to carry out a range of maintenance and construction jobs across the six schools.

The Federation also employs a Safeguarding Practitioner, as there are significant safeguarding and social needs among the pupils and their families.

One continuous challenge for a group of federated schools is the relentless pressure of Ofsted inspection; however, the advantage is learning from each inspection, which can then be used to support other schools waiting for the call.

Simon explained that they have been able to attract a different calibre of governor, who are able to offer greater challenge than has previously been the case. The governance structure has been streamlined with a single Governing Body, and each school has a dedicated School Effectiveness Governor, who knows their school inside and out, and has a half termly meeting with Federation leaders.

After about three years of discussion, the local authority allowed the schools in the Federation to amalgamate their budgets, saving a huge amount of time and cost in administration. Simon's approach, and that of the Federation, is that there is "one lot of money, supporting one lot of children." This has, at times, been a big issue for governors, who have been reluctant to give up a part of their school's budget to support another school.

Jinnie noted that this has been a barrier in Essex; ideally she would like to pool the budgets of the three schools in the Chorus Federation, but currently the LA will not facilitate this, stating that they would then only receive one lump sum for the three joined schools. She noted that there would be a huge efficiency saving by joining the administration of the three separate budgets, but this is not possible at this time.

Simon was thanked for attending the meeting and for his presentation. He said that he would be happy for headteachers to contact him directly if they wanted more information about the federation process and the benefits that they have experienced. Simon can be contacted at s.wakeman@coastaltogether.co.uk

4. ESSEX TASKFORCE CONTRIBUTION TO SMALL SCHOOLS

Professional Officer reminded the group that at the last meeting the headteachers considered the proposal from the Essex Education Taskforce to run an additional wellbeing conference for small school headteachers. It was agreed in January that this would cause problems in terms of being able to get out of school and, instead, it was suggested that the Taskforce should be asked to support the annual conference, which is scheduled for

Wednesday 18th October. The Taskforce has agreed to this alternative suggestion and will contribute towards the cost of the conference.

The Professional Officer proposed that the conference should be extended into the afternoon, with a focus on wellbeing after lunch. This was agreed, and it was also suggested that gift bags would be popular with delegates. Pam will work on this.

Professional
Officer

5. **NATIONAL SMALL SCHOOLS ROUND TABLE**

Sean Tobin was welcomed to the meeting. The group was reminded that he attended a meeting of the Small Schools group last July, to tell heads about his work on the National Small Schools Round Table. This is a group that was commissioned by the DfE to look at the challenges facing small schools and how these can be supported by inclusion in a multi academy trust. The group has been working on a research paper and Sean fed back on some of the findings. The Round Table had considered a range of issues including the challenges of rural schools, including transport and geography, as well as limited capacity and, often, great need. Sean noted that the group has fed back a number of recommendations to the DfE and he agreed to share the report with the small schools group via the Professional Officer. The next meeting of the National Small Schools Round Table is on Monday 20th March, and Sean agreed to feed back any progress from that meeting.

Sean Tobin

Sean commented that he had been very interested in the federative approach outlined by Simon Wakeman, noting that this felt very similar to a MAT model. Indeed, the Coastal Together federation goes further than many MATs as it holds the schools' budgets centrally and dictates a federation-wide curriculum approach.

6. **ANY OTHER BUSINESS AND SUGGESTED ITEMS FOR FUTURE MEETINGS**

The Professional Officer suggested that Clare Kershaw, Director of Education, should be invited to the next meeting to talk about the Local Authority's strategy to support small schools, particularly now that the DfE focus is no longer on system-wide academisation. An increasing number of headteachers in small schools are struggling and a worrying number are resigning from headship, some well before their retirement age. There is real concern that some schools may be left without a leadership team, and it is felt that sometimes the support from the LA is only forthcoming when the school is in absolute crisis. It was **AGREED** that Pam should ask Clare Kershaw to attend the next meeting.

Professional
Officer

Jinnie thanked the headteachers who attended the meeting, and asked them to encourage other small school headteachers to attend.

7. **DATES AND TIMES OF MEETINGS FOR THE 2022/23 SCHOOL YEAR**

- Wednesday 10th May 2023
- Thursday 13th July 2023

Meetings to be held online (unless otherwise indicated) starting at 3.30 pm

The meeting ended at 5.10 pm