



VILLAGE SCHOOLS CREATE NEW “DOWNLAND VILLAGE SCHOOLS FEDERATION”

13th May 2020. Two small, village schools in the rural South Downs – Rake and Rogate C of E primaries - today agreed to form the new **Downland Village Schools Federation (DVSF)**, following a successful two-year partnership.

The two schools formed a partnership two summers ago, agreeing to share Rake’s headteacher, **David Bertwistle**, and business manager, form a joint senior leadership team and work towards a deep level of collaboration.

As a result, Rogate had its ‘academy order’ rescinded by the regional school commissioner and, with the help of a package of school-to-school support from Rake, funded by the LA, Rogate accelerated its school improvement plan and achieved a ‘Good’ rating by Ofsted last September – followed just 3 weeks later by Rake retaining its ‘Good’ rating from Ofsted in a surprise inspection.

With strong encouragement from the diocese and local authority, the schools and their governors have steadily deepened their collaboration, co-ordinating their curriculum and school improvement plans, arranging joint STEM and arts days, visits and sports coaching for their pupils. With money raised from local charities by the governors, they have upgraded the schools’ IT infrastructure and linked them with a joint Microsoft 365 platform, enabling their staff to share work and resources freely and to manage virtual meetings and introduce more modern systems.

Since last September, the two boards of governors have held a number of joint meetings and training sessions, including agreeing joint visions and values for their schools. They have also worked with the local authority and diocesan education staffs and met with governors and senior staff of academies and federations in East and West Sussex to assess the benefits of a more formal, permanent union. In the Spring term, they finally decided to launch a formal “statement of intent” to federate, and started a six-week consultation involving surveys of parents and staff at the two schools, and letters to / discussions with local parish councils and church benefices, the Diocese of Chichester and West Sussex County Council.

At meetings yesterday and today, both boards of governors reviewed the results of this consultation and agreed that they were overwhelmingly in favour of the proposals. They therefore voted unanimously to form the new federation, dissolving the two existing boards of governors (total 17 members) and forming one new board of 12 members. The LA has already selected one governor (local county councillor **Kate O’Kelly**, currently a Rake governor), the diocese has agreed three (including both local rectors), and elections starting today will select two parent and one staff governor (as well as the executive headteacher). These eight will have their first meeting on 10th June and select the four further “co-opted” governors. To ensure continuity and school knowledge, these will initially be chosen from the existing boards, with the remaining current governors asked to join local school committees to safeguard the individual strengths of the two schools.

Executive headteacher David Bertwistle paid tribute to the governors of both schools: “I am hugely proud of what has been achieved at both schools while we have been working in partnership. Whilst it has been hard work all members of the school community have benefited, children, parents, staff and governors. Many people will not realise the debt we owe to the thousands of volunteers that sign up for this responsible governance role, but I know our parents realise that they are especially lucky with the governors we have had.

“Rogate’s governors initiated the move towards partnership two years ago, to save their school from likely closure, and Rake’s board met the challenge willingly. They have worked tirelessly, along with the senior leadership and staff of the school, to help us make sure it was a success for both schools – and sets of children – and then to analyse the benefits and explore the options for deepening and making it permanent. It turns out that Rogate was a good school, with a great team, just needing a fair chance. I am excited to have the opportunity to show how much more we can all do.”

Chair of governors at Rake when the partnership was formed, and currently co-chair, **Nik Taylor**, says: “When we first agreed to this partnership, I think we all thought it was right that our C of E school should help out a neighbour going

through a hard time, and we were also happy to let David take on this extra challenge – we felt the extra fulfilment and experience he gained would benefit both schools and their children.

“That was all true but it steadily grew on us that this was not just Rake helping out Rogate, but an increasingly equal partnership benefitting both schools, their pupils (including mine!), their communities and generations of children to come. I think the two-year ‘engagement’ was the right way to start the relationship and I look forward to seeing it mature and strengthen, as I’m sure it will.”

Neil Ryder, chair of governors at Rogate, complimented the staff and governors at Rake: “Our board had spent over a year looking at the potential benefits of partnership even before we approached Rake,” he said, “whereas they came to it from scratch. We had also had the time to study the form of their headteacher and the rest of the school, so we knew we were onto a good thing – whereas they were taking a step into the dark. We owe them – and our own staff and parents - a big vote of thanks for giving us the chance, and I hope we have started to pay some of that back.

“We are the first new federation in West Sussex since the local authority brought out its new ‘school effectiveness strategy’ in summer 2018, encouraging small schools to group together, and we’ve had to work hard to find our own way through this maze. We’ve had other small schools asking us about our experience so far, because they are considering similar moves, and we’ve been told them it’s not been easy but that we think we are now showing there is a good future for at least some of our small village schools – that we are managing to hang onto the specific strengths of both schools while building a more sustainably viable future and a better pupil experience for both. I agree with David that the future prospects are exciting. ”

Nigel Jupp, West Sussex cabinet member for education and skills, said: “I congratulate both schools for this considerable achievement, which is the result of much detailed planning, cooperation and hard work by so many. It is especially pleasing to see the positive results this partnership is already having on all members of the school communities, especially its pupils.

“Rake and Rogate are a shining example to schools who are looking to form partnerships that an open mind and a willingness to share resources and expertise can have big benefits for all, and we will support schools through the process.”

Gillian Keegan, local MP and parliamentary under secretary of state at the Department for Education where she is the minister responsible for apprenticeships and skills, Commented: “Rake and Rogate are brilliant examples of how schools can work together to enrich their education offer to children. Their partnership to date has already provided children with fantastic opportunities such as their joint STEM day which I enjoyed attending last year. I am thrilled this collaborative approach is continuing and deepening as it will only further benefit the education of their pupils and secure the future of small rural primary schools. I look forward to my next visit, when possible, to congratulate the governors, leadership and staff in person.”

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NOTES TO EDITORS:

Extract from response to the consultation by Paul Wagstaff, director of education and skills, WSCC:

“Much has been achieved by both schools in recent years through their partnership working and I am confident that the next step will strengthen provision further. The Governors of both schools have come to their decision to federate with a carefully considered rationale.”

Extract from response to the consultation by Trevor Cristin, director of education, Diocese of Chichester:

“The Diocese has been using the example of your partnership and federation journey and the things you have learnt along the way to support and advise other Church schools, particularly the importance of focusing on putting children at the centre of decision-making.”