



Report from Rogate school to the parish council

At a time when an insidious bug is causing widespread grief and uncertainty, and affecting so many aspects of our way of life, when the village pub is still shut, the shop is for sale and the village hall is struggling, it's good to be able to report that the first pillar of the community that started looking dodgy is bouncing back in a big way – thanks to our own versions of 'local heroes'! In order to report on the latest year, we need to set the scene quickly . . .

Four years ago (January 2016) Ofsted came and rated the school as inadequate, and put it into special measures. The new head promptly left, closely followed by 20 or so children – a quarter of the pupil population (and therefore income). Soon afterwards, the department of education issued an academy order, in effect meaning the school had to join an academy trust or close. The local authority (LA) posted in an interim headteacher, and a temporary, professional chair of governors to "refresh" the board of governors. The head focussed on the three Rs while the chair sorted out the compliance issues and, when Ofsted came back in June 2017, they raised the school's rating a notch to 'requires improvement'. That was an important step in rebuilding local confidence in the school and it was time to rebuild its traditional strengths as a small, rural, village school – deeply involved in its local community and with a caring, family Christian ethos to match – which required a different leadership style.

By June 2018, when they both moved on, the governors had been exploring strategic options for some time. It was clear that, as a C of E school, the only academy trust we were allowed to join was the diocese one (DCAT – diocese of Chichester academy trust) – but the regional school commissioner (the local supremo representing the government's department of education) did not believe DCAT had the resources or experience to support a tiny village school right up in the South Downs (its existing schools were all down in the coastal strip). The LA was therefore under pressure to close the school, but we had spent months working with them, and with other local school governors, to develop other ideas. We had concluded that all small rural schools were too volatile to be sustainable in their current form. With a maximum of 15 pupils in each year group, some of whom defected to private schools for the latter part of their primary years, they often had such small numbers of pupils by the final year (Rogate had just two in 2018) that their 'pupil outcomes' (SATs result) were not a reliable measure of their educational success. With just 4 full-time teachers, all of them (no matter what their experience) needed to manage a mixed-age class, as well as lead two or more subjects – and the loss of any one of them on maternity leave, promotion or ill health caused major ructions. In any case, could a school with less than 100 pupils really justify a full-time head, business manager and caretaker of its own?

So when our head resigned two years ago, we were ready to seize the opportunity. We immediately started talking to the heads and governors of other local schools and concluded that Rake was the best cultural fit, the most popular with parents (judged by the number of pupils and waiting lists), and with an experienced head, David Bertwistle, ready for new challenges (he was already being used by the LA to help other headteachers).

We don't need to go into all the details. I have already paid tribute in the R&T News to the governors at Rake, and to David himself, for being prepared to jump in and take up this challenge at short notice. They agreed to share David and their business manager with us from the start of the following term (September 2018) and our partnership was born. David called in favours and spent most of his summer holidays down at Rogate, so that the school looked and felt different when the staff and pupils returned - and we have not looked back since.

With having to pay only 50% of the salaries of our head and business manager, we were able to recruit two new teachers of a far higher standard than we could otherwise have afforded. We won a £10,000 grant from the LA to help both schools improve their maths and writing standards and the governors raised £20,000 from local charities to upgrade the IT of both schools and link them properly, so that our now-larger staff could collaborate more effectively. Some of you came to our joint Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths day or our joint arts day.

In another key step, last September, Ofsted came back and rated Rogate 'Good' – one of the first small schools in the country to be assessed under the new tough inspection regime, which had been expected to be a real challenge for small schools. What's more, they were back in just 3 weeks and gave Rake a 'good' rating too, so David must be one of the first heads to have gone through two Ofsted visits in a month!

With the new confidence this gave both sets of governors, we've spent a lot of time since September discussing our future with the LA, the diocese, and governors and heads of other schools that have become academies. By the Spring, we'd decided that federation was the right move, to finish what we'd started and go all out to create a more stable and sustainable partnership that could keep the best features of the small village schools but also get the benefits of bigger schools; that could offer staff more shared teamwork and experience and better career prospects; and could offer pupils a better start. To make sure, though, we have spent six weeks consulting parents and staff, the LA and diocese, local parish and church councils before making the final decision this week. Since the responses were overwhelmingly favourable, I have to say the final decision was not difficult!

We're now in the process of conducting staff and parent elections for the new, unified board of governors, which will meet on 10th June, but the two schools had a combined total of 18 governors and the new board will be just 12, so we'll have to lose a few of our local heroes - but they have agreed to stay on local school committees that will safeguard the specific values of each school. On Rogate's board, Debs Burles and Max Harwood, who both joined after the fateful Ofsted shock of 2016, have made a huge contribution to this pillar of village life; at Rake, Nik Taylor – the former chair of governors who did the deal with us – and Mark Poeti both feel they cannot make the bigger commitment cannot. We're delighted, though, that all four will still work with the governors at a local level to protect their unique local characters.

The other group of largely unsung heroes are the Rogate staff, some of whom have stuck by it right through this turbulent time, and some who agreed to join at a difficult time and have somehow fitted in so well. In that first group, it's only fair to single out Steph Garwood, who was a young teacher at the school in the 'noughties', taught in Liphook for a while and came back. Steph was deputy head when the last head left and worked closely with the governors to save the school and help David take the reins, while providing the stability and leadership the staff needed. She is his head of school at Rogate and will be part of its local committee as well as being an associate on the federation board, and her presence there will reassure those that know her.

At the time of writing, the staff have been on a rota to go in and look after the half dozen children of essential workers and vulnerable families that were allowed to stay at school through the lockdown, as well as doing their best to support the other parents in home-schooling. Whilst a few are in self-isolation for medical reasons – but working hard from home - the rest have willingly done their duty and looked after the children that needed their help – and the parents trying to do some of their work in homes suddenly doubling as classrooms and offices. Senior leaders have even helped the heroic caretaker keep the school scrupulously cleaned and reconfigured for social distancing. Right now, primary schools are find themselves centre stage in the massive uncertainties of the end of lockdown and, once again, we all have to depend on the staff to do their best in difficult circumstances – so nothing new there!

This little school has proved, time and again, that it's a core pillar of the village. It's been shaken and stirred for the last few years but has proved its resilience and we believe it's now in better shape than ever before. It has gained the all-important Ofsted seal of approval for its wider curriculum and is being quoted as a shining example by the diocese and the LA for forging a partnership aimed so squarely at pupil benefits, and it still has plenty of plans for further improvements.

Perhaps most important of all, though, its parent survey this Spring reflected the third year of increasingly positive responses - this time with not a single negative score – and the word is obviously spreading: Rogate has attracted its biggest reception class for years for this September. Local parents are recognising that it can, once again, give their children the best start in life - whether because they have been coming to its weekly "stay and play" group, and seen at first-hand how happy and engaged the pupils are, or because they've seen its choir and other children at village events, or they've visited the school and recognised its creative curriculum, caring community feel and stunning outside space.

Talking to other governors across the county, it's been clear to me that this school has been very lucky with the support it's had from the local community and the parish council. We're all very grateful for that and will continue to try hard to deserve and repay it. Let's hope the school's revival can help some of the village's other institutions to bounce back!