

# Special school federation

## *Sue Thornton* looks back on an eventful journey towards the federation of two Nottingham City special schools

In December 2009 the local authority (LA) asked me to join a new governing body at Woodlands Special School, which has 60 places for pupils with a wide range of complex learning difficulties. The school was having problems and had been without a substantive leader for some time; the acting deputy had taken charge when the acting head went on sick leave and did not return. The previous GB had resigned in disagreement with a proposal to federate with another special school, Westbury. In contrast, Westbury is an excellent school for pupils with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties, headed by a national leader in this field.

I knew nothing about federations and had no experience of governance in special education but I enjoy a new challenge and, since it would “only be for a couple of terms”, I agreed.

### Ofsted inspection

The inaugural meeting proved interesting. We were informed that an Ofsted inspection was scheduled for the next day and that we were required to make a decision on whether to proceed to the consultation stage of federation that evening! Too late for any input into the Ofsted visit but it was obviously critical to the school’s survival to have a GB with a chair in place and, since I was the only eligible experienced governor present, I took on the role.

Reassuringly, the deputy head had been working on federation with the head of Westbury for some months to very good effect. She presented an excellent document that, after close questioning, persuaded us to agree to move to the consultation phase. We were pleased to hear positive views from the new parent governors who already had confidence in the school. They wanted to make sure its caring ethos remained but they were also able to see that federation would benefit their children’s education.

The consultation was scheduled for February 2010 so we had to work quickly. Fortunately, Westbury had a well-established GB who understood their head’s vision for the federation that had so inspired our deputy. Unfortunately, the governance picture was less clear so we were relieved to discover that national guidance\* identifies the action required to get to the “decision to federate”. I had two major surprises during the process:

the first was the key decisions to be made before consultation and the second was a lack of guidance on how to proceed after agreement.

The key decisions made were that Westbury Woodlands Federation would have an executive headteacher accountable to a single governing body, and each site would have a head of school. We also agreed a GB constitution that would allow us to retain expertise from both schools and the two (small) bodies set up as a temporary GB to lead the planning; I was elected chair.

### Action plan

We devised a planning process that had two strands, a pre-federation action plan for the schools and preparation for the new federation GB. The purpose of the action plan was to establish priorities to start translating the vision into reality. It was developed jointly by school leaders and governors and identified resources, timescales and success criteria to deliver on seven main objectives across the federation: policy development, joint fiscal planning, senior leadership recruitment, review of school development plans to identify joint priorities, curriculum provision and practice, best use of BSF projects, and to

identify components for a five-year strategy.

The temporary GB would secure a Statutory Instrument, recruit the leadership team, promote joint fiscal systems, develop governance policies, draft terms of reference and arrange elections for parent and staff governors.

This approach proved successful and in September, having recruited the Westbury head as our federation executive headteacher, the outgoing GBs handed over to the new federation governing body which ratified the planning work we had completed and signed off pre-federation actions. We really did feel we had hit the ground running and were ready to start developing our partnership.

Naturally, we encountered problems along the way; introducing change inevitably creates some disruption and anxiety. However, I believe that the inclusive structured approach we took helped us in many ways. All our work was documented, accessible and distributed widely for consultation and/or discussion. This transparency certainly went some way to allaying fears and we were able to pick up concerns and deal with them. It also ensured that consistent messages were delivered and we avoided any major misunderstandings.

After two terms of federation, Woodlands is thriving under its new head of school (the former deputy); we are all looking to the future with confidence. ▲

*Sue Thornton is chair of governors at Westbury Woodlands Federation*

“The inclusive structured approach we took helped us in many ways”

Pupils at Woodlands Special School



\*Guidance on the School Governance (Federations) (England) Regulations 2007