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Record of Online Public Meeting concerning the proposed closure of Weaverthorpe CE VC Primary School

Virtual Public Meeting held on 20 January 2022 at 18:00 using Microsoft Teams

Present:

County Councillor Patrick Mulligan- Executive Member for Education and Skills

Amanda Newbold, Assistant Director- Education and Skills NYCC

Andrew Dixon, Strategic Planning Manager NYCC,

Andrew Smith, Diocesan Director of Education- Church of England Diocese of York

Rachel Ray, Interim Headteacher- Weaverthorpe CE VC Primary School

Rev. Andy Bowden- Chair of Interim Executive Board- Weaverthorpe CE VC Primary School.

Approximately 26 people attended the meeting

The meeting was opened by Andy Bowden, Chair of Governors, who introduced himself, thanked everyone for attending and introduced Cllr Patrick Mulligan who would be acting as Chairperson for this meeting.

Cllr Patrick Mulligan then explained his role as Executive Member for Education and Skills, the format of the meeting and then introduced the members of the panel who would be available to answer questions following the consultation.

He also explained to attendees that the meeting would be recorded for the purposes of compiling a note of the issues discussed at the meeting but that the recording would be destroyed once this had been done.

He then passed over to Andrew Dixon, Strategic Planning Manager to give a short presentation on the circumstance leading to the proposal, the reasons for the proposal and the process that this entailed.

Presentation

Andrew Dixon gave a presentation detailing the proposal.

Q&A

Cllr Sanderson stated that she didn't want to speak first as she felt that the community should ask questions but she realised this might be daunting for people using a virtual platform so she would ask a forward thinking question. The presentation stated that the school site is owned by diocese and school and as there is little provision for children in the wolds could it be used for some for some kind of community use if worst came to the worst?

Andrew Dixon explained that any decision on the future of the site would be part of a subsequent process following the process regarding the closure proposal. Cllr Sanderson could express a view on the future appropriate use for the site as part of this process, but that the decision would be part of a different decision making process.

Cllr Sanderson stated that she hoped it did not come to that but that it was important to forward think.

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Femi Shellard introduced himself as Chair of Parish council and former Chair of Governors of Weaverthorpe School. He asked that as reference had been made in the presentation to an interim inspection can this be made into a full inspection. Can the local authority lobby Ofsted for this so that the full current position can be taken into consideration rather than an out of date report? The work of current Headteacher and IEB can then be taken into account as this doesn't seem to have been considered so far.

Amanda Newbold stated that Ofsted have resumed normal cycle of inspections. She said this means that it is typically 2 year cycle for schools judged Inadequate to be inspected, however for several terms there were no inspections and so a backlog situation. At some point in the near future Weaverthorpe will have an inspection but we cannot predict when that will be. Ofsted deliberately don't tell schools or Local Authority when they will be inspected.

A parent said that reference was made in the presentation to being unable to find an acceptable solution and asked for clarification of what this means and what would make a solution acceptable. She also asked for clarification over whether options had been turned down by Weaverthorpe or by the other schools that had been approached.

Andrew Dixon stated than in order to be acceptable a solution would need to continue the improvements necessary and also place the school on a secure financial footing. None of the schools contacted felt able to consider partnership at this time with the exception of Sledmere and Wetwang. Sledmere and Wetwang did consider a partnership proposal at this time but the Local Authority was unable to support this proposal as there was no financial recovery plan for the school.

The parent asked if it was then the Local Authority turning down the proposals?

Andrew Dixon confirmed that in the one instance of Sledmere and Wetwang it was because the proposal was unable to give a financial recovery within the period required which would be the current financial year plus three years.

The parent also asked the panel to comment on Norton College and whether they had been approached with regards to a partnership.

Andrew Dixon explained that any approach to an Academy would have been made via the Regional School Commissioner as part of the search for a sponsor rather than by the Local Authority. This question was raised in the Autumn term and NYCC contacted the RSC to get a response. RSC confirmed that they didn't approach Norton College for two reasons: that it is not Church of England Trust and also they would also look for trust with experience and record at primary provision.

A member of the public asked following on from the comments about Norton College Academy, they aren't CofE but neither are Luttons. Luttons was last inspected by Ofsted in 2016 and have the Local Authority had an update on Luttons and if not will they get one before the school is recommended to parents?

Amanda Newbold said there were two parts to the question and that she would answer regarding Ofsted and that Andrew could follow up the issue of a school being recommended. Luttons school have been inspected recently and the community can expect this to be published soon.

Andrew Dixon explained that although the word 'recommended' had been used in the question it is just the catchment proposal from September 2022 that most of the Weaverthorpe catchment area be covered by an extended Luttons catchment area as it is by

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far the nearest school. However, that is markedly different from saying this school is the school being recommended for parents. Parental preference is enshrined in law and parents will choose for a whole range of reasons. So we could see dispersed pattern of preference.

The member of the public asked has it not just been chosen for cost reasons rather than what's best for the children? Why not Hertford Vale when its our nearest Church school. Why are you instead dividing the village? Would you not provide transport to Hertford Vale as the nearest church school?

Andrew Dixon explained that Sherburn CE is the closest church school but Hertford Vale already serves part of the catchment in Butterwick. If people wish to make representations about alternatives to the catchment proposal be it about Hertford Vale or Sherburn C.E this would be considered as part of the process. The proposal as it stands is based on proximity and this takes into account not just cost but also accessibility.

The member of the public asked if this is based on Luttons getting a good inspection?

Amanda Newbold responded on this and apologised for a mistake in an earlier response regarding the Luttons inspection. Amanda confirmed that the report has been published and it has remained good. There are lots of strengths listed and Ofsted have, as always, listed things they will be focusing on in their next inspection. No change to overall judgement and this is a normal Section 8 monitoring inspection.

Another parent said that she was responding from a parents perspective. She didn't feel that parents have been supported and although it's been said that they had been corresponded with she felt that they've just been left to do it themselves. They had had to arrange visits to other schools by themselves. Due to an outbreak of covid they hadn't all been able to visit schools and so had had to make decisions based on Ofsted inspections etc. She said they felt totally let down and like no one had been supporting them. She said Weaverthorpe school were doing the best they can but that it was a matter for the Local Authority.

Andrew Dixon responded that the preferencing process has been carried out and it was noted pretty quickly that this process need to be extended due to the prevailing covid situation. However, it was a balance to strike between giving enough time and completing it early enough to have the desired intention of giving clarity to parents relatively quickly. Ultimately in terms of visiting schools and contacting other schools that is a parents responsibility as the Local Authority wouldn't be in a position to know which schools parents wanted to visit and there could be a wide variety of schools. If there are still concerns about need to make decisions but not having information then please contact the admissions team over the phone and they will do all they can to help. He acknowledged that there had been a been a difficult period but said that there had been generally a good level of response from parents. He confirmed how parents could access the contact details for the admissions team and undertook to get that information to parents again via school.

A grandparent of a pupil said that one of her big concerns was that the childrens' education has already been disrupted by covid and isn't the closure proposal just making it worse. Should we not be trying to maintain stability. Also the inspection of Luttons has thrown up some things that need looking at, will having more children make it more difficult for a school that needs a bit of help already. She made a second point that the path between Weaverthorpe and West Lutton is not safe as a walking route and cannot understand why this has not been looked at. Parents from Weaverthorpe school should be assured that they will get transport provision as this is a long and busy road. It should also be born in mind that many parents at Weavethorpe probably do not drive.

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Her final point was to express that if we always knew leadership was temporary why wasn't someone else brought in to take over before and move the school on before it goes to this point. Also the community will suffer seriously.

Andrew Dixon responded regarding the walking route. The point is well understood and it does need to be communicated to parents, so once the report is agreed then this will be shared. It's over two miles which is the distance at which transport is provided for KS1 pupils so we can say with certainty KS1 transport would be available if they live in Weaverthorpe, but until exercise is complete we cannot say for key stage 2 pupils. We understand the concern and will communicate as soon as possible.

Amanda Newbold responded regarding the disruption to children's education. Going through consultation and change is never ideal or preferred choice. Unfortunately the situations surrounding this school mean that the consultation is required at this time. We would welcome comments on impact of covid in this consultation period and we invite people to respond to this consultation. However, covid has affected ability to support from other schools as they often didn't have the capacity themselves over covid period. Regarding the appointment of a Headteacher this has been raised previously and this is a matter for the governing board to decide. Good governing boards will consider the options and check the viability of these options. They would consider whether the pupil numbers and the funding attached to these numbers allows them to recruit a headteacher to solely lead their school or whether they can work with another school to share a leader. Unfortunately, when the school has an academy order this limits options for sharing leadership in the long term to academies. We know that the Regional Schools Commissioner had looked at all options for this and found none so that ruled out that option. So governors rightly had to look at interim leadership with the help of the Local Authority. They managed to secure the support from the Langton Governing Body and Mrs Ray, this was temporary but they have kindly and generously extended this interim support for two years. In response to the question about Lutton's recommendations in their report: all reports have recommendations. In the Lutton's report you will see that all the recommendations are about curriculum, this is typical of a lot of recent reports. A new framework came in just prior to the covid outbreak and schools had been working on that framework in the term ahead of the outbreak. They have then had to try and work on the new framework against the backdrop of the difficult circumstance over the last two years. Lutton's have also recently had a change of leadership and the bullet points they were given to work on are not a surprise. The school are able to work on these points. However, you will know which school is right for your child and will be able to look at the school yourself. You can then decide if that school ethos etc. is right for your family if that is required.

A parent asked about the Ofsted report in October at Lutton's. How come Lutton's got their Ofsted inspection last year but the one for Weaverthorpe couldn't be done. This all seems a bit planned.

Amanda Newbold responded that Ofsted are required to inspect all schools within a 5 year window so because its last one was 5 years ago Lutton's were required to have a visit. There were a number of schools across North Yorkshire that did have inspections on that timescale for that reason. Schools that are judged inadequate are judged on a 2 year cycle and schools that are judged Good are typically inspected on a 4 to 5 year cycle. At the time of that inspection Ofsted would not have known about this consultation so it is unrelated in every way to this process.

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The parent said that she had already removed her children. She stated that there was no support from anyone during covid. School now have wonderful new teachers in but now they've been upset, kids are upset. It's a done deal you want us to close to boost Luttons numbers. I want to thank the Headteacher and the teachers for coming in and getting them stable. My children have surprised me since they went back and now you are going to disrupt all that and worry the kids and its quite sad and I'm very upset with it.

Cllr Patrick Mulligan thanked the parents for that contribution. This isn't a foregone conclusion and everything will be taken into account before a decision is made.

The parent said I don't think you think about the children, these kids have been locked up in their houses. They've been locked in their houses and now they've gone back, they've got wonderful teachers and now you do this to them. I can't believe you're doing this to the community, children and the teachers are sad, its heartbreaking.

Cllr Mulligan said we understand your sentiments and we are sympathetic towards them.

A parent asked if we could please go over the Sledmere and Wetwang proposal as I feel you skirted over that a bit. Could you please explain why the LA didn't think this proposal was financially acceptable.

Andrew Dixon responded that the financial cost of the proposal were such that the school could not achieve a balanced budget and therefore could not achieve recovery plan within the required period. Similar to considerations of other North Yorkshire schools. Being able to move into partnership and continue the improvement required in a school is not an easy task. Sledmere's assessment was that the level of support that would be needed, the input of staffing to a level that was essentially not affordable by Weaverthorpe. This was such that, on the pupil numbers that are projected, the budget would continue in an annual deficit and therefore a cumulative deficit.

The parent asked what those requirements were

Andrew Dixon explained that he did not have details of the proposal to hand but it was essentially the Leadership requirements and costs

The parent asked if that was not offset by the fact that a full Headteacher would not have to be employed?

Andrew Dixon said that would have been a consideration when the judgement was made. The full range of requirements made it unaffordable.

The parent asked what these other requirements were?

Andrew Dixon stated that he could only respond in broad terms that it was staffing requirements.

The parent asked if this similar kind of leadership and staffing was required by other schools going into partnership for example Luttons when they federated?

Andrew Dixon explained that Federation is a matter for each Governing Body and not a Local Authority decision. One of the considerations for those Governing Bodies would be whether the requirements were financially sustainable for the schools. Governors at both schools (Luttons and Sherburn) must have decided that the package was sustainable at the time, but this was not the case with the proposals available to Weaverthorpe.

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The same parent said that saying NYCC are not involved with Federation is not true because NYCC decides on budgetary issues and whether they are willing to go ahead with it.

Andrew Dixon responded that in that respect yes the LA are involved in the process. However, the decision on whether to implement a Federation is a decision for Governors.

The parent said that it seems like a proposal was agreed but it wasn't allowed to go ahead by the LA for financial reasons. Was it not the case that NYCC wouldn't approve anything because they want the school to close?

Andrew Dixon explained that this was not the case at all, we put a lot support in to looking at options with maintained schools which it was hoped might be able to create a situation where through improvement and removal of Academy Order we could then see a formal Federation form. We put considerable effort into approaching other schools.

Andrew Smith said that to follow up on discussions, some of the reasons for the support package is based on where it is at with their journey of improvement. The current staffing model in the school is a reflection of this and is more expensive because of that. This would need to be continued for a longer period of time. Any maintained collaboration can only be for a temporary period. In terms of legislation the only way for the school out of the current situation is by academisation. So any short term arrangement with a maintained school is not a long term solution. So, this would not solve the viability issue from that point of view and also the issue of increased costs in the short to medium term to continue that improvement journey. Some of the reason that NYCC needed to say no to that proposal was because of these increased costs that would be necessary. It must be clearly said that Federation cannot be an alternative to academisation, the Department for Education has been clear on that and it will likely be even more strongly the case going forward.

A member of the public asked that bearing in mind so much budget was spent on supply teachers when did NYCC become aware of the leadership and financially problems at the school?

Andrew Dixon stated that in terms of the Leadership concerns the concerns were writ large at the time of the Ofsted inspection. I cannot comment on the financial issues and I don't know if any members of the Governing Body present are able to comment.

Cllr. Patrick Mulligan explained that that would be difficult to comment on as there is currently an Interim Executive Board with members who were not necessarily involved at that time.

The member of the public stated that she understood that it was known in the Governing Body minutes going back as far as 2017 and commented she believed it is 29 pupils that are needed in order to keep the school viable. When the pupil numbers started to drop was there any research done into why the pupils were leaving?

Andy Bowden stated that once the pupils left the school we weren't in contact with parents after they left.

The member of the public asked if the Governing body were aware of complaints being made at that time?

Andy Bowden stated that complaints were discussed which would be able to be seen in the minutes of those meeting.

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The member of the public stated that those minutes cannot be seen anymore. Clearly there were leadership issues and I am struggling to see when NYCC became aware. Are you saying that you were only aware of the issues when Ofsted raised them? Who actually authorises the financial expenditure particularly on supply teachers when so many teachers were leaving on sick?

Amanda Newbold said that she was not sure which period was being referred to with regards supply teachers. At the moment Mrs Ray would have management of that, before that it would have been a matter for the previous Headteacher. The oversight of those decisions sits with the Governing Board.

The member of the public said that it was a shame that as all of that structure has gone we are now in this position.

Amanda Newbold explained that if you get in contact with the Clerk or Chair of Governors you could get a copy of minutes unless they were confidential.

The member of the public asked what would make them confidential? Could items not just be redacted?

Amanda Newbold explained that at each meeting Governors would decide which items would be treated as confidential and they would be kept separate.

The member of the public asked is there a way of accessing all minutes but just with items redacted?

Amanda Newbold explained that if you contact the current board they will be able to give you the minutes subject to data Governance.

A parent said that following on from the previous question how did NYCC not notice that the school was going under? I am not blaming the old Headteacher and Governing Board, they've gone, that's it. What I am blaming is why are NYCC not doing inspections to make sure their schools are not up to standard. How do we know Luttons will not be the same given Weaverthorpe was just left to go under.

Cllr Patrick Mulligan said that he would pass over to others to respond but that he doesn't think it is fair to blame NYCC.

The parent asked who was to blame then?

Cllr Patrick Mulligan explained that schools are largely autonomous under the leadership of the Headteacher and Governors. The LA has some powers of intervention but the school leadership cannot just be exonerated and blame North Yorkshire.

The parent asked who was above the Headteacher and the Governing Body then?

Cllr Patrick Mulligan explained that the Governing Board was above the Headteacher.

Amanda Newbold explained that Local Management of Schools is devolved to Governing Bodies and Headteachers. So the day to day management of the school sits within the school. The role of the Local Authority is to have that broader oversight, support and challenge. Weaverthorpe were receiving support and challenge prior to the report. Across the county is not possible to have a duplicate set of staff who can replicate the work of the leadership for every school.

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The parent asked why didn't the local authority intervene to find out why staff were off school, why were children leaving school and why were there safeguarding issues.

Amanda Newbold responded that they are all appropriate questions for Governing Bodies to be asking. I am sure the IEB, Mrs Ray and her board at Langton are all familiar with asking those kind of questions.

A parent asked what sort of support will be put in place once the school closes. I have a child who will have to walk past an empty building that was his school and he's got a EHCP so routine is key to him.

Amanda Newbold stated that support would be from the LA via the EHCP and also via Mrs Ray and her team to get a transition plan in place for the individual pupils.

Mrs Ray added that our hearts go out to the whole community. We will do everything we can to support the children our number one priority. As Amanda referenced our current IEB are extremely rigorous in their monitoring of current standards in the school and we will continue to do that for the future. My door is open and we'll have a coffee. We are all there to help.

The parent said that we cannot thank the staff enough, my children are coming on leaps and bounds. It's really the time after change rather than the transition itself. Why do parents have to explain to their children why the school is closed.

Mrs Ray responded that we can help with that if it goes ahead and working with new schools. We want to make sure we reduce impact as much as possible.

A member of the Interim Executive Board responded to a previous question about about minutes of full governing board and confirmed they are on the website dating back to December 2017 and running through till October 2021.

A parent asked if we could return to discussing NYCC responsibilities. It is my understanding that the appointed senior officer has a responsibility to ensure that standards are maintained schools and to provide support and guidance. With that in mind do NYCC maintain that they are not responsible?

Amanda Newbold said that as has been set out a number of times there were a combinations of factors including standards, finances and pupil numbers were triggers for the consultation. LA does take responsibility for oversight and we take a risk based approach. We provide additional support to schools where we identify that there are issues. Weaverthorpe at the moment is receiving a high level of support from the local authority. Schools get different levels of support over different periods. Prior to ofsted report there had been a detailed review of what was going on at Weaverthorpe. The LA had sent a warning letter 14th January 2020 stating that the LA could and would use its powers of intervention if that was necessary. The school had that letter and were working on that when the Ofsted inspection took place.

The parent asked if the LA could provide detail of the support from the LA in relation to that warning letter.

Amanda Newbold said that she would be able to but not in this meeting. Amanda explained she had joined North Yorkshire since this inspection has happened.

Andrew Dixon explained that the Council could provide this information as part of an update to FAQ including information on the walked route.

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The parent asked that as part of that it be detailed when did standards drop too low. It was clearly at some point prior to the warning letter. This gives me concern as I don't feel that the support was provided. I appreciate that it might feel like we are going back over the situation but it is relevant to closure as LA should've provided support which may have prevented there being an academy order.

Amanda Newbold said that we will provide as much information on support and challenge as we can.

Cllr Patrick Mulligan reminded attendees all of these issues would be taken into consideration as part of the consultation process.

A parent said that people keep talking about 2019 and there were obviously issues before then. I have had children in the school for many years and there were staff going off sick and all sorts going on before then. Do the LA not do sickness monitoring?

Amanda Newbold explained that that would be the responsibility of Headteacher and Governors. The school might use the council's service but it would be the school who would do that work. The council can advise and support if the school approach the council for that support.

The parent asked that surely you want to know why so much money was being spent and wasted with staff being off sick. I cannot understand how this public money has been wasted in this way. Why was a Headteacher not put in place as soon as the previous Headteacher left. It is like its been left on purpose so that Ofsted know they can't come in because there isn't a permanent member of teaching staff. You guys are coming in now when school are good. Where were you when this was happening years ago?

Amada Newbold stated that the only thing she had to add was that this was the same with finances, the Governors are the people who should be asking these questions on a monthly and termly basis.

Cllr Patrick Mulligan said that he thought the discussion was becoming circular but that your comments will be taken into account.

A member of the public stated that we only had a local authority governor on the governing board for about a month, we could never fulfil that position. It just seems that governors were leaving and any questions that were raised didn't come up in the minutes and were not included. As a separate point she said that at the recent (November) meeting at the school she purposely asked if minutes were being taken and were guaranteed we would get an emailed copy of them,

Andrew Dixon explained that the decision was taken that the best way to respond to both questions from that night, and to various questions that were raised by the parish council, was via the FAQ document which is now on record. There were many and varied questions raised and we feel we took some time to make sure we referred to the outline notes from that meeting to make sure that all questions were answered. If you feel there were questions that were not answered please either ask it now or submit it to let us know.

The member of the public explained that she was relying on those minutes to be taken to ensure that questions were included and not edited out.

Cllr Patrick Mulligan stated that he felt FAQs were comprehensive so I have to support Andrew on this. I would encourage you to please respond with the questions so we can add them in if required.

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Cllr Janet Sanderson said she had been very interested to hear everything that people have had to say. I have been a governor of two schools. It's a really really tough job. It is so much work I really really appreciate the effort of the governors. I offer my thanks to governors of both previous and current boards. Its not a good position that we are in I have taken in the issues you have raised and I will represent you to the end.

A member of the public asked if it could be answered why there was only a Local Authority governor for such a short time.

Amanda Newbold said that she did not know the answer I'll have to go and look it up and then respond through the FAQs

Cllr Patrick Mulligan thanked the attendees for their input and said we have total empathy. Nobody wants to close the school believe me. We will take all views raised into account. I am going to have further discussions with officers as some issues bear further discussion. Thanks for attending and I wish you the best for the future.