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Record of Public Meeting concerning the proposed closure of Woodfield Community Primary School, Harrogate

Held on 15 June 2022 at 6:00 PM.

Present: County Councillor Annabel Wilkinson (Executive Member for Education, Learning and Skills, NYCC), Janet Booth, Chair of Governors, Woodfield Primary School, Holly Whyte, Acting Headteacher, Woodfield Primary School.

Amanda Newbold (Assistant Director, Education and Skills, NYCC), Andrew Dixon (Strategic Planning Manager, NYCC), John Lee, (Strategic Planning Team, NYCC).

Apologies: Mathew Atkinson, Acting Executive Headteacher, Woodfield Primary School.

Approximately 21 people attended, including parents, members of the local community, County Councillor Paul Haslam, Local Member for Bilton & Nidd Gorge division, County Councillor Monika Slater, Local Member for Bilton Grange & New Park division, and local press reporters.

Janet Booth, Chair of Governors at Woodfield School, welcomed everyone to the meeting and introduced County Councillor Annabel Wilkinson, who introduced the officers from NYCC.

Annabel Wilkinson explained that a written note of the meeting would be made and submitted to the County Council's Executive as part of the decision-making process.

Andrew Dixon provided a presentation which covered:

- Background to the proposal, including the Woodfield Ofsted inspection and the Directive Academy Order
- Pupil numbers and financial projections
- Proposed amalgamation with Grove Road School, subsequently rejected
- The proposal and future catchment area arrangements if Woodfield School closed
- Admissions
- Staff and the school site

County Councillor Annabel Wilkinson then opened the meeting to questions.

A man said that his grandchildren go to the school. Figures can be manipulated. There had been scaremongering about the closure. Part of the school had been turned into a library reducing numbers. Numbers had gone down as people didn't think that they would have a school to go to.

Andrew Dixon explained that the school used to operate in two buildings across the site. This was very inefficient for the school to run. There had been a lot of investment to refurbish one building. There had not been a reduction in the availability of places, the school still maintained the same admission number. The uncertainty around the school had arisen as with any school subject to an inadequate Ofsted judgement and a Directive Academy Order. This introduces an immediate period of uncertainty, which sits outside the County Council, while the Regional Schools Commissioner selects a trust to sponsor the school. Trusts need to undertake due diligence. This all takes time. No trust could be found for Woodfield. He

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could understand why there had been a reduction in pupil numbers after the Ofsted report as alternative places were available elsewhere.

A parent said that their child with Special Educational Needs hadn't got a place. This was the only school suitable.

Andrew Dixon replied that while it wouldn't be appropriate to discuss individual circumstances, the local authority was trying to support parents and work with schools to see what was possible in terms of admissions. They wanted to understand the preferences of parents for all the remaining pupils, and had held a meeting at the school. When they knew the full picture they could have proper engagement with nearby schools.

The parent said that they had one child in school and couldn't get another child in the same school.

Andrew offered to take details and follow this up with the Admissions and SEND Teams.

A woman said that her children and grandchildren had attended the school and she had also worked at the school. Over the last seven years the school did not get support from NYCC. There had been a terrible incident that went on Facebook. Around 40 children had left. North Yorkshire didn't act soon enough. They had not been supported. If that incident hadn't happened they would have been doing alright. She was fighting for friends and parents. Grove Road School was not in the area. The distance wasn't practical for many. Some like to go further afield, but the majority of the community want their children here. Over the last seven years they had been badly let down. After she had been working at the school for 11 years, the only people that bothered to acknowledge here were the children, parents and teachers. There had been nothing from North Yorkshire. They just wanted the land that the school was on.

Andrew Dixon said that the amalgamation proposal with Grove Road School had been fully supported by the County Council. They were disappointed that it had not been able to go ahead. If it had happened, the school site at Woodfield would have become part of Grove Road School delivering education across the two sites. He was not best-placed to comment on a historical incident. There were still around 80 pupils at the time of Ofsted in 2020. If they had that number remaining now, the school would be more viable.

Gary McVeigh-Kaye, National Education Unit (NEU) Branch Secretary, said that he had come to support the community. They had not been let down by teachers, they had been let down by Ofsted, the government, and the RSC. He understood the problems but they had not been let down by the local authority. He knew the difficulties that the school had gone through, and he knew the area. This was a consultation. If you want to have a campaign to support this school, the NEU will support this. They support education and the right for children to have a good community school. It was terrible that it had to become an Academy or close. There was not a great deal North Yorkshire could do. One thing the County Council could do though was to extend this consultation and get the community involved. The local MP should be here, he has responsibility for this local school.

A resident and retired teacher whose family had gone through the school said that the school seemed to have been very badly let down by North Yorkshire County Council. Not enough had been done about the incident. She wondered if there was already something in the background. The site is a very valuable site. This is an area of deprivation. The school offers outdoor learning resources, physical accessibility, and special educational needs provision. How vigorously did the local authority pursue forced academisation? Academy sponsors can pick and choose. Their interests are different to taking on a school with

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difficulties. This school had once been thriving, it needed the right leadership. The state of the school building was good. There had been a very damning Ofsted. Ofsted depends on who has the biggest voice, power and influence. Why has not more effort been put into building the school roll? The statements of positivity and future that the school had on its walls in the hall are those that we should be talking about.

A grandfather said that he felt this was a waste of time as it had already been decided that the school was going to close and that they were going to be houses here.

A man mentioned that a large gas main had been run into the property that wasn't needed for a school. Why didn't Grove Road School move here?

Andrew replied that officers had hoped that the Grove Road proposal would happen. Sadly they had to recommend that the County Council reject the proposal when the leading party withdrew. The proposal had been a risk for Grove Road School, and the Governing Body had felt that operating across two schools, the uncertainty of new leadership at Grove Road, the financial constraints in managing both sites, falling pupil numbers, and a lack of parental support, carried too many risks. Any decision about the future use of the Woodfield site would be considered separately after the closure consultation. If the closure was agreed, the first consideration for the County Council would be could the Woodfield school site be put to any educational use?

It was asked who owned the site and Andrew replied that it was the County Council.

It was asked if families could buy the school or if a multimillionaire came and said they run the school would the council be prepared for this?

A member of the local community said the school had been built at a time when most of the houses that currently exist had not been built. There had been no new schools since then in the area. What about tomorrow? There were a lot of new housing sites. Grove Road school was fully subscribed. Some of the higher classes were large. The SEN provision there was limited. This was the best fitted-out school in the area. It was something to be proud of. They were not giving in.

Andrew Dixon said that they examined the potential pupil growth from housing, working closely with Harrogate Borough Council. What we are seeing from the NHS data and the district-wide birth data is that the birth rate is falling. There are lower numbers of pre-school children. There may be a larger overall number of dwellings in the area, but the population of young people is not as high as it was. A rolling average shows a marked decline in the primary-age population. Pupils moving into new housing are mitigated by the falling birth rate. Forecasts show sufficient school capacity in the area, although there is not capacity in every year group in every school.

It was stated that Richard Taylor and Bilton Grange schools have had money put in to expand. This was a beautiful facility that it would be criminal to lose.

Andrew replied that the County Council had invested significantly to remodel and refurbish Woodfield School around 2013-14.

It was asked why the catchment area for Woodfield School was not changed?

Andrew explained that catchment areas only determine who get places when a school is oversubscribed. The choice of schools is down to parental preference.

It was suggested that if a councillor or MP had stepped in, the school would never have got to this position. It had been left to rot on the vine, the County Council had let it go.

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Cllr Wilkinson replied that the County Council had worked hard to support the proposal for Woodfield to amalgamate with Grove Road School.

A parent said that Granby School had previously had a very bad reputation. It had been rebuilt. Woodfield just needed remarketing.

Andrew Dixon replied that the rebuilding at Harrogate High School had been part of a central government funded programme. The County Council was unable to provide this level of investment, but it had already invested significantly in the school building at Woodfield.

A grandparent suggested that the GP data might not cover all children as their children were not registered with a local practice.

Andrew Dixon replied that the NHS data is taken from all GP practices and identifies the postcode of the address of the child.

A parent said that dozens of school buses travelled to Leeds and to Harrogate. He went to a local school. Children should be encouraged to do that, not travel miles.

Cllr Wilkinson responded that it was parental choice to travel.

It was asked what number of pupils were needed to make the school viable?

Andrew Dixon replied that the school needed to be able to set a balanced budget. Funding is largely driven by pupil numbers.

A grandfather asked if the school closes can he send his granddaughter to a school outside the catchment area?

Andrew replied that yes, any parent can apply for any school. Eligibility for home to school transport is restricted though.

A woman asked if there were any other avenues that they could go down?

Andrew explained that a closure consultation was only instigated if all other opportunities appeared to be exhausted. The RSC had approached trusts who had viability concerns about Woodfield School. The County Council had checked back with the RSC when the amalgamation proposal had been rejected.

A person said that academy trusts were supposed to have good vision and bright ideas for the future, to get the school good again.

A woman asked if the school closes, who picks up the deficit? Could the County Council pay that off now so that Grove Road School or an academy could take Woodfield School over?

Andrew explained that it was not just the historic deficit at Woodfield that was the issue, but the school needed to break-even going forwards. The government did not allow the County Council to provide additional funding to schools which was not generated by their own funding formula.

It was noted that a lot of small schools in North Yorkshire are facing challenging conditions.

Amanda Newbold said that in 2020 and 2021 there had been conversations with academy trusts about what a rebranding opportunity could be at Woodfield and about the number of children that lived in the catchment area. Unfortunately potential sponsors could not see the school achieving an in-year balance without a significant growth of pupils. Council officers and governors did not expect to be in this position of having to undertake a consultation of this type.

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A person said that friends at Grove Road didn't want children from Woodfield to go to Grove Road and parents didn't want to come to Grove Road.

Councillor Annabel Wilkinson thanked everyone for their comments, which would be noted in the report to the Executive, and closed the meeting at 7.15 pm.