

Record of Public Meeting concerning proposed closure of Fountains Earth, Lofthouse CE Endowed Primary School held at Lofthouse Memorial Hall

Public Meeting held on 29 November 2023 at 6pm

Present: Amanda Newbold, (Assistant Director, Education and Skills NYC), Canon Richard Noake (Director of Education, CoE Diocese Leeds), Andrew Dixon, (Strategic Planning Manager NYC), Julie Pattison, (Principal Adviser NYC), Helen Nelson, (Co-Chair of the Upper Nidderdale Primary Federation of Fountains Earth, Lofthouse CE Endowed VC, St Cuthbert's CE VC and Glasshouses Community School), Sue Turley (Strategic Planning Officer, NYC) and Julia Temple (Strategic Planning Officer, NYC).

Cllr Andrew Murday North Yorkshire Councillor for Pateley Bridge and Nidderdale, Chair of Upper Nidderdale Parish Council, 7 members of the Parish Council including the Vice Chair, 2 school governors, 2 former school governors and approximately 42 members of the public attended from the community.

Apologies: Cllr Annabel Wilkinson (Executive Member for Education, Learning and Skills, NYC)

AGENDA

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Meeting opens – brief welcome - Introduction to the Panel 	Amanda Newbold, (Assistant Director, Education and Skills NYC),
Presentation	Andrew Dixon – Strategic Planning Manager NYC
Question and Answer Session	Facilitated by Amanda Newbold
Meeting Close	Amanda Newbold

1. Welcome

Amanda Newbold (Assistant Director Education and Skills)

Amanda welcomed everyone to the meeting and introduced the panel including Richard Noake from the Diocese. Unfortunately, Cllr Wilkinson was unable to attend the meeting due to illness and has sent her apologies. Amanda explained she would be facilitating the meeting in the absence of Cllr Wilkinson.

As required under the Council's constitution Cllr Annabel Wilkinson, Executive Member for Education, Learning and Skills provided agreement that this consultation be undertaken following a request from the Federation Governing Board. The Executive Committee of North Yorkshire Council is the decision-maker for this proposal. The committee can choose to approve, reject, or amend the proposal.

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Amanda said a note of the meeting would be taken so that all views can be reflected in the report that would form part of the decision-making process.

Amanda explained the following roles and responsibilities as part of the process:

Officers of North Yorkshire Council are conducting this consultation on behalf of the Council.

Officers are authors of the report to the Executive and will therefore take notes of the meeting today so that all views can be reflected in the report.

Governing Board of the Upper Nidderdale Federation is responsible for the strategic direction of the three schools in the Federation, including how to optimise the use of resources and maximise value for money.

The Executive Headteacher and Leadership team are responsible for operational management of the schools. The Executive Headteacher and senior leaders are accountable to the Governing Board.

2. Presentation from NYC

Andrew Dixon, Strategic Planning Manager, NYC, explained that the meeting was being held to discuss the proposal to close Fountains Earth, Lofthouse, CE Endowed VC Primary School from 31 March 2023.

Andrew Dixon provided a presentation which covered:

- The proposal
- Background to the proposal
- Pupil numbers
- Pupil numbers over time
- Local cohort context – October 2022
- Admissions context
- Finances
- School Leadership, Standards and Curriculum
- Impact on the Federation
- Local Schools Capacity
- Catchment area proposals
- School staff
- Federated Governing Body
- School site
- What happens now
- How can people comment

The slides explained the background to the closure proposal of falling rolls. In June 2022 the federated Governing Board approached the Council to seek consultation on the proposed closure of Fountains Earth Primary, there were 11 pupils on the school

roll at this time. The available information showed no sign of any significant growth in the roll. This consultation request was subsequently withdrawn by the Federation Governing Board in July 2022 as it had been suggested locally that the school roll was going to grow in the near future.

The Governing Board undertook a detailed exercise with the community in Autumn 2022 to understand more fully the future potential pupil numbers at the school. The exercise showed some minor change to the future forecast numbers originally held by the Council. Parents, carers and the wider community were informed of the outcome in January 2023.

The revised forecast numbers communicated at the time were as follows; 23/24 – 11 pupils; 24/25 – 13; 25/26 – 13; 26/27 – 15; 27/28 – 18.

Importantly, those predictions assumed that none of the existing pupils would leave Fountains Earth Primary, other than to transfer to secondary school at the end of Year 6.

All of the school's pupils transferred to other schools before the start of the current academic year and there were no new starters in the Reception year group in September 2023.

Therefore, the main factor prompting the Governing Board's request for consultation at this time, is there are currently no pupils on roll at Fountains Earth Primary. The associated financial implications of this are also a key concern.

The school has in recent times experienced recruitment and retention difficulties associated both with the particular location of the school and the challenge of securing suitably skilled staff to deal with the differentiation required by whole school teaching in a single class structure.

The school has a capacity of 50 pupils. In October 2022 there were 16 primary aged pupils living in the Fountains Earth Primary catchment area and attending a North Yorkshire school – 10 of those attended Fountains Earth Primary at that time. The number of 'in area' children at the school halved from 20 pupils in October 2017 to 10 in October 2022. Numbers on roll have in general been reducing since 2017.

Parental preference has been a key aspect of legislation for many years. Parents/carers can ask for a place at any school at any time, and if the school has places available their child would be admitted, and this is not restricted by catchment areas. This can lead to high pupil mobility and impact on the number on roll at any school at any time.

Fountains Earth Primary currently operates an amalgamated budget with St Cuthbert's Primary School, Pateley Bridge and Glasshouses Community Primary School as part of the Upper Nidderdale Primary Federation.

The 2023/24 Start Budget for the Upper Nidderdale Primary Federation indicated the following revenue budget position. The 2023/24 start budget for the Upper Nidderdale Primary Federation indicated the following revenue budget position:

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	In Year Position	Accumulated balance
2023/24	£22.95k deficit	£69.44k surplus
2024/25	£76.49k deficit	£7.05k deficit
2025/26	£104.81k deficit	£111.86k deficit

Pupil numbers determine a school's budget, there were no pupils on roll on the October 2023 census date. As a result DfE have confirmed that no funding would be provided to NYC for Fountains Earth Primary for 2024/25. Any 2024/25 NYC funding for Fountains Earth Primary would need to be made from the funding allocations provided by DfE for other schools and academies within North Yorkshire. The estimated annual premises costs for the Fountains Earth Primary site are c. £34k. There appears to be no reasonable prospect of sustainability for the Fountains Earth Primary element of the budget given there will be no DfE funding allocation for the school for the 2024/25 financial year.

If school closure were to go ahead the individual school budgets would need to be separated out from the current amalgamated Federation budget. Any legacy costs associated with the operation of the school incurred in the 2023/24 financial year would need to continue to be charged to the Fountains Earth Primary budget. The NYC Closing School Accounting Guidance applies to the treatment of the balances of a closing school (surplus or deficit).

There is a Leadership Team across the three schools within the federation which is led by an Executive Headteacher. The most recent full graded Ofsted inspection for Fountains Earth Primary was in April 2017. At that time there were 22 pupils on roll. Ofsted judged the school to be 'Good'. A short monitoring (section 8 inspection) took place in June 2022 when there were 11 pupils on roll. The report stated that the school continues to be a 'Good' school. As numbers fall, it is increasingly difficult to provide the remaining pupils with access to the full range of experiences and the quality of education they require. At present, if any pupils were to apply to join Fountains Earth Primary, there is no real prospect of them being able to get a full and balanced school experience in the absence of any peers.

There are two neighbouring North Yorkshire primary schools within c.8 miles radius of Fountains Earth Primary School, St Cuthbert's CE VC Primary School at Pateley Bridge and Glasshouses Community Primary School. There are five other primary schools located on the periphery of this radius, including; Kirkby Malzeard CE VC, Summerbridge, Dacre Braithwaite CE, Grewelthorpe CE School and Masham CE VA School. Pupil roll and capacity information for all local schools can be found on the consultation page of the NYC website.

At present, there is a discrete catchment area solely for Fountains Earth, CE Endowed Primary School. It is proposed that St Cuthbert's CE VC, as the next nearest alternative school at 6.5 miles by road and which is also a CE school, would incorporate the existing Fountains Earth, Lofthouse catchment area as an addition to its existing catchment area in the event of a closure. The Church of England Diocese of Leeds has indicated early-stage support for this approach.

Andrew Dixon explained that views on this option, or other ideas for future catchment areas, should the school close, are being asked for as part of this consultation.

There is a parallel staff consultation process being undertaken.

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In terms of Governance, Andrew Dixon explained that a new instrument of governance would be required to reflect the change to the federation should closure take place in March 2024.

The Council owns most of the school site and is currently clarifying the position regarding the remainder of the site with the Land Registry and the Diocese. Decisions about future use would be taken after determination of the closure proposal.

Andrew Dixon then outlined the consultation timescales and he emphasised that a two-stage consultation process would take place before any decisions on the proposals were taken. All views expressed at this public meeting would form part of the report which is considered when the decision on whether to proceed to the second statutory consultation is taken. The statutory consultation is a further 4-week period when there is opportunity for comments and responses.

Andrew Dixon stated the consultation runs until the 22 December 2023 and urged people to respond either online or by freepost. A report will be prepared and presented to the Council's Executive on 23 January 2024.

Andrew Dixon then presented a slide with the details of the panel who would take questions from the audience:

- Amanda Newbold – NYC Assistant Director, Education and Skills
- Andrew Dixon – NYC Strategic Planning Manager
- Julie Pattison – NYC School Improvement Principal Adviser
- Helen Nelson – Co-Chair of the Federation Governing Board
- Canon Richard Noake – Diocesan Director of Education, Church of England Diocese of Leeds

Amanda Newbold asked Andrew Dixon that it would be helpful at this point to explain about the presumption against the closure of rural schools, and the additional issues that decision makers must have regard to.

Andrew explained that the school is designated as a rural school and added there is a presumption against the closure of rural schools, but this does not mean that a rural school will never close. There are a number of additional questions that decision makers must have regard to as set out in the Department for Education (DfE) guidance. These questions will be set out and considered in the report to the Executive in January.

A question was asked if the additional questions could be made public. Andrew replied that this information was already in the public domain but in addition he would ensure it was provided.

Andrew then handed over to Amanda Newbold who chaired the questions and answer session

Questions

A member of the community asked how many pupils would the school need on roll to make it viable?

Amanda Newbold replied, there is no specific figure but pupil numbers drive income and there are costs to running a school for example, site costs, teaching staff. Where schools form part of a group, costs can be shared. The issue at this school is there are no children on roll.

Richard Noake said it is not wise to set a threshold of a certain number of pupils for viability of a school. Richard said he had to date been involved in 14 consultations for school closure proposals due to a change in demographics. In terms of Church Schools, the Diocese provides opportunities to federate with other schools, as is the case here.

Amanda Newbold said there are 54 schools in the county with fewer than 50 pupils and all but 4 of these schools are in a federation or trust sharing resources and costs.

A member of the community said that, prior to the pandemic, she asked the school about reception numbers and was told that all reception children were being taught at St Cuthbert's.

Cllr Murday, NYC said it would be a 'disaster for the community to lose the school' and that there must have been a breakdown in communication between the school and parents. It is important for parents to understand what has gone wrong and that it doesn't go wrong again in the future of the federation. He added, children in the community don't want to spend an hour in a car travelling to school.

Cllr Murday added that members of the public can ask to speak when the report is presented to the Council's Executive.

Amanda Newbold said that from 15 January 2024, the papers for the Executive will be available on the Council's website for the meeting on 23 January 2024. Members of the public may ask questions or make statements by applying through the Council's Legal and Democratic Services.

An ex-parent said there was a need look at pupil numbers from much further back than June 2022 to fully understand the situation. Parents felt forced out of the federation of schools. They now had to transport their children to a school much further away, with a 23 mile round trip and yesterday morning there was a blizzard and thick ice.

The Co -Chair of Governors Upper Nidderdale Federation responded that she had been elected in March 2023 and that she believed that there had been some communication issues between parents and the leadership team and that some issues had not been resolved.

Amanda Newbold said if there are parents that are uncomfortable sending their children to other schools outside of the federation, that they need to discuss any issues in the first instance with the governing body.

The Co -Chair of Governors Upper Nidderdale Federation replied saying that she understood two of the children that left Fountains Earth had gone to one of the other schools in the federation.

An ex-parent said there had been no communication with parents for over a year and that he had put a letter of complaint into the school that wasn't addressed. Eleven pupils have gone to other schools and this needs to be questioned.

The Co -Chair of Governors Upper Nidderdale Federation replied that as governors they do ask questions about pupil numbers but they do not get involved with operational issues at a school level.

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An ex-parent asked if the governing body were happy with the pupil numbers across the federation?

The Co -Chair of Governors Upper Nidderdale Federation replied saying that the question was not part of the consultation.

Amanda Newbold said it is important to hear views and encouraged people to respond with their views via the consultation.

A member of the public said that she had previously worked at the school as a Teaching Assistant. Headteachers during her time at the school were fantastic, the school was like a family, they did a lot of fundraising, the teacher did what they could and it was one unit. She was upset to find out the school may be closing and that all the parents had taken their children out of Fountains Earth and it had 'broken her heart'. Something has gone drastically wrong. If the school closes, part of the community will be gone forever. Why had parents not been listened to before it got to this stage and their questions addressed?

The Co -Chair of Governors Upper Nidderdale Federation said there had been meetings with parents to try to understand the reasons for parents removing children from the school, for example one year 6 pupil would have had no peers if they had stayed at the school. If there had been a mass exodus for other reasons, then the governors would like to know why.

Amanda Newbold reminded the meeting that the Council were here to facilitate the meeting and that the position today is that there are no pupils on roll at the school.

An ex- school parent and governor and member of the Parish Council said he had previously helped with the school's sporting activities noting that the school came 1st out of 147 schools for TAG rugby in the Harrogate area, adding that small schools can achieve great things. Looking at the data, when about 25% of parents had chosen not to send their children to the school and this is now 100%, surely this was a red flag and a starting point for discussions?

Andrew Dixon explained that the LA monitor pupil numbers on a termly basis but added we would not normally see a reduction of pupils at a school so quickly.

The Co -Chair of Governors Upper Nidderdale Federation added when she started as a governor, there were 7 pupils on roll. Governors knew about the previous pupil numbers reducing at the school and there was always a reason given. The governing body met with members of the community last Summer and understood at this meeting there were other issues involved.

Vice Chair of the Parish Council said he had watched events closely at the school since June 2022. He had met with parents and the local MP. He was called for interview as an associate school governor and this was cancelled by the school at very short notice and that he has not heard anything since. He had subsequently followed this up with the LA and is still awaiting a reply. There appears to be a deliberate policy to close the school and he questioned the behaviour of the leadership team at the school and to a lesser extent the governing body.

An ex-parent said there were communication problems with the school and governors and that it was not good enough that a meeting was cancelled one hour before it was due to start.

The Co -Chair of Governors Upper Nidderdale Federation responded and acknowledged there were communications problems at the school regarding this meeting.

An ex-parent said that he understood that every time a prospective reception pupil showed interest at the school, they were directed to St Cuthbert's or Glasshouses. Parents with children living locally wanted access to the local school, the community felt forced out. He stated that he can remember a Year 6 class at one stage having 8 pupils in one class and to go from that, to this position, should be of concern.

The Co -Chair of Governors Upper Nidderdale Federation thought potential reception children may have been encouraged to attend other schools within the federation and this could have been put in place by a previous headteacher.

A former Headteacher of Fountains Earth and St Cuthbert's said that it was categorically not the policy to send pupils to another school. She expressed concern that the current leader of the school had not acted with sufficient passion to address issues when the school became vulnerable, and also questioned why the leader was not at tonight's meeting to answer questions in person.

An ex-parent asked when and where was a permanent teacher position advertised?

The Co -Chair of Governors Upper Nidderdale Federation said she believed it was on the NY Council website and other websites.

Amanda Newbold asked Julie Pattison to reflect on the challenges of recruitment and retention in small schools.

Julie Pattison added that the smaller the school, the more year groups you have to teach together and lots of small schools find this a challenge.

A member of the public stated he had taught in Ofsted rated outstanding primary schools and now lives in the village and is available and would be prepared to undertake a free trial at the school.

A member of the public said information in the report stated that the school had not been able, over the last five years, to recruit a permanent teacher and that this was incorrect. Why is it now a problem to retain staff and to drive up the dale?

The Co -Chair of Governors Upper Nidderdale Federation said she understood there had been significant problems recruiting staff to the school because you have to teach such a broad spectrum of age ranges and it is a massive ask of any teacher, that is why the school has gone out to agencies.

Andrew Dixon said the wording in the report regarding staffing came from the school. If the information has been misinterpreted, this will be looked into and corrected if necessary, in the next report to the Council's Executive.

An ex-parent said there had been amazing teachers at the school, a good supply teacher moved to Glasshouses School, the Headteacher's partner was then appointed as a teacher at the school. His daughter had not had one single piece of homework.

Amanda Newbold noted that she was picking up issues from the meeting around the turnover of staff at the school.

A Parish Councillor said they appreciated the financial challenges but we are at a point where we want rural communities to thrive, so why would we want to close a school when we should be encouraging families to move here, particularly now the community has superfast broadband which provides more opportunities for people to work from home.

Amanda Newbold said that the 'in area' children data showed decreasing numbers overtime and that the LA had not yet seen evidence of children moving into the area.

A member of the public said that a number of children go to private schools and that these children are not captured in the data, if good local education is provided, they would attend local schools.

Amanda Newbold asked Richard Noake for his view on recruitment in general.

Richard Noake commented it was very difficult to recruit good, experienced leaders and teachers across the Diocese.

A member of the public asked why was the good teacher pushed out of the school?

A member of the Parish Council said when the school was looking to close last year, a group of parents attended a meeting to show their support for the school and they are all here tonight. They added that the current Headteacher had never held a meeting at the school for parents. Further issues were raised including why no hot food was provided for children at lunchtime and no extra curriculum activities.

He added that banners were placed outside both St Cuthbert's and Glasshouses schools to say they had been rated 'Good' by Ofsted but there was no banner placed outside Fountains Earth.

There was a very good teacher at the school in September 2022 when a school closure proposal was first mentioned and because that member of staff thought the school was closing, they transferred to St Cuthbert's. Why didn't the Headteacher bring that teacher back instead of choosing to replace that teacher with her partner?

A further question was asked about rural schools and budgets.

Amanda Newbold explained that all schools have a base funding figure, then a figure per pupil and a sparsity factor for schools that are both small and remote. Budgets for the three schools within the federation are amalgamated.

A member of the Parish Council asked where the sparsity funding allocated to Fountains Earth had gone or was it placed in the accounts of St Cuthbert's and Glasshouses School? Fountains Earth is a rural school and should not be in a deficit.

Amanda Newbold said governors oversee how money is spent.

The Co -Chair of Governors Upper Nidderdale Federation said that finances are looked at separately for each school, the issue here goes back to there being no children on roll.

A member of the Parish Council said that part of the school is part of the Lazenby Trust and linked to the founder of the school John Lazenby, she said the school does not belong to the Council. If the school stays in the community, the link to the Trust needs to be thought about as it was intended for education of boys in the area.

As regards the proposal regarding the existing catchment area of Fountains Earth, nobody from the community goes to the other two schools within the federation, so this needs to be taken into account.

Amanda Newbold said there are still some unanswered questions around the ownership of the school that the Council is looking into.

A member of the Parish Council commenting further on the proposed catchment area, said local children are not going to the other two federated schools and the community opinion seems to be against being part of St Cuthbert's catchment area.

A member of the public said as most pupils are now attending Masham Primary School, should the current catchment area of Masham School be extended to include the current Fountains Earth School catchment area?

The Parish Council Chair, said there has been a lack of communication, honesty and trust. Parents have voted with their feet. Unless the leadership team is altered, the community do not want to see the current catchment area of the school become part of St Cuthbert's catchment area. There has been little action from the Council and Diocese on the matter of declining pupil numbers. Pupil numbers are also down to 48 now at St Cuthbert's.

A member of the community asked how many people at the meeting would take their children to St Cuthbert's and Glasshouses. No hands were raised.

Andrew Dixon asked how many parents were at the meeting tonight and seven people raised their hands. He then asked how many of those parents would send their children to either St Cuthbert's or Glasshouses, no hands were raised.

Amanda Newbold closed the meeting and thanked everyone for their attendance and contributions.

The **meeting closed** at 19:25.