

## Appendix 4

### **Record of Public Meeting concerning proposed closure of St Hilda's Ampleforth Church of England Voluntary Controlled Primary School at Ampleforth Village Hall**

**Public Meeting held on 18<sup>th</sup> March 2024 at 6pm**

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**Present:** Cllr Annabel Wilkinson (Executive Member for Education, Learning and Skills, NYC), Amanda Newbold, (Assistant Director Education and Skills NYC), Andrew Smith - Diocesan Director of Education, Church of England Diocese of York, Johanna Senior, (Chair of the St Hilda's Ampleforth CE VC Primary School Governing Board), Lucy Wilshaw (Foundation Governor), Charles Raynard (LA Governor), Julie Pattison, (Principal Adviser NYC), Howard Emmett (Assistant Director Resources ), Matt George (Strategic Planning Officer, NYC) and Julia Temple (Strategic Planning Officer, NYC).

**Apologies:** Mark McCandless (Chief Executive Officer, Ryedale Learning Trust), Claire Lamb (Executive Headteacher St Hilda's CE VC Primary School)

### AGENDA

• Meeting opens – brief welcome - Introduction to the Panel	Johanna Senior, Chair of St Hilda's Ampleforth School Governing Board
Presentation	Matt George – Strategic Planning Manager NYC
Question and Answer Session	Chaired by Cllr Annabel Wilkinson, Executive Member for Education, Learning and Skills
Meeting Close	Cllr Annabel Wilkinson

#### **1. Welcome**

##### **Johanna Senior (Chair of St Hilda's Ampleforth CE VC School Governing Board)**

Joanna welcomed everyone to the meeting and introduced the panel. Unfortunately, the Executive Headteacher and Mark McCandless from the Ryedale Learning Trust had just received the call from Ofsted and was unable to attend the meeting in order to prepare for an upcoming inspection.

#### **2. Presentation from NYC**

Matt George, Strategic Planning Officer, NYC, explained that the meeting was being held to discuss the proposal to close St Hilda's Ampleforth Church of England Primary School with effect from 31 August 2024.

**Matt 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 St Hilda's Ampleforth CE VC Primary School** is responsible for the strategic direction of the school, 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 school. The Headteacher and leaders are accountable to the Governing Board

Matt George provided a presentation which covered:

- o The proposal
- o Background to the proposal
- o Pupil numbers
- o Pupil numbers over time
- o Admissions context
- o Finances
- o School Leadership, Standards and Curriculum
- o Local Schools
- o Catchment area proposals
- o School staff
- o School site
- o What happens now
- o How can people comment

The slides explained the background to the closure proposal of falling rolls. In January 2024 the Governing Board approached the Council to seek consultation on the proposed closure of St Hilda's Ampleforth CE VC Primary. There were 13 pupils of statutory school age on the school roll at this time and the available information showed no sign of any significant growth in the roll.

This has led to financial pressures, meaning that the school would have an in-year deficit in 2024/25 and a cumulative deficit by 2025. The school's current leadership arrangement is only in place until the end of the summer term 2024. Governors have requested the consultation at this time as they have identified the importance of a decision on the school's future being made before the end of the academic year.

There has been a downward trend in the number of pupils on roll since 2018/19 when there were 36 pupils on roll, this dropped to 28 in 2020/21 and 20 in 2022/23.

Matt went on to explain that pupil numbers determine a school's budget. The revised budget was based upon 13 pupils who were on roll in October 2023 and a projection of 11 pupils on roll in October 2024. If the actual number falls below that then the financial position would worsen. This budget projection assumes future leadership costs continue at the same level as the current interim arrangements. However, it is

likely that the leadership costs would significantly increase if the school were to appoint a substantive headteacher (either full time or part-time) which would result in a further deterioration of the budget position. Therefore, there appears to be no reasonable prospect of longer-term financial viability for the school.

If school closure were to go ahead any legacy costs associated with the operation of the school incurred in the 2024/25 financial year would need to continue to be charged to the St Hilda's CE VC Primary School 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 which is led by an Interim Executive Headteacher. The most recent full graded Ofsted inspection for St Hilda's Ampleforth CE VC Primary was in March 2020. At that time there were 38 pupils on roll. Ofsted judged the school, to be 'Good'. 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.

There are 6 neighbouring North Yorkshire schools within 10 miles of St Hilda's CE VC by road;

- St Benedict's Catholic Primary School
- Helmsley Community Primary School
- Hustwaite Church of England Voluntary Controlled Primary School
- Terrington Church of England Voluntary Aided Primary School
- Slingsby Community Primary School
- Crayke Church of England Voluntary Controlled Primary School

Matt explained that should the decision be made to close the school then there would also need to be a decision around how the catchment area would be split between neighbouring schools. The proposal being put forward is to split the current catchment area between Hustwaite Church of England Voluntary Controlled Primary School, Helmsley Community Primary School and Terrington Church of England VA Primary School. Views are invited on the option presented, or any other option.

The ownership of the school site is split between the Council and the Diocese of York. Decisions about future use would be taken after determination of the closure proposal.

Matt stated that the consultation runs until 19 April 2024 and if approved then ten a further consultation would take place between 17 May and 24 June 2024. A final decision would then be taken on 16 July 2024.

### **3. Questions and Answers**

Matt then handed over to Cllr Wilkinson who chaired the questions and answer session.

A local resident asked where the slides are that shows the argument for keeping the school open? He went on to say that the background only shows the reasons for

closing the school and asked if the Council had considered why the school should remain open. He said that this looks very much like a decision that has already been taken and would like to know the reasons why the school should remain open.

Amanda Newbold explained the role of the school governors and part of that role is dealing with the school finances. She said the Governing Body have made a really difficult decision to come to the LA to request a closure consultation. All the reasons to keep a school open are already happening and North Yorkshire have over 200 schools open, but this is a consultation about a closure proposal.

A resident who has moved into the village fairly recently asked how can the LA be sure that the downward projection is not a result of the Covid pandemic?

Amanda Newbold replied that the information we have is based on the numbers of children living within the catchment area. She went on to explain that GP data and housing data is also used to predict the numbers of children in the area. She said the LA can only respond to the data we have and cannot speculate on the reasons why those numbers have fallen.

A parent has carried out their own research and although there aren't many children in area they do know of a number of parents who are looking to sign up to send their children to the school. They also felt that the closure would be a contradiction to the Ryedale Local Plan as a service village.

A resident asked whether any of the other local schools shown on the slides are going through a consultation for closure?

Amanda Newbold replied that there aren't but there are proposals for Academisation.

The owner of a local nursery said that they are finding they are getting more interest from younger children which will in turn push out the older children and asked whether we have considered where these children will go?

A grandparent stated that the number of children that go to St Benedict's has risen in recent years as the number of children that go to St Hilda's has fallen. He went on to say that years ago both schools had strong, positive proactive leadership, and that changes to leadership has unsettled parents. He has also heard that some parents have been put off sending their children to St Hilda's because of the rumours around potential closure.

A parent referred to St Hilda's being classed as a rural school and said that the LA is only looking at the short-term decline in numbers and asked about the longer term forecasted numbers.

Cllr Mason said Ampleforth is one of the key service villages in the area. He said that the surplus grant funding at NYC should be going towards supporting schools. We have a school here in a village that represents what North Yorkshire is about and he's going to hold the Executive to account, and they should stop thinking on a 12 month basis.

Howard Emmett responded to say that this was a one off grant from the Department of Education that can only be spent on schools which are currently in a deficit financial position and that funding has to be spent within this financial year.

A parent and journalist said that she had sent in a Freedom of Information request to the DfE who said that 26 rural schools have closed and wants to know how many of those were within North Yorkshire.

Amanda Newbold said she believed there have been 16 school closures within North Yorkshire over the last 7 years but would have to check on which of those were designated as rural schools.

A parent who resides within the catchment area for Helmsley Primary School felt that that school was too big for her daughter, and she didn't thrive there. She went on to say that since moving her to St Hilda's she has come on leaps and bounds. She also said that she would want her daughter to go to a Church of England school.

A parent said they had been told that this was a school that was closing and that would have put parents off attending St Hilda's. She went on to question how much is it going to cost to pick up the additional transport costs?

Amanda Newbold said that as a rural school one of the elements that would be taken into consideration is the impact around transport, however, at this stage there haven't been any discussions with parents about which school they would preference so the LA can't put a figure on those costs just yet. Amanda went on to explain about the Home to School transport consultation currently underway and explained about the distances at which children would be eligible for transport.

A resident said that all answers being given make her think that no one has actually given consideration to the actual costs if the school was to stay open and asked why the preference exercise hasn't already been undertaken.

Amanda Newbold explained that the cost of transport sits with the Council and doesn't come out of the school budget so that wouldn't change the school's financial position. Amanda said that coming to parents to ask which alternative school they would preference could have been seen as pre-determining the closure decision.

A parent stated that since their son has been going to St Hilda's he has been thriving.

The Chair of Governors for the Foston, Terrington and Stillington Federation pointed out that the information on the slides should show that Terrington is also federated with Stillington. She also wanted it to be made clear that the Home to School transport consultation will only provide transport to the nearest school.

Amanda Newbold said that this closure consultation started prior to the Home to School transport consultation.

A parent, and also a previous pupil at the school said they both work full time and currently make use of the school's wrap around care. They currently drop their children off at 7.30am and don't collect them until after they finish work. What are

they going to do if the school was to close? Would one of them have to give up work?

A resident said that the Council keep saying they will get transport to their child's nearest school but for most it will be St Benedict's. She also said that it isn't that they don't want to send their children to St Benedict's but that their admissions policy does not welcome their attendance due to being a different faith.

Cllr Wilkinson responded on the point about transport and said all those issues would be considered as part of that consultation process.

A parent said that all four of her children have had a positive experience at St Hilda's. She asked how many schools are already in a financial deficit within North Yorkshire? She went on to say that her eldest child started in 2011 and there was a mass exodus at that point and there were only 12 pupils at the school but it then recovered.

Howard Emmett responded with 31 schools in an accumulated deficit but each one is in a different position with most having a recovery plan.

A parent said they have a son who has an EHCP, he said this is a written agreement and should the school close this would be a breach of that agreement and he would take legal action. He said there will be other parents with children with EHCP's who have not been taken into account. His view is that this is a post Covid situation and people have lost their nerve.

Another parent of a child with an EHCP added that their child would really struggle at another school and it was only being at St Hilda's that he was able to get through his primary education.

A resident said that as we are making this decision based on a budget deficit, how much money would it actually take to keep the school open?

Howard Emmet replied that the number of pupils are used to project the finances going forward. Governors have looked and seen that with the reduced number of pupils the viability of the school is in question.

The resident then asked why some schools were allowed to go into a financial deficit?

Howard Emmett replied that some schools have only a temporary deficit but have a 3-year recovery plan.

A parent requested a further look at the slides showing the alternative schools. She said that St Benedict's was not a viable option, Helmsley in 2-3 years' time is expected to be at full capacity, Husthwaite has an RI Ofsted rating and has a falling pupil roll and the nursery should be rated good or equivalent to that which is closing, and Terrington is too far away. In her opinion there are no other viable options.

A former pupil and parent said that St Hilda's is a fabulous school with wraparound care and feels there is no other option of a school that meets what they currently

have. One of them would have to stop work in order to look after their children if there was no wraparound care at another school.

Amanda Newbold said she will make sure we understand what wraparound care the other schools currently offer and will make that information available to parents. She also went on to say that from September 2024 all schools will have to offer or at least sign post to wraparound care.

Cllr Wilkinson invited Julie Pattison to talk about the quality of education at the school. Julie said that one of the big challenges for a school of that size is being able to continue to offer a broad curriculum and therefore ensuring a quality of education. Having so few children in the school can also create social challenges.

A parent said we also need to consider nursery children amongst those numbers and went on to say how well all the children play together at all ages.

A resident stated that the deficit budget is around £60,000 and the Executive can change the policy to enable those schools that have projected deficits to also apply for some funding to plug the gap.

Charles Raynard said that from a Governors' perspective this has been a positive meeting. He said that what this school needs is some longevity and for parents to take that leap into sending their children to St Hilda's. He went on to explain that they have had to undertake this process as the projected pupil numbers don't look favourable. He said it would be helpful if everyone could send their comments and observations into the consultation so they can all be considered.

A resident queried who makes the decision to close the school and said that she felt the decision had already been taken.

Cllr Wilkinson replied that the decision is taken by the Executive which is a group of 10 people.

There was a query around the Home to School transport policy and how and when that is happening. Cllr Wilkinson said the consultation for that is currently underway.

A former parent said they can think of at least 10 names of children who have gone onto local employment. She added that her husband was the school caretaker and in winter that school never closed. She said he would look after the children until their parents were able to get to the school to pick them up.

A parent who's four children have attended the school asked how can a child be expected to walk 2 miles there and back to their school? She added that they would be too tired to learn.

Andrew Smith from the Diocese of York said that the quality of education at the school has been preserved due to the good members of staff, but the reality is that it is not just this school who are facing a reduction in pupil numbers. He went on to say that he has colleagues in London who are facing similar difficult decisions at schools who have as many as 140 pupils on roll. He said the school is not in this position due to performance, but Ofsted is only a snap shot at a certain time and retaining a

good quality of education will be challenging with such low numbers. He said a lot of time and effort has gone into looking to see what they can do to keep the school going. They have looked at both short term and long term issues to see what can be done. He went on to explain that currently leadership support has been provided at a cost to the Ryedale Learning Trust which cannot continue and explained that in order to become an Academy they would need the Department for Education's approval.

A question was then asked around what the Diocese had done to help the school join another school?

A parent then asked if colleagues within the SEN department would be consulted.

Amanda assured the parent they would be.

#### **4. CLOSING REMARKS**

Cllr Wilkinson drew the meeting to a close by thanking everyone for their questions and assured those present that all of their comments would be included in the minutes and considered in the final report.

The Meeting Closed at 7.45 pm