



**Blue Hills  
Federation**

## **MINUTES OF GOVERNORS' EXTRAORDINARY MEETING**

**WEDNESDAY, 18<sup>TH</sup> JANUARY 2023 at 5:30  
at Bucknell School**

**SPRING TERM 2023**

**Present:** Miss. Anna Cook (Head)      Mrs. Di Cosgrove (Acting Chair)  
Mrs. Janet Hartin                      Mr. Nigel Hartin  
Mrs. Ruth Gittins                      Mrs. Julie Saunders  
Mrs. Jenny White                      Mrs. Anne Gledhill  
Rev. Caroline Bullimore (via Teams)

### **In Attendance**

Mr. Ian Urry (Clerk)

**1. Opening Prayer**

This was led by (J.W.)

**2. Apologies for Absences**

None

**3. The Future of Newcastle School**

The Chair explained that the exclusive business of the meeting would be to discuss the future of Newcastle School and thereafter to reach a decision regarding the course of action that the Governing Body wished to pursue.

### **3.1 Reasons for considering the closure of Newcastle School**

- a) **Falling Roll:** (R.G.) and the Head reminded the governors of the school's recent history, particularly with regard to falling rolls. For the past ten years, the school roll has hovered around the mid to low twenties (a role of 20 is the minimum that the L.A. has traditionally deemed to be the minimum to consider a school financially viable).

The projected role for next year is 20, with the possibility that it could be as low as 18. The loss of several children in and around the summer period, for a variety of reasons, prompted the senior management to meet with parents in an effort to forestall any additional loss of existent or potential children. Concerns were addressed and there was clearly a lot of goodwill for the school, but parents also voiced concerns about the social and educational implications of sending their child to a school with such depleted numbers.

- [REDACTED]
- b) **Demographics:** the chief cause of the falling roll is the ageing local demographic, caused in part by the lack of affordable housing for young families. In the present climate, there is little likelihood of this situation changing, and absolutely no prospect of the 200 new-builds that it has been estimated would be needed in order to guarantee the long-term future of the school.

The governors were shown maps and charts that allowed comparisons to be drawn between the actual provenance of the children now, compared with that of those anticipated to attend in 2023-2024. In addition to providing information about individual children over the last two years, the data also demonstrated the success that the school had enjoyed in attracting children from outside the school's catchment area. This group of children has constituted more than half of the total number on roll in the past, but a recent decline in the number of out-of-catchment children indicates that the school cannot rely on them as a source of students going forward. Transport difficulties for children coming from outside the catchment area, particularly those coming from Wales, also exacerbate this problem of recruiting from outside the area. Whereas Powys has given guarantees of future transport to Welsh schools, no such guarantee exists for Welsh children travelling to Shropshire schools, even though they may well be the closest option.

Forecasts for the school roll for the next four years, provided by the L.A., suggest that, except for 2026, when the consequences of the Covid lockdown' are expected to manifest themselves with a potential addition of 4/5 children, the roll should be around 25 – 27. However, these projected figures presuppose that all the eligible children in the catchment area are sent to the school. Experience proves that this is highly unlikely to happen. More realistic projections would see the school's roll remaining around the 20-figure mark.

- c) **Financial reasons:** when Newcastle became part of the Blue Hills Federation, the L.A. expressed reservations about the financial viability of the school. It has only been through careful budgeting and the judicious uses of the Federation's resources that the school's books have been kept balanced all this time. However, a falling roll will have inevitable financial consequences.

Unfortunately, a lack of recent, detailed budget forecasts from the L.A. makes it difficult to determine those consequences with any accuracy. However, future yearly deficits of between £50,000 and £90,000 have been posited. Such deficits would require the school to submit a plan demonstrating how it would extricate itself from that situation.

- d) **Staffing reasons:** deficits of the type referred to above would inevitably lead to the transfer or loss of some staff members.

[REDACTED]

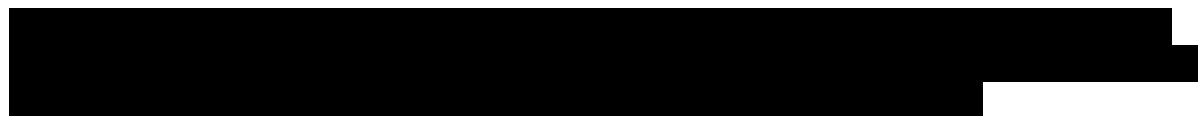
The Federation would always seek to redeploy staff members within the Federation, but the geographical distances between the schools might mitigate against that.

(R.G.) indicated her intention to leave Newcastle School, either in September or, at the latest, at Christmas of this year. After moving to Tenbury Wells because of her husband's work, she now has to contend with a daily commute of about one hour in

each direction. This is not sustainable, particularly given the state of the roads for much of it.

All the governors recognised that the success of Newcastle School over the last decade has in no small way been a result of the skill and dedication that (R.G.) has shown. She will be a significant loss to the school.

The governors discussed the difficulties of recruiting a suitably skilled and experienced teacher to lead Newcastle School. Recent attempts to recruit staff to the other schools in the Federation have been met with a paucity of applicants. The remoteness of the school, together with anxieties about its future, are also likely to compound these difficulties.



**e) The educational provision of children at Newcastle School:** all the governors reiterated that the overriding consideration in these deliberations about the future of the school must be the quality of the education that we are able to provide for the children, both those currently on role and those yet to join.

Governors shared the concerns, already expressed by a number of parents, that the size and make-up of year groups and classes will no longer be adequate to be able to guarantee an acceptable level of educational provision.

The governors reflected on the benefits of small, rural schools: they provide a welcoming, caring and nurturing community in which both children and adults become very well-known to each, creating a familiarity that encourages a huge amount of trust, and leads to a well-informed educational provision. Newcastle has been and remains a shining example of such a school.

The governors also recognised that a tipping point is reached when the very smallness of groups restricts the children's social and educational opportunities. These opportunities include: the chance to mix and study with a range of different people; the opportunity to experience a full range of educational styles and approaches; and the opportunity to have access to adequate resources. The prospect of year groups comprising only one or two children, and individual children having no other children of their gender and age in the school is one that raises genuine concerns.

The governors, individually and collectively, expressed the view that Newcastle School, with the anticipated future roles as they are, is now approaching that tipping point.

### **3.2A Review of the Options**

The Chair proposed that the governors re-visit the 6 Options previously agreed upon in the board meeting of November 8<sup>th</sup>, 2022.

**Option 1: to take no action, but hope that the school roll recovers over the coming years.**

The governors felt that this would be both naive and irresponsible. All the evidence suggests that no such recovery will take place without any sort of intervention.

**Option 2: to continue as we are but in the meantime to aggressively market the school through a concerted campaign to attract additional pupils.**

The governors acknowledged that, whilst they felt a natural instinct to fight for the future of the school in this way, they believed that its chances of success, given all the other

factors that have been outlined, would be very small. There is a finite number of children living in the wider community. Any such campaign would inevitably involve a degree of 'poaching' from other schools. We already attract a significant proportion of children from outside the catchment area; it is doubtful that we could increase our share or be able to maintain that increased share year after year. The school already markets itself by issuing invitations to open sessions (an initiative that has only ever resulted in the attendance of existing parents, and has been actively sabotaged in a neighbouring village).

Fewer and fewer affordable houses are being built to sell or to rent in rural communities and so the prospect of that pool of potential pupils increasing in size is remote.

**Option 3: *pursue the option with the L.A. of bringing the Child Centre under the control of the school.***

The purpose of this would be to ensure a reliable stream of children transitioning from the nursery to the school.

The governors believed that the L.A. would not entertain such a proposal, particularly because it would mean the additional expense of constructing accommodation on the school site when the Child's Centre is currently housed in a purpose-built, Lottery-funded, building.

**Option 4: *retain the Newcastle site but transport the children to other schools in the Federation.***

Whilst the governors could recognise the benefits of this as a long-term strategy, they believed that it would never be acceptable to the Diocese because it would contravene the criteria of the original deeds.

**Option 5: *negotiate with the Diocese about involving other local schools in a wider solution.***

The governors felt that the possibility of involving Clun School in a reorganisation was unlikely given its present position in the Diocese of Hereford Multi Academy Trust. The governors expressed the strong view that, whatever the decision, parents of children at Newcastle should be given the opportunity to continue the children's association with the Federation. The children and their parents are familiar with the staff, pupils, ethos and approaches of the Blue Hills Federation, and that affiliation may well override the inconvenience of having to travel longer distances.

**Option 6: *move to a proposal to consult on the possible closure of Newcastle School.***

The governors, with considerable reluctance, felt that this was the only realistic option available to them.

**3.3 Review of the meeting with representatives of the L.A. and Diocese of Hereford on 12<sup>th</sup> January 2023**

The Chair suggested that, in the absence of an official note-taker at the meeting, the governors should pool their memories of the salient points before moving to a vote on the proposals.

- A decision to propose to close the school would invoke a long and difficult process
- There is much to be said for the GB taking the initiative, rather than standing back and watching the school 'whither on the vine'

- Should the governors decide to propose a consultation about the closure of the school, the L.A. would make every effort to bring the proposal before the Cabinet for a decision at the earliest opportunity, hopefully in April 2023
- If the proposal to close is accepted, it is likely to be completed by September 2024, but it could well involve educating children off that site before then
- Access to transportation will be a critical factor in where the children go if the school closes.
- Funding of Newcastle pupils during any possible transitional period is of crucial importance
- The Diocese would prefer the Newcastle building to be sold rather than to use it for an alternative educational function
- Phil Jones expressed his readiness to become involved and fully supportive of the Federation if the proposal to consult on closure is taken
- If Newcastle School is closed, there should be some form of ceremony to mark and celebrate its achievements.

### 3.4 Decision on the future of Newcastle School

*(The two associate governors, (J.W.) and (R.G.) removed themselves from the room whilst the vote took place)*

The Chair asked the governors to vote on each of the options that had been previously discussed.

No votes were cast in favour of Options 1-5.

All the governors (7) voted for Option 6. **Therefore, it was unanimously decided by the governing body that a proposal be presented to Shropshire Council that a formal consultation process be initiated into the proposal to close Newcastle School.**

### 3.5 Next steps

The governors were given an opportunity to air any concerns or questions regarding what lies ahead. It was generally agreed that, although governors are familiar with the process of consultation, they lack information about the time scale involved and the degree of guidance and support that can be expected from the L.A. and the Diocese. Clarification on these matters will be sought.

In the meantime, the Chair will consult with the Head and (R.G.) to draw up a draft of the proposal to be presented to the L.A.

The governors were reminded that this matter remains confidential until staff and parents are officially informed after the County Council Cabinet meeting.

The Chair thanked her fellow governors for their excellent support during the meeting and in proceeding meetings.

The Head also thanked the governing body for their diligence, sensitivity and generous support, qualities that will certainly be called upon over the coming months.

### 4. Date of the next Full Board Meeting

This was arranged for Tuesday, 7<sup>th</sup> February at 6:30 at Clunbury School.

### 5. Rev Caroline led the governors in a closing prayer.

Date:	Signed:
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