

Meeting to Discuss the Prescribed Alteration Proposal Newcastle CE Primary School, 8th March 2023, 3:30p.m.

Governors in Attendance

Miss. Anna Cook -Head

Mrs. Janet Hartin

Mrs. Di Cosgrove – Acting Chair of governors

Mrs. Anne Gledhill

Rev. Caroline Bullimore

Mr. Nigel Hartin (N.H.) Acting vice-chair of governors

Mrs. Julie Saunders

Associate Governors

Mrs. Ruth Gittins

Mrs. Jenny White

Clerk in attendance Mr. I. Urry

Apologies received from;

Sian Lines (Deputy Director of Education for the Hereford Diocese) anticipated travel difficulties because of the snow.

Phil Wilson (Service manager-business support, learning and skills people directorate) is unwell.

The invited audience consisted of approximately 30 people, made up of parents, both former and current, Newcastle teaching staff, lead-teacher from Clunbury and other members of the community.

1. Opening remarks

The Chair welcomed the audience and explained the purpose of the meeting, before inviting the governors to introduce themselves.

The Head expressed her regret that we find ourselves in this situation and her hope that governors and all interested parties could work together to arrive at a solution that serves the interests of the pupils.

Mrs. Melanie Sharpe introduced herself as a parent and a spokesperson for parents and other members of the community who, since receiving news of the proposal, had met to discuss the matter and to raise their concerns.

The Clerk expressed his intention to take notes during the meeting and make them available on the Federation websites as a faithful record of the meeting. He also assured the audience that any questions that the governors were not able to answer during the meeting would be noted and an answer sought from the appropriate source.

The vice-chair explained that we are currently in Stage 2 of a four-stage process, one that leads to a Cabinet decision on the 17th May. He also explained that at the end of the consultation process on March 31, governors would meet again to review all responses before deciding whether, in the light of those responses, to continue the process via a request for a decision at SC Cabinet on the 17th May. He also emphasised that any decision made at that Cabinet meeting could be appealed and

that the whole process could be curtailed at any stage. He also made it clear that, even though he is a serving county councillor, he will not be involved in the decision-making process at Cabinet.

1. The issues raised

a. Absence of any representatives from the diocese and the L.A.

Disappointment was expressed that no member of the Diocese or the L.A. was present in the meeting, and it was suggested that that lack of representation should merit a halt in the process. There was also a complaint that holding the meeting at 3:30 was inconsiderate because it precluded the attendance of many working parents.

The governors agreed that, although they understood the reasons why the invited representatives could not attend, it was indeed regrettable and inconvenient. They promised that an additional meeting would be arranged as soon as possible to allow parents to directly address their concerns to representatives of the L.A. and the Diocese.

The governors apologised for the time of the meeting and promised to liaise with the community to organise the next one at a more convenient time for all. The governors also offered to check with the L.A. to see what scope there is to delay the consultation process in response to these types of issues.

The meeting on the following afternoon (9th March) at Clunbury School will, however, go ahead at the advertised time of 3:30, but child-minding provision will be offered and parents would be able to collect their children early from Newcastle school if they wished to attend the meeting.

b) Concerns about the timing and manner of the meeting held on Tuesday, March 2nd to announce the proposal to consult on a Prescribed Alteration for Newcastle School

Parents expressed anger about the nature of the meeting, particularly the fact that it did not allow them to ask questions. They felt that it was the worst possible start to the process and ensured that a 'them and us' opposition was established from the outset. Moreover, it led some parents to perceive the governors as 'abrupt', 'deceitful' and 'underhand'.

The governors accepted the criticism and apologised for that perception. They also recognised the shortcoming of the approach employed, but explained that they were following the advice issued by the L.A. about how to conduct the initial meeting and that that advice was predicated on the need to deliver clear, objective information.

It was suggested that, in the interests of transparency and civility, it would have been better if governors had rejected or at least questioned that particular protocol.

c) A perceived delay in making the requested agendas and minutes available

Disappointment was expressed about the time it took to make available the requested minutes and agendas. They were originally asked for on Friday, 3rd March and not made available through the school website until Tuesday, 7th March, which did not provide sufficient time for them to be thoroughly scrutinised by any interested parties.

The governors responded by suggesting that, given the fact that there was an intervening weekend, and that data protection requires sensitive and confidential material to be redacted from the minute before being shared, the delay was not unreasonable. It was also made clear that only very small parts, and none about reasoning or process pertaining to the proposal had been redacted from the minutes. However, they regretted the fact that parents had not had long to study the minutes.

d) The perceived lack of engagement with parents and the wider community about the challenges faced by Newcastle School

Parents felt that governors failed in their responsibility to engage and negotiate with parents at a much earlier stage and that, had they done so, solutions could have been found that would have obviated this 'drastic solution'. The school has a deep spring of goodwill and that could have been drawn upon in mounting a campaign to recruit more pupils and in secure additional financial support. The present consultation does not amount to the 'lengthy consultation process' that is recommended in the Maintained Schools constitution and was indicated in governors' minutes as a prerequisite of the consultation process. It was also claimed that other schools who had made similar proposals had allowed for a significantly longer consultation period.

The governors explained that, although the low numbers on role at Newcastle School have been a cause for concern for some time, it was not until the Autumn term 2022 and more critically December 2022 that the school became aware of the critically low numbers that they were facing in September of this year. Since that time, governors have been working tirelessly to explore possible solutions to the problem. It had always been their desire to be as open as possible with the parents and the wider community, but this desire had to be balanced against their fears of provoking a self-fulfilling prophecy whereby parents, anxious about the situation at the school, would pre-empt its closure by removing their children mid-year.

Governors understood the perception that it appeared that they were rushing through this proposal, but they assured parents that they now have an opportunity to express their views, all of which will be considered by the governing body, and subsequently submitted to the L.A. or, result in the governing body suspending the process. However, the suggestion that a longer official consultation time is normally permitted was refuted.

e) The lack of a parent governor on the board of governors

It was claimed that the failure of the governing body to replace the two parent governors who resigned from the board denied the parents a voice. It was also suggested that shortcomings could be corrected, albeit belatedly, by holding elections for parent governors as quickly as possible.

The governors acknowledged that the timings of the two resignations had been unfortunate and that there was some degree of uncertainty about the actual departure date of one of them. The governors had also been advised by the Diocese not to proceed with the election of a parent governor whilst this whole process was ongoing, because of issues of confidentiality. However, governors accepted that it would be helpful to recruit one or two parent governors in the near future. However, they reminded those present that the normal electoral procedure would have to be followed and that any parent elected to the role would be there to represent the interests of all parents in the Federation.

Parents suggested that one way to ensure a more immediate presence in the decision-making process was to establish a stakeholders group, drawn from all interested parties.

Governors supported that idea in principle, welcoming the involvement of the community going forward.

f) The belief that the school could have done more in recent years to market itself to boost its intake, and to discourage parents from removing their children.

The governors were challenged to explain what efforts had been made to forestall the situation that now faces the school.

The Head outlined the initiatives she had taken to improve the working relationship with the Newcastle Children's Centre, including such events as joint workshops, inviting pre-school children to attend events and running coffee mornings at the school, but she concluded by reporting that there had generally been a poor attendance for these activities.

With regard to the accusation that more could have been done to dissuade parents from removing their children from school, it was pointed out that there are many different reasons why a parent chooses to do so. In the event of a grievance, there is a rigorous Complaints Policy, published on the school website, that provides a means for parents to air their complaints to the senior leaders and to the governors.

The governors also wanted to make explicit their absolute trust in the senior management and its ability to respond to parental concerns and complaints.

The Head also cited several joint activities that had been organised across the Federation with the intention of providing Newcastle pupils with opportunities

to mix with more children and enjoy more diverse activities. In response to the accusation that Newcastle had played host to very few of these federation events, it was pointed out that the size of the school precludes the gathering of large numbers, and that the experience was more important than the venue.

Mrs Gittins was challenged on the specific point that she had, allegedly, advised a prospective new parent, that she had been showing around the school, to also visit Clunbury School. If true, the parent thought that this indicated that the closure of the school was regarded as a foregone conclusion.

Mrs Gittins responded by acknowledging that she *had* issued that advice, but she believed that it was the ethical thing to do given the uncertainty that faces the future educational provision at the school.

g) The governors were challenged to explain why they had opted for the proposal that is currently the subject of this consultation

Parents expressed the view that other, more creative, options regarding the school should have been explored more thoroughly before arriving at this, option. These might have included such ideas as: using the site for a forest school; reducing the staffing costs and recruiting volunteers; and transporting children to other schools in the Federation on a weekly basis to share lessons with more children.

Governors reiterated the point made in the consultation document that their decision-making has been driven by a determination to ensure the highest possible quality of education for all current and prospective students. 30 pupils on role is regarded by the L.A. as the minimum viable number for a school within the county. Careful and judicious budgeting, the benefits of becoming part of a federation and the relentless determination of successive governing bodies and senior staff have ensured the survival of the school thus far. Ever since Miss Cook took on the role of executive head, she had been aware of the vulnerability of the school and L.A. interest in ensuring the viability of the school. However, facing the strong likelihood of only 16 children on role from September 2023, and fewer the following year, it was felt that a tipping point had been reached. That tipping point is particularly significant at KS1, where the staff believes that they will not be able to ensure the excellent standard of education provided hitherto, or provide essential opportunities for social and emotional interaction.

Unfortunately, evidence provided by the L.A. confirms that this changing demographic of fewer and fewer children in all rural areas is likely to continue into the foreseeable future. Only the construction of large-scale affordable housing in areas like Newcastle is likely to challenge this downward trend.

It was suggested by parents that a reduction in staffing would be the obvious response to a reduced budget.

The governors and staff at the school explained that the multi-year nature of the classes necessitated a high staffing ratio and that any reductions in staff would be detrimental to all the children in the school.

On the question of potential future pupils, it was suggested that parents in the area could be asked to submit a letter making a commitment to send their child to the school in the future.

Governors recognised the merit of this suggestion but commented that that commitment would have to be very firm if any future plans were to be based on it.

h) Concerns about transport arrangements

Parents sought guarantees about transport provisions. Concern was also expressed about the length of the journey, in some cases as long as an hour, that many children would be expected to undertake each way. Such a length of journey runs contrary to the HMI's recommendations on primary school travel times. It was felt that one result of this would be to make the afterschool clubs unviable.

There was also a suggestion the transport needs of each pupil be mapped as soon as possible

Governors were able to ensure parents that those pupils in receipt of free transport at present would be provided with free transport to Clunbury or Bucknell School until the end of Year 6. However, they were not able to respond to a parent who currently takes her child to school herself, but would require transport in the event of a change to a different school site. Such a question, and others, will have to be posed to the L.A. transport expert at the next consultation meeting. On the question of mapping the transport needs of each child, it was thought that the transport department in the L.A. is currently engaged in that task.

i) How can parents and other members of the community work together with the governors to seek the best solution to this problem?

Parents assured the governors and staff that they valued the school and the excellent education it continues to provide their children. They were now aware of the issues that had been outlined, both through the consultation document and as a result of the meeting and, although still unhappy about the way the process had been conducted, they were determined to do all that they could to fight for the school and their children's education.

The governors welcomed that determination and thanked them for their participation in the meeting and for the helpful criticisms and suggestions that they had made. They urged all those present to send in their responses by the deadline provided and they guaranteed that all of them would be read, considered and sent to the L.A. as appendices in the report to be deliberated in Cabinet.

The governors were asked if they would stand together with the parents and the wider community in their campaign.

The governors assured those present that they would work constructively with them as long as they were convinced that they were working for a solution that would provide the best possible outcome for the children.

j) Concerns about the wider impact of a possible school closure on the community

Parents shared their concerns about how the possible closure of the school would impact the area generally. The role the school plays in the life of the church was cited, and there were other events that would disappear were the school to close.

Rev. Caroline accepted that the school population is integral to a number of church activities, but more crucial than this is a regular congregation of a decent size, something that has been missing for some time.

The lead teacher from Clunbury School, Mrs Jones, assured the audience that, should the proposal go ahead and a number of the Newcastle children go to her school, it is her intention to ensure that the Newcastle children continue to participate in those traditional back in their own village.

2. Closing remarks

The Chair of governors thanked the audience for their attendance and said that the date for the next consultation meeting would be arranged as soon as possible and communicated to them.

Chair's initials	
Date:	