

# WILLIAM MARSHALL SCHOOL



May 2015

Case against Closure  
By the William Marshall Parents Committee

# William Marshall School

## CASE AGAINST CLOSURE

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Norfolk County Council has indicated that they are considering closing the William Marshall School in Welney after a recommendation by the School Governors.

There is an ongoing consultation with stakeholders before the Director of Children's Services at the Council decide whether to accept the recommendation of the Governors' to close the school.

Parents and supporters have set up a 'Save Our School' Campaign in order to persuade the County Council to consider the effect the closure of the school will have on the education of the pupils and the local community.

The case has been put forward that the closure is based on the failure of the leadership and governance of the school culminating in the inability to provide a conducive environment to provide good quality education for the pupils. It was also stated that the roll of the school is too low to be able to sustain a viable future.

We have put a case together to indicate how the parents, villagers and well-wishers can help improve the governance and leadership, increase the roll, bring the standard of education up and work towards making the school sustainable in the future.

We have also shown that keeping the school open is supported by the pupils, the parents, the Governors, the Head teacher, the staff, the Parish Council, the Local MP, the District Councillors and the residents of Welney and neighbouring wards.

The school is judged to need improvement by Ofsted. This is deemed by Ofsted not to be a formal category of concern. Any school judged as needing improvement will have a full section 5 re-inspection within a period of two years. This is now due and we demand that it is allowed to take place. This will indicate to us the current state of the school as far as Ofsted is concerned and help all of us to make valid judgements. A school should not be closed based on an old report (which in itself is not as good as we would like it, but is not damning).

The school is a designated rural school and the presumption against closure of rural school should prevail and other further options to keeping the school open should be pursued. The effect on the rural community, the

extra cars on the road and the cost of transporting the children to another school should all be taken into consideration. So is the effect the closure will have on the community.

Similarly, the effect that the closure of the school will have on the school the pupils are going to be moved to should also be considered. Would the closure and movement be beneficial to one, the other, both or neither? Could this closure and transfer have a detrimental effect on the receiving school?

We are of the opinion that the closure of Welney School will be detrimental to the pupils of Welney due, obviously, to the closure, the travelling they will have to undertake every morning/afternoon, the bigger class sizes, the feeling of dejection at the closure of their school and the lack of religious direction available at the Welney School.

The pupils of Upwell School (the school identified as the destination school) will also suffer due to increased classroom sizes. The residents of Upwell might also find out in the future that there are no spaces for their children if the spaces have been taken up by children from Welney. On the contrary the children from Welney might not be able to get spaces at the Upwell school if the rate of development at Upwell continues.

We believe that given the chance, we can reverse the fortunes of Welney School, help bring about good governance, improve the educational standards, increase the number of pupils on the roll and find a way of making the school more cost effective.

What the Community need is the County Council to work with us and give us a minimum of one academic year to use the currently approved budget to keep the school open whilst still carrying out consultations if so wished (we are aware that the consultation stage can go on for up to a year) and let us show what we can achieve regarding the changes needed to bring William Marshall school educational level up to the standard of at least good and work towards outstanding. We would at the same time work towards achieving the other objectives needed to make the school better governed and more sustainable.

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### EDUCATIONAL STANDARDS

It was stated at the public meeting held at the school on the 19<sup>th</sup> of May that one of the factors leading to the possibility of recommending the closure of the William Marshall School Welney (henceforth referred to as the school) is that there were concerns about the education standards at the school. This was contributed to by the fact that there was a long term staff absence leading to only having one permanent member of staff. This then led to the inability to provide a good level of education for the pupils. There was an audit in November 2014 pointing out the deficiency in the adequacy of the education. This led to the Local Authority classifying the school as being of grave concern and vulnerable to a future adverse inspection.

#### Fact

When we spoke to the head teacher, James McBurney, he was confident that the school had made improvements since the 2013 Ofsted report. Please refer to the attached Ofsted 2013 report, which indicated that ***'The proportion of pupils making expected progress and those exceeding expected progress is higher than in previous years.'***

Teachers that we have spoken to indicated that there had been a marked improvement in the academic achievement of the children.

The parents have also noticed that their children are performing better and are happy with the standard of education their children are receiving.

The governors, though admitting that there had been problems in the past, said that the school is moving in the right direction in terms of academic achievements.

The staff members have had no formal meetings to inform them that the standards were not improving.

We would like to challenge the letter sent out to parents and local residents specifying that 'they do not have the capacity to bring about the significant improvement needed in the school to guarantee a good enough education for the children of Welney.' We believe this is erroneous and misleading.

An email received from Downham Market School confirmed that they have had no problems with William Marshall School Students joining their school in year 7. They are just as rounded and well prepared as students joining from other schools.

The category 3 awarded by Ofsted meaning requires improvement (used to be adequate) is not, according to Ofsted, a formal category of concern. Any school awarded a category 3 will have a full section 5 inspection within a period of two years. This inspection is now due. This must be allowed to take place.

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### SCHOOL ROLL

The school Roll history was stated as follows:

YEAR	NUMBER OF PUPILS
2011	32
2012	29
2013	19
2014	24

#### Fact

The number of pupils attending the school declined in 2013 because the Social housing in Chestnut Avenue, Welney where a substantial number of pupils lived was being renovated and families were moved out temporarily until these renovations were completed.

These renovations that were supposed to be completed within a short period of time have taken longer hence resulting in the families not being moved back for the children to return to the school.

The situation is just about to change with the completion of the renovations due to take place imminently with the return of approximately 8 children to the village.

There are some families in the village who, for various reasons, choose to send their children to other schools. These amount to about 6. These reasons range from the perceived lack of leadership in the school to practical issues like having other children who attend pre-school sessions at another school and prudence dictates that the older siblings should attend the same school.

This situation can be reversed if we can resolve the leadership problems at the school, enhance the quality of education and provide pre-school facilities at the school. The pre-school children will act as 'feeders' into year one of the main school.

This has the potential of increasing the school roll to 44 in the short term with a view to filling all the roll (48) in the long run.

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### LEADERSHIP/GORVENANCE

It is stated that the school has no head teacher and that the head teacher is seconded from Upwell School one day a week. It was also mentioned that this cannot continue indefinitely.

It was asserted that the Governance of the school was poor and needed improvement. An external assessment of the Governance was carried out and resulted in the highlighting of a 26 point improvement plan which the Governors were expected to implement in order to save the school from closure.

It was stated that the Governors, on facing these uphill tasks, decided to request that the Local Authority should close the school.

#### Fact

The head teacher seconded from Upwell who could have made a difference to the situation at Welney School, according to information provided, only attended the school two hours a week. This was not enough, by any stretch of the imagination, to contribute positively to the improvement required of the school

The problems with the governance were kept completely under wraps and no one apart from the LA, the Diocese and Ofsted knew anything about the immense pressure the Governors were under.

We, the parents and supporters of the school, only found this out whilst investigating the reasons for the potential closure of the school.

It came to light that the Governors were struggling to cope with governing the school effectively and providing the right directives for the school to follow in order to fulfil the curriculum requirements. This is exacerbated by their inadequate numbers.

They did not make this public as, according to them, 'they did not want to create a panic amongst the parents'.

After the external review undertaken on the Governance, and the Governors were given a 26 point action plan to undertake, they felt it was an 'impossible task' and according to them were 'strongly encouraged' by the Local Authority to request the school closure as they could no longer cope with what was expected of them.

During our long meeting with some of the Governors they all expressed the fact that they did and do not want the school closed even though quite a few of them are 'tired' of the whole process of being governors and would prefer not to continue to be governors. Some of them stated that the reason they stayed on as governors was that there were no one else available to take over from them.

They were adamant, though, that they have never had a problem with the finances of the school and have never been in deficit.

This means that the governors were not able to get help when they needed it as the need was deemed necessary to be hushed up in order not to create a panic amongst parents. The governors have become frustrated about the governance of the school and simply given up.

One of the interesting aspects of this whole situation, of planning to close the school down, is the fact that the Head teacher who was seconded to help turn the school around and gave up; is the same head teacher at Upwell school. Two of the Governors at the school who are tired of being governors are governors at Upwell school. How could it be right that the people who had 'given' up on our children at Welney are involved in the school they are planning to be moved to?

If only the governors had highlighted their plight early enough, there are now people in the village who are willing and able to take on the role of Governors at the school and are prepared to take all actions necessary to enhance the governance of the school.

These are highly motivated individuals who have made a success of their lives in various parts of society (education, business, law enforcement, management, finance etc.) now living in the village with plenty of time on their hands and free to put something back into the society.

There are a lot of new parents also who are willing to become parent governors.

So the problem of not being able to find suitable governors is no longer an issue.

One of the potential solutions was to 'Federate' the school with another school. It has transpired that when this issue was brought up by the head teacher of Upwell school, that the governors of Upwell school had declined federation. The County Council had also declined to approve the Federation. It was therefore quite disingenuous for the Council representative at the public meeting of the 19<sup>th</sup> of May to say that the idea of Federation had drawn a blank. There was an opportunity and it was not approved by the County Council.

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### FINANCE

In as much as it was stated that financial consideration was not taken into account whilst deliberating about the possibility of closing the school it was mentioned that the National funding formula which is used for 'per child' funding will become an issue because Welney School is a small school. This was based on the fact that the school will get a Designated School Grant (DSG) plus an amount per pupil. This meant that the average cost per child, because of the small number of pupils, will be high.

#### Fact

William Marshal School is a small rural school and by all measures it is an accepted fact that rural schools tend to cost more than urban schools.

Closing the School might be a way of saving some money by the Local Authority but it will not be very cost effective as the 'per child funding' will still have to be paid to Upwell and the cost of transporting the displaced pupils to Upwell school will need to be factored in.

The biggest benefactor in the village, the William Marshall Trust is prepared to step in and offer some funding to the school until such a time as the school gets a full roll of pupils.

Moreover it is known that the budget for running the school has already been allocated for the year 2015/2016.

The Governors have also categorically stated that they have never been over budget and that the School is on a firm financial footing.



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### SUMMARY

There is a presumption against closure of rural school. There are a lot of factors that need to be taken into account before this can happen.

Small village schools are part of the community more than large schools are.

Government guidelines states that it is also accepted that in order to preserve access for young children, there may be more empty places in schools in rural areas than in urban areas.

It is unacceptable for the Local Authority to propose closing a popular, successful schools which parents want to send their children to, if the Local Authority have not fully looked at alternative uses or consulted properly with the community in which the school is located.

We have been told that the Governors and the Local Authority have drawn a blank on Federating the Welney School with other schools and the reason for these are confidential. What are these reasons? The decision made about our children's future cannot be shrouded in secrecy. This is contrary to the fact that the governors of Upwell school had declined federation and that the County Council had also declined to approve the Federation. Has any attempt been made to Federate with schools across the County borders?

There is a concern that the school roll at Upwell will be adversely affected if the Pupils from Welney are transferred to Upwell School. This could have a negative effect on the overall performance at Upwell School and hence would be counterproductive in terms of improving the educational standards of Welney Pupils.

There is also a big concern about having to put young children, as young as four, on buses for the potentially long journeys to school. This has been known to affect children's performances.

Parents of Children going to Welney School are concerned that their children are being sent to a non-Church of England school thereby losing the religious ethos of their current school. This is unacceptable to a majority of the parents.

It is a well-known fact that there is a benefit of having small classes. This will be lost by the current pupils at the William Marshall School if they are moved to Upwell school. If they are perceived to be struggling now, they are more likely to struggle even more so in bigger classes. Disrupting the schooling of Key Stage 1 pupils will adversely affect their education for many years to come.

It is the accepted opinion that we need more small schools not less.

A study by NASS (National Association of Small schools) states that closing small schools is :

- An attack on the fabric and sustainability of rural society and that the argument is not about education but driven by a set of tired old arguments that do not stand the test of serious analysis.

- That broader perspectives are unbalanced and only presents the preferred erroneous view that small schools are either detrimental to children's best interest or too costly.
- That decision makers and many parents have been wilfully misled.

(Source: We need Small schools – New Vision for education: A New NASS booklet compiled by Mervyn Benford : www.smallschools.org .uk June 2014)

They further stated that those trying to close small schools will use the following arguments

- That small schools costs too much
- Small schools lack facilities
- Small schools lack special teacher. They face mixed age and ability classes.
- Pupils in small schools lag others of the same age and interests. This peer group argument is claimed to disadvantage able pupils.
- Small schools and their staff are often isolated
- Leadership in small schools is a problem – often too great to challenge
- Small schools in fact are not really important to or much involved in their local communities
- Primary schools below a certain number on roll are not viable.

(Source: We need Small schools – New Vision for education: A New NASS booklet compiled by Mervyn Benford : www.smallschools.org .uk June 2014)

We have included this in our report almost in its entirety because most of the statements above match almost exactly the arguments put forward as the reasons for considering the closure of William Marshall School Welney. This cannot be a coincidence.

It shows that when it comes to considering closure of small rural schools, dogma takes precedence over other considerations.

NASS further goes on to state that when collective results (normally exempt from publication) are made available, small schools tend to do better than the rest.

It is therefore important to stress the importance of small schools and the valuable role they play in the cohesion of the local community.

The size of a small rural school should be seen as an asset and not a liability.

Children who are struggling do better in smaller schools with smaller classes than in bigger schools with bigger classes where they can easily be left behind.

It has also been noted that children from poorer families tend to do better in smaller schools.

The children also have a feeling of belonging and interact better with the teachers, staff and other pupils.

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### WAY FORWARD

#### **Governance**

There are a variety of Welney Residents with various skills who are prepared, willing and able to fill the roles of Governors. They are prepared to work with current governors who are prepared to stay on and give the benefit of their experience and take over from those who have 'had enough'.

This will ensure that there is a full complement of Governors who are prepared to tackle the prescribed action points in order to turn the fortune and hence the performance of the school around.

#### **Educational Standard**

Villagers and parents are now willing to get involved in the running of the School and are prepared to contribute to the success of the school by helping to run additional clubs and classes (homework clubs and other after school clubs etc.) that will help to enhance the academic achievements of the school.

#### **Viability**

Actions will be taken, working with the County Council and the Dioceses to tackle the problem of federation whilst looking at other options available.

The schools profile will be raised, by advertising and other means, making more people aware of its existence and successes and hence making it a more attractive school for new pupils within the catchment area and neighbouring wards.

A pre-school session will be set up to act as a feeder into the main school thereby allowing parents who currently take their children to other schools to come back to William Marshall School.

#### **Proposal**

What we are proposing is that we should be given a minimum of one academic year to work with the Local Authority, the Diocese and the School to bring about the change required at the School.

By the end of the 2015/2016 year we will endeavour to:

- Improve the governance of the School
- Increase the roll
- Enhance the educational standards and;
- Find ways of providing value for money

We are passionate about our willingness to save the William Marshall School. Set up by the late William Marshal, it has been in the village since 1848 (over 150 years) providing education for the children of Welney many of who have grown up to be successful in their chosen fields. Including those who have sent their children and grandchildren to the school. The school premises is provided to the Council free of charge by the William Marshall Trust hence reducing the burden of paying for school premises. This means that if the school is closed there is no financial benefit to the council in terms of asset disposal.

The school is a very important part and one might say the heart of the community. It is the only community related point (apart from the Public House) left in the village. The shop is gone, the post office is gone. If the school should go, the village will become devastated and 'dead'. Evidence suggests that if the school is closed no young people will ever move into the village and hence the village will become a ghost town or a place where most of the residents will be 'waiting for God'

There massive support to keep the school open as indicated by the Pupils, the Parents, the Governors, the Teachers, the staff, the Parish Council, the local MP, the District Councillors and a vast majority of residents of Welney and neighbouring wards as indicated by the petition signed and delivered.

Over 98% of those canvassed indicated a preference for the school to stay open. This might not match the responses to the online survey as a good number of people in Welney are averse to going 'online'.

It will be unfortunate to close William Marshall School because of the failure in Governance and leadership. It will be a travesty if other people who are prepared and able to bring about the change necessary to make the school secure and sustainable are not given the opportunity to do so.

We know we can bring about the change required. We need you to work with us to bring about this change. We care about the education of our children and we want to save the school for them and the village.

We are ready to work to make this happen.