

Proposal to cease to maintain William Marshall Voluntary Controlled Primary School, Welney

Final determination report for Director of Children's Services and Chairman of Children's Services Committee from the School Organisation Adviser.

Background

William Marshall Voluntary Controlled Primary School in Welney takes pupils from the age of 4 through to 11. It was designated by the Department for Education in October 2013 as a rural primary school serving a village. The school has 6 places available in each year group, but is regularly undersubscribed. For the last 10 years, the number of pupils on roll has remained below 40, and has further declined in recent years:

September 2011	32
September 2012	29
September 2013	19
September 2014	24
September 2015	20

Since January 2004, leadership of the school has been provided through a partnership with Upwell Community Primary School, whose Headteacher spends one day a week at William Marshall Voluntary Controlled Primary School. Such leadership arrangements are no longer sustainable and governors at Upwell Community Primary School do not feel that they have the capacity to pursue a more permanent federation at this time.

Because of the declining roll and the lack of sustainable leadership, William Marshall Voluntary Controlled Primary is a school of concern for the Local Authority. It was deemed Satisfactory by Ofsted in 2006 and in 2010, and the most recent inspection in 2013 judged the school to Require Improvement. A Local Authority audit of teaching and learning revealed significant need for improvement but high levels of staff absence have hindered the implementation of plans for improvement. Standards remain low, and governors have reluctantly acknowledged that they do not have the capacity to bring about the very significant improvement needed in the school to guarantee a good enough education for the children of Welney. The governing body has vacancies including for parent governors. This lack of governors is a concern for the governing body which has advertised the vacancies without success.

The school therefore remains vulnerable to an adverse inspection.

For the above objectives and reasons, the Local Authority took the decision to consult with parents and other stakeholders on a proposal to cease to maintain the school.

A six week statutory consultation was carried out, and the proposed closure was discussed at a meeting of the Children's Services Committee on 12 May 2015. The Director of Children's Services agreed to proceed to statutory Public Notice on 3 September 2015.

The four week representation period following publication of the Public Notice to close William Marshall Voluntary Controlled Primary School ended on Friday 16 October 2015.

Two representations have been received, the first from the Parents Action Committee which challenges the validity of the initial consultation on the basis of an FOI request to Ofsted. This is attached at **Appendix 1**. The second is from a local resident and is attached at **Appendix 2**.

In coming to a decision on proposals to close a maintained school, the decision maker is asked to address the following factors:

- Consideration of consultation and representation period
- Education standards and diversity of provision
- Demand
- School size
- Proposed admission arrangements
- National Curriculum
- Equal opportunity issues
- Community cohesion
- Travel and accessibility
- Capital
- School premises and playing fields

In addition, where the proposal relates to a rural school, the decision maker needs to give consideration to

1. Alternatives to closure including the potential for federation with another local school or conversion to academy status and joining a multi-academy trust or umbrella trust.
2. The scope for an extended school to provide local community services such as childcare facilities.
3. The transport implications.
4. The overall and long term impact on local people and the community of closure of the village school and of the loss of the building as a community facility.

This report, to be read in conjunction with the prescribed information already published (**Appendix A**), the report to Children's Services Committee, and the report prepared for the Interim Executive Director of Children's Services requesting permission to proceed to Public Notice, will address each factor in turn.

1. Consideration of consultation and representation period

All statutory requirements in relation to the statutory consultation, publication and decision-making were complied with. The guidance for proposers of school closures states that the proposer **MUST** consult with the parents of pupils at the school and the local district or parish council where the school is situated. The guidance also lists bodies which **SHOULD** be consulted, and copies of the consultation document were circulated to all the institutions listed.

The proposal to close William Marshall Voluntary Controlled School was discussed at the Children's Services Committee on 12 May 2015. The Committee resolved to:

- Note the contents of the report
- Ask that the Interim Executive Director of Children's Services, after listening to the debate, using delegated powers, considers publishing a formal notice to propose the closure of William Marshall Voluntary Controlled Primary School.

As well as issuing a consultation document to each parent at the school, a public meeting was held at the school on 19 May 2015, and the minutes were posted on the NCC website. Copies of the consultation document were sent to all the local Parish Councils. In addition there was a meeting with representatives of the William Marshall Parents Committee on 12 June 2015. Representatives from the Ely Diocese attended both meetings.

Guidance from the Department of Education suggests that consultation should take place during term time, and therefore, publication of the Public Notice was delayed until 18 September 2015 when the full proposal was published on the Norfolk County Council consultation portal and in the Lynn News. A letter was sent to all governors, parents/carers and staff at William Marshall Voluntary Controlled Primary School to alert them to the publication of the Public Notice. The local County Councillor and the Ely Diocese were informed along with other stakeholders and copies of the notice have been displayed at the school gates in line with regulations.

2. Education standards and diversity of provision

Because of the declining roll and the lack of sustainable leadership, William Marshall Voluntary Controlled Primary is a school of concern for the Local Authority. It was deemed Satisfactory by Ofsted in 2006 and in 2010, and the most recent inspection in 2013 judged the school to Require Improvement. A Local Authority audit of teaching and learning revealed significant need for improvement but high levels of staff absence have hindered the implementation of plans for improvement. Standards remain low, and governors have reluctantly acknowledged that they do not have the capacity to bring about the very significant improvement needed in the school to guarantee a good enough education for the children of Welney. The school therefore remains vulnerable to an adverse inspection.

The Local Authority is concerned about the performance of very small schools which perform well below larger schools.

Performance data related to size of school – Key Stage 2% level 4 reading, writing and maths combined:

	2012	2013	2014
Schools < 50 pupils	60.4%	61.8%	67.6%
Norfolk average	69%	71%	74%
National average	75%	75%	79%

William Marshall Voluntary Controlled School is a church school. The designated catchment school is a community school however there are six other church schools in the cluster so the diversity of provision in the area will not change.

3. Demand

The school has been undersubscribed for some years and the total number on roll at the start of any academic year has not exceeded 30 since September 2012. In September 2014, there were 24 pupils on roll, the majority of whom live in the catchment area. Taking into account parental preference, pupil numbers are predicted to remain below 40 for the next ten years.

4. School size

The guidance states that *“decision makers should not make blanket assumptions that schools should be of a certain size to be good schools, although viability and cost-effectiveness of a proposal is an important factor for consideration. The decision maker should also consider the impact on the LA’s budget of the need to provide additional funding to a small school to compensate for its size.”*

Norfolk has many high performing small schools but the table presented in Section 2 sets out clearly the reasons why the Local Authority has concerns over the performance of very small schools.

The budgeted cost of running the school for the current academic year is £9554 per pupil, which is significantly higher than the county average cost of £4160 per pupil. The current cost per pupil at Upwell Community Primary School is £4619 per pupil. Should the Welney pupils move to Upwell, the cost per pupil will be £4388. This latter figure is less than Upwell without them, and recognises economies of scale i.e. buildings related, staffing etc.

The Local Authority has to question the viability of continuing to fund such a small number of pupils at twice the cost available to other pupils across the county, at the expense of other schools and particularly at a time when funds are under pressure.

5. Proposed admission arrangements

The designated catchment school for those living in the William Marshall Voluntary Controlled catchment area will be Upwell Community Primary and Ten Mile Bank Community Primary Schools.

The proposed catchment area for Upwell Community Primary School will be permanently extended to include that part of the current catchment area for the William Marshall Voluntary Controlled Primary School to the north west of the Old Bedford River. The small area to the south east of the Old Bedford River will transfer to the catchment area for Ten Mile Bank Community Primary School.

Parents will be able to express preferences for alternative schools for their children and the local authority will work with parents to ensure that all children are allocated a place at a local school with available places.

6. National Curriculum

All maintained schools must follow the National Curriculum.

7. Equal Opportunity issues

An Equality Impact Assessment (EQIA) has been carried out and is attached (**Appendix B**).

8. Community cohesion

Schools have a part to play in providing opportunities for young people from different backgrounds to learn with, from and about each other. Very small schools such as William Marshall Voluntary Controlled School are limited in being able to provide a range of such opportunities.

9. Travel and Accessibility

The designated school for children displaced by this closure is Upwell Community Primary School and Ten Mile Bank Community Primary School. Transport will be provided free of charge for displaced pupils living in the current William Marshall Voluntary Controlled catchment area. The estimated cost of transport is £25k per annum and will be confirmed when the in-year admissions process is complete to determine which school(s) pupils are placed in, followed by the subsequent cost of contracts.

10. Capital

Additional accommodation will be provided on the Upwell School site. The proposal to relocate Welney pupils comes at a time when numbers locally are increasing towards the Published Admission Number (PAN) of 30, whereas in recent years they have been at 23/25. Admission numbers for 2015 currently stand at 28 for Upwell and 4 for Welney. This places pressure on a number of small classrooms. Initially the Welney children can be accommodated but it will require use of a small

classroom currently used and adapted for after school and breakfast activities. As the Upwell area will require consideration over time as part of strategic area review, the accommodation proposal to accompany the closure proposal is that a double modular classbase be sited at Upwell, from Basic Need funding. There are likely to be planning issues around car parking which will increase the cost and possibly add delay. It is proposed that the modular proposal be in place by Easter 2016, with preparatory work commencing in September. Because of the overall pupil number growth, this work will be necessary irrespective of the Welney case. The capital cost of the double modular classbase is in the region of £250k, of which approximately £150k (i.e. a singular modular classbase) would be attributable to Welney pupils, the rest to growth in the area.

11. School premises and playing fields

Suitable outdoor space is available at Upwell Community Primary and Ten Mile Bank Community Primary Schools to enable children to play safely outside.

12. Additional factors to be considered when the proposal is to close a rural school

The guidance issued in January 2014 by the Department for Education on School Organisation changes, states a presumption against the closure of rural schools. This does not, however, mean that a rural school will never close, but that the proposer must provide evidence to the decision maker, that due consideration has been given against each of the points listed in the introductory paragraph.

Norfolk has set out clearly in its strategy A Good Education for Every Norfolk Learner its plan for ensuring rapid school improvement across the county of Norfolk. An essential strand of this is securing high quality sustainable leadership which will ensure high standards of education for all.

The school has had no substantive Headteacher since 2004. Upwell Community Primary School agreed to second their Headteacher for one day a week to provide leadership, but this is no longer a sustainable arrangement and Upwell Governors do not feel able to federate at this time with William Marshall Voluntary Controlled Primary School. The Governing body have explored options including Federation with other schools nearby and academisation but these discussions have not been successful, mainly because of the size of the school. Governors have continued to function in difficult circumstances and have maintained a balanced budget, but have been unable to recruit governors from the community.

The school offers limited extended services at present, and does not provide childcare facilities.

The transport implications have been considered as above.

The Local Authority recognises that the closure of a village school is an emotive issue for the local community and a petition signed by 400 people from the Welney community was submitted in response to the initial consultation.

A detailed document was submitted by the William Marshall Parents' Committee during the consultation phase (**Appendix C**). This put forward a "Case against Closure", and proposed that the group work with the Local Authority, the Diocese and the school over the coming academic year to:

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

Advisors and officers met with representatives of the Parents' Committee and asked them to address questions challenging **how** they would bring about the improvement needed. A second document entitled "The Way Forward" was submitted (**Appendix D**).

A detailed report on this, written by the Head of the Education Intervention & Inspection Service is attached (**Appendix E**). The response to this report from the Parents' Committee is attached (**Appendix F**).

Our strategy "A Good Education for every Norfolk Learner" sets out our vision to ensure that all learners in Norfolk go to a good or outstanding school. In June 2014, our support for school improvement was judged "effective" by Ofsted, but we know that we still have some way to go. Ofsted told us that we should:

"Work to increase the proportion of good or better schools still further, with a sharper focus on secondary schools and the smallest primary schools".

Norfolk County Council recognises that the proposed closure of a village school is an emotive issue for the local community. In our role as the 'champion of children' it is essential that we are prepared to take difficult and potentially contentious decisions where this is necessary to secure the best possible education for all Norfolk children.

Conclusion and recommendation

- **That the Decision Maker approve the proposal to close William Marshall Voluntary Controlled Primary School, Welney**

Proposal to cease to maintain William Marshall Voluntary Controlled Primary School, Welney

Determination Notice

I hereby **approve** this proposal to cease to maintain William Marshall Voluntary Controlled Primary School, Welney on 31st December 2015. The reasons for this decision are that:

- The statutory procedural requirements under section 15(1) of the Education and Inspections Act 2006 have been met;
- The proposal meets the criteria laid down in statutory guidance in relation to the likely impact of the proposal on standards and school improvement, local choice and diversity, surplus places, community cohesion and race equality;
- The views of all interested parties, including those most likely to be affected, have been considered.

Signed:



Date: 20 October 2015

Michael Rosen, Executive Director of Children's Services, Norfolk County Council