

Consultation on proposed closure of Brancaster School

By email to info@dnearg.org

Response of Brancaster Parish Council, approved at a meeting on 5/11/24, minute ref 9b

Dear Sirs,

I have been asked to write by Council expressing our grave concern over the proposed merger of the Village School with Docking Primary Academy from January 2025. We thank you for allowing a short extension to the response time for us to be able to consider at a formal meeting.

There has been concern and considerable distress among our parishioners; we know that you will have received many letters expressing this, which we would seek to support wholeheartedly.

The first point to raise is the unseemly haste with which this decision appears to be being taken. A letter to parents dated 14/10 noting a three-week consultation period, the first consultation meeting on 17/10, with a decision being taken, we believe, on 20th November hardly seems appropriate for a decision of this magnitude. If the situation is as difficult as has been suggested, it must have been known about for much longer, in particular by the Transition Board. We also have concerns that, albeit marginally, this did not meet the three-week period required.

A school is more than just a place for education; it represents a focus for the community, and one which gives our young people a sense of that wider community which is important for its long-term survival. As is well-known, the coastal parishes of North Norfolk are trying to encourage young people and families to stay in the area, and this is another blow to those efforts.

Teachers, we are told, will be offered posts within DNEAT schools. Given the distance involved this may not be possible, and staff may face redundancy, further affecting the Community.

The announcement itself will become a self-fulfilling prophecy – the moment there is doubt about the future of the School, parents will quite understandably look for alternatives. This will strengthen the case for closure.

We believe that there is a strong possibility that numbers of children will increase across the whole area, despite projections given at the meeting; the addition of a large new development of housing in Brancaster Staithe and the possible effects of VAT on

school fees pushing some parents from the private sector back to state education are significant factors. Neither of these can be known at the moment and time should be allowed so that the effects can be monitored, given the permanence of any closure.

We also note the current success of our local Baby and Toddlers Group, supported by the PC, and do not believe their numbers have been fully included.

Further, regarding the timing of the decision, a group of children in Year 6 will be required to change schools twice during one year – three schools in four terms. These are children of an age who will already have suffered adversely from COVID and for whom it is well known that stability is very important.

Your figures seem contradictory. You state there is an oversupply of school places in the area (which is not defined), yet the current numbers for Brancaster and Docking combined total 118, and you list the maximum at Docking at 120. This suggests a very close margin should the merger proceed. Should there be even a small increase in the number of children looking for places, it would imply bussing to schools even further away. Council is mindful that there has been a large increase in house-building in Docking.

The transport of children to schools at a distance is of concern. There is not only the fact of the addition to the school day, but issues with sustainability. The costs will also fall on County, already facing budget issues. It should also be noted that Brancaster is not always easy for access to larger vehicles, potentially causing delays.

We believe that Brancaster has space and facilities which make it an eminently suitable place for a school, moreso than Docking in fact – Council is not aware of any encouragement being given to pupils from outside the Parish to attend, which we feel would benefit the School itself and pupils from villages nearby.

We do not accept the premise that “The educational provision that can be offered in schools with fewer than 50 pupils is not acceptable...” (your letter), with its implied criticism of the School and its staff.

There is a strong feeling that there has been insufficient activity on the part of the Trust to support and promote the School – “constructive collapse” was a phrase used. If the situation was as dire as we are now being told, an active and urgent call for Governors might have been expected, with a report to Council requesting help. We believe this would have led to additional options being considered, including an increased role for Brancaster within the Trust. This highlights with the widely held perception within the Parish that the School was deliberately being allowed to “fail”.

The timing, and lack of encouragement for the School has also precluded consideration of other options, such as specialist provision (e.g. SEND) and the potential for site-sharing.

Finally, Council believes that, should the above arguments not be convincing and the School indeed be forced to close, this should be done at the end of the academic year. This is supported by all local elected representatives; we note and fully support NCC's objection, and were surprised that they were not included in preliminary discussions. We strongly urge all those involved in making this decision to reconsider.

Kind regards,

Simon Bower

Parish Clerk, November 2024