



To: DNEAT; Brancaster Consultation, CEO Oliver Burwood
By email to: info@dnearg

28 October 2024

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Dear Mr Oliver Burwood,

Proposal to merge Brancaster Church of England Primary Academy with Docking Church of England Primary Academy from 1 January 2025 (by ceasing to maintain the Brancaster site)

Thank you for sharing your consultation proposal with Norfolk County Council. I am responding on behalf of Norfolk County Council following the consultation information you have provided in my role as School Organisation Manager.

Norfolk County Council acknowledge the Trust's reasoning behind the proposal to merge Brancaster Church of England Primary Academy with Docking Church of England Primary Academy from 1 January 2025 (*by ceasing to maintain the Brancaster site*).

We appreciate the opportunity for consultation; however, while the consultation meets the minimum requirements, three weeks is short. This limits time for all consultees to respond and parents to consider what the next steps might be for their children and the logistics of these arrangements. We do therefore feel that the community would have benefitted from earlier engagement and a longer consultation period given the significance of the proposal. In future the Local Authority would be keen to engage with the Trust as early as possible where such proposals are under consideration so that we can jointly manage the impact for communities.

We understand that reaching this course of action will have been challenging for the Trust. We recognise the complexity of the factors you will have taken into account and the significant thought in balancing multiple considerations, including the impact this outcome will have on the pupils, staff, families and wider community. As a local authority, we have a duty to carefully assess the implications of any school closure or amalgamation. This extends beyond those directly and immediately affected, it is important to consider the wider context both now and in the future. The Local Authority has reviewed many aspects in coming to its view.

Current pupil numbers and forecasts

	Nursery	Year R	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4	Year 5	Year 6	Total
Docking	2	10	14	12	16	16	13	11	94
Brancaster	0	0	4	5	6	0	2	7	24
		10	18	17	22	16	15	18	

Brancaster: The catchment for this school could run between 30-37 pupils with numbers in individual cohorts likely to be lower than the current operating PAN of 8. Due to the smaller numbers, the parental preference modelling suggests a continued decline, but this does not take account of the estimated catchment nor the previous positive preference the smaller local community has shown.

It is unfortunately difficult to be precise to due to the current demographic decline and smaller housing projects in the area. The situation facing Brancaster is not an uncommon position based on previous years, the school has never operated at full capacity and often operated in range between 30 and 50 children on the school roll. Our preference information provides an insight to suggest a majority of local families from the Brancaster community use the school and it does not rely on movement from out of area.

Docking: The catchment for the school could run between 80-90 with some larger cohorts close to the current operating PAN. If parental preference is to be considered this could operate between 100-120 places being taken up. These assumptions include the longer-term housing trajectory outlined in Kings Lynn West Norfolk Borough Council 5-year land supply figures (an expected 47 homes to come forward with 10 of those already included in our forecasting information).

Docking has served catchment numbers over the last few years between 9 and 20 pupils with a declining pupil population on roll which has in the last 3-4 years shown a gradual recovery from low 90's overall to 100-105. Docking has seen lower catchment cohorts where not all local children have selected their local school and therefore parental preference has drawn children in from a wide range of locations. Applying the additional housing will provide catchment cohorts 80-90 across the school. Including the impact of parental preference at a model rate which occurred over the last 3 years the school could see cohorts of between 100-120 due to preference.

The future projections for both schools suggests catchments of 7 and 13 respectively. Brancaster future birth numbers suggests consistently 3 pupils in each of the consecutive years based on current forecasts, and Docking has 8 followed by a further 13 pupils. When overlaying these numbers with the current parental preference Docking could expect to see 21 and 12 pupils pushing the numbers across the school to near its current capacity. Key Stage 2 numbers in both schools areas are likely to remain high for the next few years alongside that of the schools across the local area.

Quality of education

The Local Authority largely relies on external evaluations to assess the quality of education in academies. Neither Brancaster nor Docking schools have undergone inspection since their conversion as 'Good' schools since joining the trust. While it is unwise to base judgments about educational effectiveness solely on data—especially with small cohorts, where data should be interpreted with caution—both schools have shown consistently below-average percentages of children reaching expected standards in 2022, 2023, and 2024.

Capacity for amalgamation

With the intention of pupils joining Docking from Brancaster in an amalgamation, Docking would be operating at near full pupil capacity over 4 classes, with limited space for additional pupils. While current combined cohorts are within the capacity of Docking, the arrangements for merging the two schools could affect the use of already limited classroom spaces and may impact the children's learning if they are placed in significantly 'at capacity' environments, beyond what they are accustomed to. To accommodate the potential combined cohorts would require splitting cohorts across multiple year groups and mixing key stages which is detrimental to curriculum delivery and would therefore disrupt not only the displaced Brancaster cohort, but also those on roll at Docking. In addition, potential increases in pupil numbers due to housing developments could lead to a deficit of places. Docking site is constrained and cannot expand further. Although we are aware of additional funding from Section 106 available to Docking school, any expansions are unlikely to be ready in time for January 2025, or offer sufficient additional capacity to respond to new housing in the area.

We feel amalgamation is not the right solution for the wider area.

Impact and capacity of other schools

Parents are entitled to choose the school they feel is most suitable for their child during an amalgamation, and this will inevitably impact schools within the vicinity. However, there is no placement capacity in the wider area to accommodate older pupils, which will restrict the extent to which families can exercise choice.

Amalgamation over closure

Docking Church of England Primary Academy and Nursery is not the nearest or most appropriate school for all the pupils displaced from Brancaster to attend, it is likely that pupils will attend a number of different schools in the area based on location and family logistics. The County Council would like further information on why the Trust has chosen amalgamation over school closure and information on the alternatives explored before reaching this conclusion.

Transportation

There are currently no pupils transported by Norfolk County Council to Brancaster. Amalgamation will likely incur significant additional costs to the Local Authority.

Limited notice of change will impact the Local Authority in tendering for the most cost-effective travel arrangement for pupils in a vast rural area, which is likely to incur additional cost to the Local Authority.

It has been suggested that transport will be provided for existing students travelling to Docking by the Trust if the proposals go ahead. If transportation for existing students is covered for the next few years, Norfolk County Council will likely bear the responsibility of arranging and funding transport for new students during the same period. Given this, it seems practical and cost-efficient to consider pooling resources in these circumstances. By coordinating transport arrangements, we can work together ensure we are making the best use of available funding and avoid the inefficiency of multiple vehicles traveling to and from the same locations due to different overseeing agencies.

Timing of proposed change

We appreciate the Trust need to take timely action to address the circumstance, we are however concerned about the pace of change. By initiating plans from 01 January 2025, this will impact the Local Authority in conducting a full consultation to redraw catchment areas, affecting

the admissions process and therefore may impact families in their decision to choose and prepare for the most appropriate onward placement for their children. The Local Authority does not support a significant change such as amalgamation mid-way through an academic year, unless entirely unavoidable, as this is disruptive to the education of pupils and particularly for the relatively large cohort of children due to take SATs in year 6, who will experience two school changes in a short space of time.

On balance, the Local Authority does not support this proposal.

Brancaster is an integral part of the educational infrastructure in this rural coastal area, where there is no local capacity to accommodate pupils if it were to close. Forecasts show a continued need for school places in the area.

Docking is already at capacity in most classes, and combining the pupil populations could further strain resources, potentially risking the quality of education.

We have some concern about the pace and timing of implementation. A more collaborative approach from the outset may have better supported sustainable, positive outcomes for all stakeholders.

We understand that our position may be disappointing for the Trust and appreciate the challenging circumstances faced by schools with declining pupil numbers regarding their longer-term viability. We have carefully considered your proposal; however, we believe that the outcomes of the amalgamation present significant challenges for the area.

We recognise that pupil numbers will fluctuate over time, and as such, we would welcome the opportunity to work collaboratively with you in the future, to periodically review the outlook over both the medium and longer term. We remain committed to exploring potential solutions collaboratively as the situation evolves and would welcome the opportunity to meet.

Should you wish to review any of the points raised, I am available to discuss any of these matters further on 01603 638099 or anna.palmer@norfolk.gov.uk

Please can I ask that you share the outcome of your proposal with schoolreview@norfolk.gov.uk at the earliest opportunity.

Many thanks,

Yours sincerely



Anna Palmer

School Organisation Manager

Children's Services: Education Infrastructure & Partnerships

Education, Infrastructure and Partnerships Service