

STAPLEHURST PARISH COUNCIL

6th October 2021

Simon Beamish,
CEO,
Leigh Academies Trust,
Carnation Road,
Strood,
Rochester,
Kent,
ME2 2SX

Parish Office
Staplehurst Village Centre
High Street, Staplehurst
TONBRIDGE, Kent
TN12 0BJ

Parish Clerk
Alison Smith

Tel
01580 891761

email
clerk@staplehurst-pc.uk

website
www.staplehurst-pc.uk

Dear Mr Beamish,

Open Letter: Closure of High Weald Academy

We are writing on behalf of Staplehurst Parish Council and our residents regarding the shocking announcement from the Leigh Academies Trust (LAT) on the closure of the local secondary school, High Weald Academy (HWA).

We strongly oppose the decision to close the HWA and urge the Secretary of State to provide a stay of execution in relation to any decision to close, as requested by Helen Grant MP.

It is our firm belief that the community, working with the school and the Academy Trust, be provided the opportunity to explore the options for the school, which have not been fully or exhaustively considered. To work successfully with the school to explore the alternatives to closure will require time and cooperation. We believe that the Secretary of State should provide the local community this opportunity before a decision, as critical and damaging as this one, is taken.

On 28th September we held a public meeting to which a large number of residents attended to voice their fury and devastation to the news that the HWA will be closing by September 2022. It is clear that there is public disharmony and outrage at the way in which this has been handled by the Government, but also by the Leigh Academies Trust.

As a Council we are appalled and disappointed that the document outlining the closure does not take into consideration the vast number of issues that need to be addressed and/or assessed as part of this decision, as well as the wider impact this decision has on our locality.

We would very much welcome from the LAT a number of documents including a copy of the impact assessment, as well as the business case for the closure of the school.

The closure of the only non-selective school in the Weald is extremely contentious and far-reaching in terms of the impact. As a Parish Council we have identified the key issues relating to this closure (outlined below), which we believe need to be addressed/assessed.

1) The announcement of the decision to close the High Weald Academy

When the announcement was made it was a shock to students, parents/carers, employees of the academy and the wider community. There has been no consultation prior to this decision by either the Brook Learning Trust or the Leigh Academies Trust, which we believe is contrary to the Department for Education (DfE)'s November 2019 guidance *'Making significant changes to an open academy and closure by mutual agreement'*. Your comments on why there has been no consultation regarding this decision would be welcomed.

2) Historic systematic failures by DfE, ESFA, Ofsted and academy trusts

We believe there has been systematic failures to raise educational and reputational standards at the school. These failures are the responsibility of the Department for Education, the Education & Skills Funding Agency and Ofsted, by not properly auditing the school and holding the school to account. In particular we reference the mismanagement of the Harris Centre, which we believe has contributed to the decline in standards and finances at the school.

After the school became an academy, the leadership of the school has continuously changed with very little consistency for students and staff. This has impacted on attracting and retaining staff, which undoubtedly has contributed to parents/carers choosing a different educational provider for their child(ren).

We understand that Cranbrook School had offered support to the High Weald Academy, but this offer of support was declined by the Trust. On what basis was the support declined? Was it because the plans to close the school were already in motion at the time?

This failure by LAT to accept support from other organisations is extremely disturbing and brings into question whether a full exploration has taken place to viably continue the school, or whether the matter was already a 'done deal'.

We believe more could have been done and must be done before any decision to close is taken. We've outlined some alternatives to closing the school later in the letter.

3) Improving education quality and Ofsted

The narrative by the Trust is that the school is and will remain a school that requires improvement. However, rather than reading the headlines, if you read the content of the latest Ofsted report and the latest Monitoring visit from Ofsted, you can see that Mrs Barker has made progress in moving the school forward; the school has the capacity to become a 'Good' school as outlined in the last monitoring visit. Therefore, we do not believe the school would stay as requires improvement, as long as progress continues in the direction it was going in and would improve the opportunity of the school to attract new attendees and subsequent funding.

4) Inappropriate remaining choices for non-selective secondary schools

The remaining choices for families and their children if HWA is to shut are:

- Homewood School and Sixth Form Centre: This is a large school, set in Tenterden, which has extremely poor public transport links with the Weald, resulting in journeys of up to 80 minutes one-way on a good day for students. Not only this, but the school is neither a good or outstanding school, as their latest Ofsted report shows. The school's capacity is almost reached as identified in KCC's Commissioning Plan; the new housing developments will add additional pressure on places at this school.
- Cornwallis Academy/New Line Learning Academy: These schools are on the edge of Maidstone town and students travelling from the likes of Hawkhurst will have increased travel times of up to 45 minutes one-way to get to these schools. Although there is capacity at the schools, the demand for these places will increase with the significant number of housing developments in Coxheath, Boughton Monchelsea and surrounding areas which are closer in terms of the catchment area.
- Mascalls Academy: This is a medium to large-size school, in Paddock Wood. The only public transport to the school from the Weald is via the train from Staplehurst station. For families in Hawkhurst their journey to school could take them up to 90 minutes one-way on a good day. Currently in Paddock Wood alone over 1100 new properties are in progress of being built, with a further 4000 currently in the Local Plan. Any small capacity that Mascalls may have will meet the immediate need for the school year 2022. It is unlikely to accommodate the needs in future years from its own catchment area, let alone any demand from the previous catchment for High Weald Academy. Where will these children be schooled in the upcoming years?

5) Impact on students

The announcement of the decision to close the school has already had a profound impact on students, with some expressing that they feel responsible for the school closing. We understand from local parents that assemblies have taken place with the Trust telling students that the school will close and giving no reassurance that Year 11 students will be supported with competent teaching through to their exams. We find this completely unacceptable putting the children under this level of pressure and uncertainty.

The students have had the most unsettling and anxious eighteen months or more, as a direct result of the COVID-19 pandemic. This September, for many students and their families, was the start of a new chapter where normality was returning in terms of their education and the hope for stability. This decision has completely undone any progress to returning to 'normal' and will have a damaging impact on their educational attainment and their mental wellbeing.

For the Year 7 students they have just transitioned to a new school. Everything for these students will be new, in terms of the travel to school, the expectation of them, the way the educational day is structured, the different and multiple teachers. They have just got back into the classroom and they are now being forced to go through a second transition to a much bigger and daunting school.

The students and their families chose the High Weald Academy, as the Academy promoted and boosted their ability to have smaller and more intimate class sizes and this may be the best learning environment for these young people. However, the Secretary of State and the LAT have unilaterally decided that the environment in which these students and

families chose to go to is no longer available and they are being forced to travel significant distances to be educated.

As a Council we feel that allowing enrolment in Year 7 in September 2021 only to announce closure within a few weeks is gross mismanagement, lacks any compassion and demonstrates a complete lack of strategic planning or foresight. Students and their families could have chosen different schools for their children prior to them starting at HWA.

The Year 8, 9 and 10 students will be disproportionately affected by the result of this decision. Starting GCSEs varies from school to school, as does the curriculum offer and exam boards.

Therefore, students will either have to make a decision on their options a year earlier than planned, putting undue pressure on them to make a decision; or they may have to change their options, as the new school could already be part-way through the curriculum delivery of the GCSEs; or require considerable assistance to catch up even if effort is made to still offer the same curriculum. This will put students at an extreme educational disadvantage and could negatively impact the health and their wellbeing.

For all students, but particularly Year 11, the announcement of the school's closure will result in staff absences, as many will be looking to secure new employment elsewhere. This will affect the preparation for their GCSE exams.

Turnover of the Academy's workforce has been an issue for some time and this last-minute announcement will increase the risk of staff departing. Students' safety and welfare could be put at risk, due to staff shortages at the school and this is in addition to usual staff absence. In the event that the planned closure goes ahead, how are the LAT going to ensure that no child that is disadvantaged by staff departures or absences?

6) Impact on families, particularly those low-income families

The closure of the only non-selective school in the Weald will have a disproportionate impact on low-income families. Staplehurst, like other local villages, has seen a rise in families struggling due to the economic impact of the pandemic. The extra cost to these families will be intense and put a real burden on families.

Despite the commitment by the Trust to cover the cost of uniform and arrange transport, this does not extend to those families where their children are currently at primary school and will be looking for secondary education provision in the coming years. The cost of transport will result in a rise of around 20% per child. Public transport costs to Mascalls Academy are currently estimated around £952, with the cost of transport rising year on year. Kent County Council is already struggling financially to support school transport. Closing a school where many children and families can travel at zero or low cost is only going to increase costs to the tax payer. This is simply moving costs around from one budget to another, not achieving cost savings.

7) Impact on the road network and the environment

The closure of the HWA will put more pressure on a road network that is already at capacity and will disproportionately affect Staplehurst, as many will be forced to drive through our village to get to one of the other available schools or access the Station.

In addition, the increased motor vehicle activity will negatively impact our environment, contradicting the Government's green agenda and promises, as well as our local interventions in Kent.

8) Impact on the public transport network

For those that are not able to drive their children to school they rely on public transport. For several years, the Council with our Borough and County Councillor colleagues have reported and challenged our bus operator, Arriva, on their poor performance and reliability. In particular their track record in delivering a good service for school children is often poor.

The bus service serving Sandhurst, Hawkhurst, Cranbrook and Staplehurst towards Maidstone is not as frequent as it should be and the impact of a cancellation or a delay is profound for those left waiting in all weathers and could impact on learning and student attendance records.

Additionally, it is worth noting that Mascalls is a fair distance from the train station, meaning that students will have to walk unaccompanied in the dark in winter, particularly daunting for the younger children.

9) Impact of House building and associated developments on capacity

The decision to close HWA has not taken into account the increased house building we have seen within the area. The south is seeing a significant increase by Tunbridge Wells Borough Council in Hawkhurst, Sandhurst, Cranbrook and Sissinghurst, as well as increases in Staplehurst, Marden and Headcorn by Maidstone Borough Council.

These new homes will be occupied by more families, resulting in an increase of students for the HWA and other schools in the area.

In addition, as mentioned above, Paddock Wood and the surrounding area also has significant increases in housing allocations. This will put pressure on capacity at Mascalls Academy and the surrounding schools without the additional students potentially being transferred by the High Weald Academy. Current data suggests that Mascalls Academy is close to capacity, meaning that in the coming years there will be no capacity for those children outside their traditional catchment area. There seems to have been no assessment or acknowledgement of the impact of this growth around the area for school places. What are the future plans for secondary education provision in the Weald that does not involve nearly an hour travel each way for students?

10) Kent County Council's Commissioning Plan for Education Provision in Kent (2021 – 2025)

We accept that there is currently surplus capacity currently in the area primarily because of the High Weald Academy. We believe the solution cannot be to shut the school. The impact this has on capacity in the surrounding schools and area appears either not to have been assessed or assessed on inaccurate data.

The KCC Commissioning Plan shows that for 2022/23 and 2023/24 additional places are required in the Paddock Wood and Maidstone area 2023/4. This does not include the impact of the HWA closing and students transferring to Mascalls Academy, nor does it

seem to take into account the increased requirement of the remaining village areas of the Weald, which we believe will lead to an overall deficit.

11) Academy trusts

The Brook Learning Trust's report and financial statement from August 2020 shows their objectives and commitments were to increase the intake of Year 7s and their plans for the future does not indicate the proposed closure.

The merger between the Brook Learning Trust and Leighs Academy Trust should be something to be celebrated, as we believe in the Leigh Academies Trust's vision, set out in their Trust Vision 2025 document on their website.

As a successful Academy Trust, with both primary and secondary schools, we would have hoped the merger would have continued the increase in educational and wider outcomes for students at HWA, building in capacity for shared knowledge, experience and expertise from the wider Academy Trust. The plan has been abandoned before it has had time to be executed.

Despite significant investment into the building estate at HWA on the basis that this was to support attraction of more students, time has not been allowed for this to occur. The Council questions therefore whether the intention as early as 2019 was to close the HWA in favour of the creation of a SEN School and that the parents and public have been hoodwinked for more than two years. Your thoughts on this statement would be appreciated.

In addition to the questions above, the Parish Council would like further information as follows:

- A copy of the impact assessment to be made available.
- A copy of the full business case that formed the decision-making process to propose the closure of the High Weald Academy.
- Copies of the minutes of the last 12 months trustee meetings of both Brook Learning Academy and Leigh Academy Trust in order to understand the decision-making process.
- Details of and information regarding discussion with the Minister for Education or other senior Government officials regarding the closure.
- An explanation whether the merger between the Brook Learning Trust and LAT was on the basis of the closure of HWA specifically to change it to a SEN facility.
- The evidence of the demand for a SEN specific facility in the Weald and whether this is sustainable and viable longer-term. What will the capacity of the academy's estate be?

We ask that your response to our questions and the information requested is provided prior to the closure of the listening period, in order that the Parish Council and residents can make considered responses to the listening period and informed decisions for the future education of their children.

Alternatives to closure

We would like the Leigh Academies Trust to openly and transparently collaborate with other organisations such as Cranbrook School, North Kent College and other organisations to fully explore alternatives to closure.

If Leigh Academies Trust does not wish to participate in this, we would ask that the Secretary of State put a stop on the decision to close in order to provide the opportunity for the local community to establish its own academy trust or to work with an alternative local trust to run the HWA as a non-selective school.

Yours sincerely,

Cllr P Riordan
Chairman

Cc: The Rt Hon Nadim Zahawi MP, Secretary of State for Education
The Rt Hon Baroness Barran MBE, Minister for the School System
The Rt Hon Helen Grant MP, Maidstone and the Weald
The Rt Hon Greg Clark MP, Tunbridge Wells
The Rt Hon Tom Tugendhat, Tonbridge and Malling
Roger Gough, Leader of Kent County Council
Shellina Prendergast, Cabinet Member for Education and Skills, KCC
Sarah Hamilton, Deputy Cabinet Member for Education and Skills, KCC
Lottie Parfitt-Reid, Kent County Councillor, Maidstone District
John Perry, Maidstone Borough Councillor, Staplehurst Ward
Louise Brice, Maidstone Borough Councillor, Staplehurst Ward
Matt Dunkley CBE, Corporate Director for Children, Young People and Education, KCC
Christine McInnes, Director of Education, KCC
Nick Abrahams, Area Education Officer, KCC
David Burton, Leader of Maidstone Borough Council
Tom Dawlings, Leader of Tunbridge Wells Borough Council
Kim Fletcher, Chairman of Cranbrook and Sissinghurst Parish Council
Antony Staples, Chairman of Frittenden Parish Council
Kate Tippen, Chairman of Marden Parish Council
Clare Escombe, Chairman of Hawkhurst Parish Council
Roland Hunt, Chairman of Biddenden Parish Council
Geraldine Brown, Chairman of KALC (Maidstone)