

Neale-Wade sixth form closure – an update

An update for constituents following my meeting with the Neale-Wade Principal Graham Horn and Chief Executive of the Active Learning Trust, Lynsey Holzer.

Sixth form financial viability requires 130 students

Mr Horn said that the sixth form needs 130 students in total across the two sixth form years, so typically 65 students a year. Any shortfall below 130 students requires a financial subsidy.

Mr Horn became Principal in 2020 and said sixth form numbers had declined in each of the last 5 years, with the combined number across Years 12 and Year 13 being:

- 2021/22 – 199 students
- 2022/23 – 161 students
- 2023/24 – 111 students
- 2024/25 – 81 students
- 2025/26 – 50 students projected (based on 24 students eligible for Year 12 and 26 students going into Year 13)

Currently there are 233 students in Year 11, so with just 24 students identified for next year's Year 12 based on their current predicted grades, he said it is significantly below the 65 students needed a year to be viable.

Declining student sixth form numbers

I asked Mr Horn and Ms Holzer about the steps they had taken to generate interest, given next year's sixth form demand is approximately a quarter of what it was four years ago in 2021/22, with around just one in ten Year 11 students choosing the sixth form. Mr Horn said he had made one new course available (in politics and government), but no student had signed up.

Mr Horn suggested the lack of interest in the sixth form reflected changes in the options now open to students with "more competition". Students may start an apprenticeship or study elsewhere which is often positive. Yet my concern remains that some students may miss out on the university place or career opportunities offered by taking A levels, particularly if the cost of travel to Chatteris or additional time involved deters students from a sixth form place.

Would changes boost future numbers from Year 9 & 10

Ms Holzer said there is currently no new plan to boost student interest in the sixth form amongst Year 9 & 10. This is because the Trust believes that "student choice to go elsewhere should be celebrated", and "provision is available within their Trust at the Cromwell Community College".

I believe the school should set out a workable plan to boost interest in a Neale-Wade sixth form particularly amongst Years 9 and 10. Just a few years ago there was sufficient demand, and March continues to grow as a town.

For context, over each of the last 5 years Thomas Clarkson Academy has maintained a minimum of 92 or more students in its sixth form and has the same percentage of students receiving pupil premium funding as Neale-Wade. The 50 students projected for next year is therefore well below other Fenland schools, including the most directly comparable local secondary school.

Governance

I previously asked to meet with the Chair of Governors when the news of the sixth form closure was announced, and was told this was not possible. On 14th February the school wrote to say "we understand the request to include the Chair of Governors in the meeting, however due to our structure as a multi academy trust, governance responsibility sits with our Trust Board. We are in the process of formalising new titles and responsibilities for our traditional governor roles at all schools across the Trust to better reflect this".

No mention was made at our meeting with Mr Horn and Ms Holzer of current governors being involved in any way with the sixth form decision. It is therefore a surprise that following the meeting the school has written to clarify that it "does have a local governing body in place with governors sitting on it. The review includes consulting governors across the Trust on how their time is best used".

If Governors are in place, it would be helpful to understand how they have been involved in the decisions over recent weeks, and what their role will be in the coming weeks. This remains unclear to me when I would expect Governors to be involved.

Consultation

The absence of a clear plan to restore the sixth form suggests the Trust intends the closure to be permanent after current Year 12 students finish next year. However, ahead of yesterday's meeting the office of the Regional School Director told me their approval is required should the sixth form close.

Ms Holzer disputed this. The Trust's view is that they "are not closing the sixth form, it is that the numbers are so low that it cannot offer any courses as it is not financially viable". So the Trust say it "it is not closing the sixth form, it is simply not offering any courses this year". They say "the school is legally entitled to do this and this is covered in its admissions policy. If sixth form numbers approach the level needed next year the intention would be to offer viable courses".

In practice if courses are not offered, and if the Trust say they don't expect any return to the 130 student level which they say is needed, it is difficult to see how this is anything other than a closure. If the decision was temporary, there would be a clear recovery plan to boost numbers back to 2022/3 levels which is currently missing.

I have separately been in touch with the Regional School Director's office to ask them for clarification around what consultation is required with parents and will update on this shortly.

Travel costs and additional journey time

I also raised with Mr Horn and Ms Holzer my concerns regarding the cost and time involved from the additional travel required to and from Chatteris, and the disruption this will cause for students and parents.

Dews Buses provide a Neale-Wade to Cromwell Community College return service, but on calling them they said the cost per year is £822. That cost will not be affordable for some families. The danger in closing the sixth form at Neale-Wade is that it therefore closes off social mobility. Whilst A levels are not the right choice for all students, for some it is a stepping stone to achieving their full potential.

The Ely Zipper bus is £1 per journey so £2 a day for those under 25 years old, and there would also need to be more capacity arranged. The additional time and inconvenience will still be detrimental to students.

Following the meeting, the Trust has said it "is exploring agreeing a change to the bus timetable to make it more practical as well as covering transport costs." The Trust added "the level of disruption must also be set against the disadvantages of students being taught in very small classes of only 2 or 3", and that "students would not use the MO1 at a cost of £822 but the Ely Hopper at £380 per annum and that would be fully funded for students".

It would be helpful to have further information for parents on whether the subsidy for the bus is just for next year or future years, and what other steps the Trust will take to help mitigate any costs and disruption involved.

Monitoring report progress

It is important to recognise, notwithstanding the concerns regarding the sixth form decision, the positive comments in the most recent assessment from Ofsted issued on 22nd January 2025 following their monitoring inspection of Neale-Wade. This found "leaders have made progress", staffing "is now more settled", the culture of the school "improved", and "attendance has got better". To read the letter in full, [click here](#). This monitoring report comes ahead of a full Ofsted inspection later this year.

Neale-Wade Governors and the Trust Board

It is important to now hear more from the Neale-Wade Governors (and the Trust Board) as to date they appear absent. For example:

- Could Neale-Wade better use BTECs (equivalent to A Levels) to increase take up? Following the meeting the Trust has said it has offered BTECs in Health & Social Care, IT, Criminology and Sports Studies, yet it is unclear why take up has remained so low and continued to fall given the interest in such additional courses in other schools?
- What funding changes will result from this decision to not have a sixth form, and what if any funding may move between schools within the Trust?
- What clearer reassurance can be given to parents on any additional costs? Following the meeting the Trust has said "costs will be covered wherever possible in line with the Trust's agreement with the Department for Education", and it would be helpful to clarify what this means in practice?
- What assessment have they made of the number of students in future years expected to continue to A levels, and what impact will future plans have on this trajectory?
- How confident is the Trust Board that the pace of improvement is sufficient ahead of the Ofsted inspection later this year, and what more can be done? Saying the Trust Board has discussed this issue, as was stated to me after the meeting, is not evidence of improvements being delivered at sufficient pace.
- The Trust has said following the meeting that "the sixth form plan is refreshed every year", but given the numbers went down every year the refresh clearly did not work. What lessons do the Governors and the Trust Board take from this, and how does it influence a new plan to reverse the trajectory back to 2022/23 levels?

I will continue to liaise closely with students, parents and staff to support the school moving forward and update as further information becomes available.