

Divisions Affected -

EDUCATION & YOUNG PEOPLE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE – 13 June 2025 Woodeaton Manor School Update

Report by Lisa Lyons, Director of Children's Services

RECOMMENDATION

1. The Education and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee is recommended to **NOTE** progress on resolving the outstanding issues at Woodeaton Manor School.

Executive Summary

2. This report updates Scrutiny on the position at Woodeaton Manor School (a foundation school). The report covers the period Autumn 2023 to 30 May 2025. It highlights the significant concerns and complexities that led to the resignation of the school governing body and the permanent headteacher and gives details of the steps the local authority took to stabilise leadership and management in the school and to tackle those concerns. The report has been structured sequentially in order to give a timeline and structure.

Exempt Information

3. The report will make reference to a number of unnamed individuals who are no longer in the employ of the County Council. Some of these individuals left during 2024 and therefore access to some files and information has not been available during the collation of this report.

Background (prior to 2023)

4. Woodeaton Manor School is a foundation special school catering for roughly 80 pupils with Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs). It is located near Islip in a Grade II* listed building.
5. As a foundation special school, the governing body was responsible for the leadership and management of the school including all aspects of safeguarding,

property repairs and maintenance, teaching and learning and financial management.

6. When the Foundation was established, full legal responsibility for the freehold should have been transferred to the governing body by the County Council. This was only partially finalised, and the land registration was not completed and therefore the land is showing as still belonging to the County Council.
7. Prior to November 2023, the school was a successful school, educating around 80 pupils. The school had received the following Ofsted inspection outcomes:

January 2011	outstanding
November 2013	good
May 2019	good

2023 Onwards

8. As a result of the local authority's regular improvement support for schools, our School Improvement Partner raised significant concerns about the leadership and management of the school – in particular safeguarding and building concerns – in the summer of 2023. The headteacher was suspended in July 2023 and later resigned. In October and November 2023, the school was inspected by Ofsted and given a rating of 'inadequate', leading to a 'forced' academisation. The report stated:

Pupils do not receive an acceptable standard of education at Woodeaton Manor. The school is often chaotic and staff are not supported well enough to provide the nurture, care and professionally informed approach that pupils need.

Leaders and governors have not acted quickly enough to stem the decline in standards in the school since the last inspection. Pupils' safety is sometimes put at risk because the school's policies and procedures are not embedded or followed consistently by staff.

9. After the inspection in November 2023, the governing body resigned.
10. Due to the 'inadequate' rating, a forced academisation process was commenced under the DfE's academisation framework. As part of that process an 'Interim Executive Board' (IEB) was established to replace the school's governing body. An interim headteacher was appointed in the Autumn of 2023, who left in mid-January 2024. Since then the school has had a series of interim headteachers, however, a permanent appointment was made in late 2024 and remains in post.
11. In conjunction with the DfE, in early 2024, a brokering exercise was conducted to seek to find an appropriate Multi Academy Trust for Woodeaton Manor. The date for academisation was set as 1 February 2025.

12. The County Council did not express a preference for any specific academy trust during the brokering exercise. The DfE named Propeller Academy Trust (PAT) as the successful Trust to run the school once it became an academy.
13. The County Council used its strategy group meetings to determine progress at the school. As a result, over the course of 2024, it became increasingly clear that the IEB was finding it difficult to fulfil its obligations with regard to safeguarding staff and pupils at the site and where this was largely due to the state of the building and wider safety issues at the school site, in addition to difficulty in securing the necessary therapeutic support for pupils. Alongside significant investment by the County Council in repairs and maintenance, from March 2025 the County Council put in place a service level agreement with PAT to support the leadership and management of the school. The County Council further decided to re-evaluate the IEB at the end of its term of office on 28 February 2025 and put in place an Interim Transition Board (ITB) with effect from 1 March 2025 to oversee the period to academisation, with the ITB being formally approved as a new IEB by the DfE in April 2025.
14. The residential element of the school's provision was paused in Autumn 2023 due to the safeguarding concerns. In Spring 2025, acting on behalf of the IEB, the County Council undertook a public consultation on the proposal to close the residential provision with effect from 1 April 2025. None of the current pupils at the school had the requirement for residential provision as part of their EHCP. Following the consultation, the decision was made to close the residential provision.
15. Due to challenges around ownership of the land and assets (see below) and complications surrounding the funding for Woodeaton, the date for academisation has been moved and is subject to further discussion with the agreement of PAT and the DfE.

Land Issues (Freehold and Leasehold)

16. The school is located in a Grade II* listed building (a designation only pertaining to 1% of listed buildings) and the buildings are not suitable for a 21st century curriculum nor appropriate to ensure the safety of staff and pupils. The original governing body did not invest in the premises and the site is dilapidated and not fit for purpose. Despite significant investment from the County Council, this site and building cannot be improved to deliver quality education and the long-term plan is to relocate the school into more appropriate premises.
17. As stated earlier, when the school became a foundation school, the freehold (including the land and buildings) should have been transferred to the school governing body. However, although this process was started, the final step (the registering of ownership with the Land Registry) was not completed.

18. During 2024, the IEB raised their concerns that the freehold had not been vested in the governing body of the school. In the autumn of 2024, the IEB contacted the Office of the Schools Adjudicator to formally request the vesting of the freehold.
19. During 2024, the County Council held discussions with PAT about the status of the freehold when the school became an Academy. Both parties were in agreement that once Woodeaton Manor became an Academy, the freehold should be transferred to the County Council and where this would place Woodeaton Manor on the same legal basis as other academies across the county under a 125 year leasehold agreement.
20. The Office of Schools Adjudicator responded to the IEB's request in late 2024, requiring the County Council to register the freehold and title with the IEB by 31 December 2024. Unfortunately, there were delays from solicitors which meant that the deadline was missed.
21. Following the establishment of the ITB in March 2025, and in collaboration with PAT, it was decided that all three parties (the County Council, PAT and ITB) would write to the OSA rescinding the prior request to transfer the freehold to the IEB (at that time the ITB), since the ITB acknowledged that the County Council and PAT had reached an agreement whereby following academisation the freehold would revert to the County Council and where setting aside the direction from the OSA would save public funds resulting from unnecessary land transfers. A response from the OSA has been received requesting that the freehold be vested in the IEB and all parties have undertaken to take any necessary and appropriate action to complete that process.

Financial Implications

22. There have been significant financial implications for the County Council as a result of the previous failure of the governing body to appropriately invest in the land and building at the school. Significant amounts have been committed to ensuring the safety of the site and buildings and protecting the safety of pupils and staff in the order of £1.6m. In addition, due to lack of historic robust financial management and other leadership and management at the school, the revenue budget has been significantly overspent. The deficit (which sits with the Council rather than the school after academisation) was in the order of £1.5m as at 31 March 2025 and is likely to continue to increase.
23. In order to secure the support of Propeller Academy Trust (PAT) for the period between March 2025 until academisation, a service level agreement was put in place with a cost of £101k for 3 months. A funding agreement to support the school through the next couple of financial years will be agreed prior to conversion, funded from the High Needs Block of the Dedicated Schools Grant.

Comments checked by:

Thomas James, Head of Financial Services,
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Legal Implications

24. The County Council has acted in accordance with the legislation and guidance for academisation and the appropriate land and property framework. The academisation process has been completed in line with the legal requirements and throughout the process discussions have been held with PAT and the IEB/ITB as appropriate.

Comments checked by:

Leanne Schrouder, Locum SEN and Education Solicitor,
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Staff Implications

25. The process of academisation involves the transfer of the employment of staff from the local authority to the multi academy trust – in this case PAT – under the Transfer of Undertakings (Protection of Employment) Regulations 2006. All due diligence checks were completed before 1 June 2025 in line with guidance and good practice. Due to the closure of the residential provision, one member of staff was identified as being at risk of redundancy.

Comments checked by:

Michelle Higgs, HRBP Schools and Education,
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Equality & Inclusion Implications

26. Woodeaton Manor School is a special school serving a pupil population, all of whom have Education Health and Care plans. Ensuring the school is effectively led and managed is of central importance to delivering the very best outcomes for one of our most vulnerable communities.

Lisa Lyons

Background papers: Nil

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