

The Governing Board
St Andrew's C of E Aided Primary School
Buckland Monachorum
PL20 7NA

Monday, 2nd August 2021

Dear Members of the Governing Board,

We, members of the Buckland Monachorum community, are writing to you in response to the statement released by the Chair of Governors on Wednesday 28th July outlining how the school is to permanently remove the informal and open access to the school grounds after school hours and block off the historical right of way from Modyford Walk to the front gates of the school.

The school and its grounds are an asset to the Buckland Monachorum community and wider parish. The community value of open and informal access to the school and grounds after school hours and at weekends, has been recognised by stakeholders, including residents, school leadership teams, the trustees and later the Governing Board, since the school opened in 1976. In addition to helping build parts of the school grounds, the community have shown their appreciation for continued access by helping to maintain the school premises and grounds, protecting it from flooding during storms, alerting the school to problems, donating money to the school through the village fair and supporting PTFA events.

We recognise that open access has been a guiding principle, a community-orientated obligation, not a legal one. We also recognise that the landscape in which schools operate has altered over the past 40 years, with changes in health and safety and safeguarding legislation. We also understand that current insurance may be inadequate for supervised and unsupervised play, that the school has a right to protect equipment and assets and that governors are collectively liable for accidents. Strategic governance, however, involves considering all stakeholders, building relationships that can respond to change and contribute to good decision making.

On an issue of such importance to the village community, it is unclear why local stakeholders were not consulted about the complete change to school access arrangements. We question whether the Board of Governors considered the long-term implications of its decision in terms of community relations and the reputation of the school.

Why is open, informal out of hours access so valuable to the local community?

The school grounds have offered a safe, central green space for all members of the community to enjoy and share, especially children, and comparable to that of other local villages. The grounds also provide a footpath across the village, enabling children and other residents to safely visit friends, relatives and the cemetery without having to negotiate an increasingly busy road.

Such open green space, large enough for a football match, access to a stream and trees, plus flat paved areas for learning to ride bikes, skate and scoot, has been essential for many Buckland Monachorum locals with small or no garden and/or no alternative access to green space. Most children in the village do not have the privilege of sizable gardens that enable them to kick a football around, play hide and seek, do gymnastics or climb trees. Whilst there is a play park, it is less accessible for those living in Modyford Walk and even more so now with the school footpath closed and does not offer a wild space for exploration and engaging with nature. The play park was also reduced in size substantially to make way for a turning circle for buses, an arrangement the community agreed to because there was no reason to question the access arrangements with the school. The play park does not have any paved areas for learning to ride bikes, skateboard, scooter

or roller skate. The value of the school grounds to the community was keenly seen when the school removed access last June for reasons related to the pandemic, and children and families started to use the cemetery car park as the only other flat paved surface in the village. The car park is clearly not a suitable or safe space for children to play.

What are our concerns about “controlled” access?

Parents over the years have used the school grounds to enable their children to increase their independence and move from supervised to unsupervised play because it offers a secure, safe and accessible site, overlooked by houses, central to the village and with no busy or dangerous roads to cross to reach it. The benefits of unsupervised outdoor play for children are numerous and it is key for their development as well as mental and physical health. Unsupervised outdoor play helps children to build resilience and independence, problem solve, develop self-control, manage risk and practise decision making. Access to green open space is also known to help reduce obesity, anxiety and depression.

In a pandemic era, with mental health issues amongst children a key concern for parents and educators, these benefits should be highly valued. Controlled access, however, offers none.

Controlled access only appears to offer access through Modyford Walk and no right of way through the school. This does not acknowledge or resolve the safety risks to residents having to negotiate the road through the village.

Controlled access, in our view, will effectively make the school grounds like the Village Hall, an asset that can only be accessed by a chosen few and then only for booked and circumscribed activities. This contrasts sharply with the previous informal access that allowed children the educational experience of informal and cost-free play in a safe space and adults a public footpath and a tranquil space that they could access in an unplanned informal way.

Our response to school concerns (from both the statement and Board minutes)

Safeguarding

This is an issue for the school when schoolchildren are on site. Outside school and pre-school / after school clubs, there is no safeguarding need for the grounds to be locked.

Health and Safety

Risk management is a key part of managing play spaces and we are aware that governors, who are volunteers, have time constraints and that school leadership naturally focus their energies on teaching and learning. Out of hours informal access, however, has not been a unique model to St Andrew’s school. There are countless examples of schools across the UK that have an out of hours access policy, including other schools locally. Had the community been consulted it is likely that issues surrounding risk management could have been collaboratively resolved.

Residents are very concerned that the impact of the Board decision to block the community right of way through the school is an increased health and safety risk to our community who now must negotiate the road through the village, which has no pavements and a dangerous corner between the Chapel and the Old School, where oncoming traffic from either direction cannot see pedestrians. Only three years ago an elderly gentleman lost control of his car on the bend by the

Chapel, crashing at speed into the school wall by the gates. Had anyone been walking on that stretch of un-paved road at that time they would have been seriously injured if not killed.

Vandalism and anti-social behaviour

Concerns have been expressed that the open school site allows a risk of vandalism, anti-social behaviour or petty theft. Vandalism is more likely to occur when there is poor provision for young people locally, and, consistently, is less likely to occur when people have a sense of shared responsibility and investment in a place or area. There have been few incidents of vandalism over the years, but we accept that this cannot be entirely avoided and are aware of past incidents, such as theft of lead from the roof a few years ago. We suspect that even the current fencing will not prevent such a determined planned overnight theft and one resident has already witnessed people trying to scale the fences. In contrast, accessible school grounds make it hard for the petty thief or vandal to be unseen. There are many occasions when parents have gone to find the parent of an offender as many of us have had a sense of ownership and pride in the school grounds as a valued community asset. As residents, we are concerned that shutting the school grounds may in fact increase vandalism or anti-social behaviour around the village. Research has shown that schools that open their sites to the local community report fewer incidents of vandalism and in fact keeping the grounds and footpath open increases the presence of people, making vandalism and anti-social behaviour less likely to occur. The experience of the principle of open access in our village demonstrates this.

Governor Liability

We recognise that ultimately the school is responsible for managing risks and understand that governors may be fearful of accidents and litigation if unsupervised access remains. Governors are not personally liable and the risk is held by the Board as a collective. Evidence from case law shows that if a school has properly assessed the risks, successful litigation is extremely unlikely and insurance exists that would cover these costs should it ever arise, although in 45 years of open access it never has. Had the community been asked, we would have been able to support the school with problem solving this issue.

What evidence is there to show how valuable the principle of open access has been to the community?

Please find a sample of the many comments from community residents, past and present, that have been received since the school released its statement:

“Bringing up our children here we have been privileged to have access to the school grounds, as a safe and safely accessible place for our children to play. In the early days, this was with parental supervision, as they played with new birthday or Christmas presents and learned to ride scooters and bikes. Later, it was a safe space for them to play unsupervised for a while and allowed good access for a lot of the village without having to cross busy or difficult roads”.

“As a teacher who is passionate about the importance for children being able to play and socialise in a safe environment, I am surprised by the response. Developing links with the wider community and enabling children to develop healthy lifestyles and to be responsible is all part of a school's curriculum. The potential benefits for the school in terms of community engagement and wellbeing particularly considering the positive effect on children and young people's health and happiness is huge. It seems such a shame for the youth of our community. At a time when the school's admissions are declining I am again surprised that the school is not encouraging the use of their grounds”.

“Outside school hours the school grounds have been an accessible and peaceful space, which we hold dear and which the community values. Along with others we have played our part in maintaining the grounds over the years, - not least because we perceived them as a village asset. I have frequently been glad of the foot path through from Chapel Meadow to Modyford Walk, which route has been closed to us in recent times”.

“Our children started school, with the school already feeling like a familiar and friendly place. That opportunity will now be lost to future generations”

“When we grew up the football pitch and playground were integral to us building social skills and generally having an enjoyable upbringing. Yes there would always be the few that do silly things (and admittedly I may have not been perfect myself) but if you take away this hub of the village what are the youngsters going to do except hang out on the church wall and resent being excluded so become more mischievous as they will have nowhere to burn up those teenage hormones”

““I am extremely saddened by the statement released by the governing board. Having read the statement several times, I still cannot find the school's primary motivation for wanting to restrict community access to the school field when it has worked successfully for 45 years with few issues. If the school had concerns with the existing arrangement of unlimited access, why has it not sought to work with community stakeholders to find a solution? Why has the school only sought the opinions of legal teams and not sought the opinions of the members of the community whom this decision will have an everyday impact on? With Sport England seeking to financially support schools in opening up their grounds to keep children physically active following the pandemic, this decision seems regressive and will deny local children the opportunities to play and meet in a safe and secure environment. I would urge the school to reconsider their decision and instead seek to work with the community to reach a solution which works for all”

“I find it incredibly sad and disappointing that the school governing body regard the village community with such little respect. There has been little or no communication with the local community regarding the obvious plan to keep all access to the field and pool closed during out of school hours. Where is their concern for the health and safety of village children who want and need somewhere to play. To allow things to escalate to this level is frankly unforgivable”.

“This could be the start of anti-social behaviour as they will not have a space to go to play, mess around and be children”

“Surely these plans do not bode well for the future of the school itself! Children’s, teenagers and the villagers views should be listened to, valued and respected!....If the number of children growing up in the village decide to leave ..it will impact on its future!”

“I am utterly devastated by the statement released by the school today closing access to the community. It has so many implications for all of us. I am particularly sad that there has been no public consultation. I am also sad that this issue has already and will continue to divide an otherwise harmonious community. This action will undoubtedly change the character of our community”.

“A few years ago the village flooded on a Saturday. There was a river running through the school car park and playground, with the water rising so fast that the school itself was in danger of flooding. As a community we pulled together to create a flood barrier and were able to protect the school premises from serious and costly flood damage”

“I've suffered debilitating mental health problems for many years. My eldest daughter is 17 my youngest is 12, I've never been able to enjoy a normal life with them like many parents would, I've never been to the beach with them, never been into Plymouth shopping with them, not the cinema, pantomimes and have never been on holiday with them. There have been times I've been housebound. Life can be very lonely. The school field and grounds have played an important part in my life, at one stage I struggled to get to the middle of the field, with plenty of exposure work I did manage to feel secure there, it was the only area I could play with my girls, where I felt like I was being more of a parent. I witnessed my girls learn to ride their bikes, we played football, rounders, gymnastics, table tennis, skateboarding, roller skating, I've swam with them in the pool, and looked for wildlife in the grounds”

“The school states it's concerned about vandalism, there has been no historical proof of anything major, what would be of more importance, what price do we put on the health of the local community? The community will always appreciate those that open the grounds”

“Feeling very grateful to the PTFA for funding, training and opening the pool this week. While my child enjoyed swimming today, it was humbling to observe so many positive activities taking place simultaneously around the school grounds. A family playing ball games. A group of teenagers playing football. Children exploring sticks and building dens. Young children rediscovering friends that they've not seen since Lockdown started. Parents talking to each other around a poolside. Pledges to support with the pool in the future. Being in nature, being together in the beautiful, special place that our children learn in. Around 80 swims have taken place this week. Thank you!”

“How sad. When my children were young they all played on the field and played basketball I'm sure it will be greatly missed as a safe area to play”

“I'm totally gutted by the school's statement. This is from an organisation who profess to have the best interests of children at heart. Whose children I wonder! Not the children of the village that's for sure! I'd sooner my little ones didn't 'learn together what is good and right' if this is what it means”

Next Steps

The Department for Education Governance handbook states that:

“Boards should be able to demonstrate the methods used to communicate with and seek the views of parents, carers and the local community, including disadvantaged families or those families where English is not the first language. They should also be able to show how those views have influenced their decision making and how they have fed back to parents, carers and the local community. It will be important for a school with a religious character to maintain a close link with its local parish”

As a group, we ask that having reviewed our response to the school's statement, that the Governing Board swiftly put on hold their plans to move to “controlled” access and take time to engage with the community and other stakeholders, including the children and young people of the village. In doing so, the Governing Board may discover that the community holds many of the solutions to the perceived issues or is dedicated to seeking a collaborative resolution so that the long-established open access to the school grounds can be maintained.

If the governing board are not prepared to review their current position, we request a timely response to the following information:

1. Why has the Board chosen to not consult with the local or community on the closure of the out of hours use of the school grounds and footpath?
2. Has the Board considered the impact of the decision to close the school grounds and footpath on the local community?
3. How have the views of the local community influenced decision making on this occasion? If not, why not?
4. What might the implications of this decision be in terms of the school's links with the local community? How might this influence parental choice of schools? What evidence are you using to back this up?

5. How many governors on the Board live in the village and/or have any first-hand experience of how informal access arrangements have worked in practice? How might a lack of community knowledge influence decision making?
6. Has the Board considered what the reputational damage to the school could be in terms of its Christian ethos, its links to the Church, the new Headteacher and staff?
7. How does this decision fit within the strategic vision for the school and its place within the community?
8. Has the board considered what impact closing informal access will have on the physical and mental health and well-being of residents, including our children and young people?
9. What is the primary motivation for restricting access to the school?
10. What has changed in recent legislation that supports the school's decision?
11. Can the community have access to the advice the school received?
12. Would the school be open to problem solving with the community to overcome the key issues/reasons for choosing to restrict access?
13. What work is being completed during the school holidays to prepare for "controlled" access?
14. Who is responsible for school grounds health and safety?
15. Does the school acknowledge the increased risk to children, and the wider community, by having to walk on the road to cross the village?
16. If the school is not prepared to restore out of hours community access and the footpath would the Board consider giving back the Devon County Council owned land to the community so we can create a safe and accessible play space and footpath through the village?

Thank you for taking the time to read our response. We look forward to hearing from you soon.

Sincerely

Bella Alexander
Tim Alexander
Ben Backway
Jake Backway
Kirsten Backway
Edie Baird
Helen Baird
Lisa Baird
Maggie Bennet
Phil Bennet
Marie Butler
Jon Butler
Sam Butler

Lisa Birch
David Boyle
Isabelle Boyle
Sam Boyle
Rosie Bradley
Jon Burnie
Meg Burnie
Shona Burnie
James Cargin
Mary Cargin
Jessica Carlson
Patricia Carver
Roger Cockayne
Sue Cockayne
Jon Cox
Lamorna Cox
Lucy Cox
Rory Cox
Carrie Creber
Macie Creber
Richard Creber
Isaac Crimp
James Crimp
Matthew Crimp
Rachel Crimp
Josh Davey
Rona Davies
Nigel Davies
Immy Dibble
Nigel Dibble
Oscar Dibble
Toby Dibble
Freddie Fuller
Shirley Fraser
Janice Fuller
Simon Fuller
Liam Galloghly
Lydia Galloghly
Megan Galloghly
Sam Galloghly
Martin Goff
Sue Goff
Margie Goodfellow
Richard Goodfellow
Arthur Green
Jo Green
Monty Green
Reuben Green
Tim Green
Alan Glanville
Ann Glanville

Grant Harvey
Immy Harvey
Joseph Harvey
Katie Harvey
Linda Harvey
Terry Harvey
Carol Harwood
Mike Harwood
Stephen Hosking
Hettie Hughes
Jake Hughes
Lily Hughes
Jasmine Larkham
Samantha Larkham
Samuel Larkham
Ruby Larkham
Geoff Lakeman
Joy Lakeman
Martin Lee
Sarah Lee
Heather Luckham
Bronwyn Keegan
Megan Keegan
Pete Keegan
Summer Keegan
Katherine Kilkelly
Isabel Kilkelly
Steve Kilkelly
Thomas Kilkelly
William Kilkelly
Jackie Mabey
Richard Mabey
Daisy Mason
Dan Mason
Roz Mason
Caspar Mervyn
Marley Mervyn
Patrick Mervyn
Dave Moore
Jan Moore
Jon Moore
Matty Moore
Margaret Parsons
Rich Pearce
Robyn Pearce
William Pearce
Evie Pearce
Jon Pratten
Caroline Puschendorf
Rob Puschendorf
Ben Puschendorf

Sofia Puschendorf
Julie Rendle
Nigel Rendle
Hannah Rogers
Serena Rogers
Ben Saul
Catherine Saul
Ellie Saul
Karla Sykes
Alfie Stacey
Bobby Stacey
Flossie Stacey
Freddie Stacey
Jack Stacey
Andy Trzcinski
Alice Vyse
Pamela Walker
Angelina Watson
Ben Watson
Daniel Watson
Elena Watson
Katie Watson
Chloe Willson
Emma Willson
Rebecca Willson
Evie Wilson
Shane Wilson
Thalia Wilson
Vicky Wilson
Graham Wood
Lucy Wood
Matthew Wood
Aiya Zaleski
Lola Zaleski
Steven Zaleski
Susie Zaleski

