

Report to the Cabinet

Meeting to be held on Thursday, 11 April 2019

Report of the Head of Service - Education, Quality and Performance

Part I

Electoral Division affected:
Wyre Rural East;

Future of Bleasdale Church of England Primary School

(Appendix 'A' refers)

Contact for further information:

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Executive Summary

Between 7 January and 15 February 2019, at the request of the governing board and in partnership with the Diocese of Blackburn, the authority consulted on a proposal to close Bleasdale Church of England Primary School, with implementation commencing from 31 August 2019. Under the statutory process, the authority is now required to consider the responses to the stage 1 consultation and decide whether to publish a Statutory Notice on the proposal.

The purpose of this report is to provide the information necessary for that decision to be considered.

Recommendation

Cabinet is asked to:

- (i) Note the consultation arrangements that were undertaken and the responses that were received in respect of the authority's proposal.
- (ii) Approve that the authority publishes a Statutory Notice of its proposal to close Bleasdale Church of England Primary School, with implementation commencing from 31 August 2019.

Background and Advice

On 3 December 2018, Cabinet approved that a stage 1 consultation be undertaken on the proposed closure of Bleasdale Church of England Primary School due to a fall in the numbers on roll at the school making the school educationally and financially unviable.

Bleasdale Church of England Primary School is a local authority maintained Church of England voluntary aided school, for children aged 4 to 11 years, located in Wyre Rural East and is deemed by Department for Education categorisation to be a rural school.

As at September 2018, the school had 2 pupils on roll, one in Year 4 and one in Year 6.

With regard to their financial position, the school has sufficient funding to continue to operate in 2018/19, but with only 2 pupils would go into an irrecoverable deficit from 1 September 2019.

The Department for Education's statutory guidance, 'Opening and Closing Maintained Schools' (April 2016) gives a reason for closing a maintained school as 'it is surplus to requirements'. It should be noted that... 'there is a presumption against the closure of rural schools. This does not mean that rural schools will never close, but the case for closure should be strong and a proposal clearly in the best interests of education provision in the area.'

Careful consideration has been given to the statutory guidance on the closure of rural schools, and given the fact that there will only be one child on roll in September 2019, there would be no adverse effect of a closure on the local community, standards in neighbouring schools or travel/transport.

The next nearest school of any denomination is Calder Vale St John's Church of England Primary School which is 3.5 miles away by car, which had 23 pupils (plus 5 in Nursery) on roll in October 2018, with a net capacity of 70.

Closing a Maintained Mainstream School: Guidance and Process

There is a defined statutory process in the School Organisation (Establishment and Discontinuance of Schools) Regulations 2013 which must be followed before making a decision on the closure of a maintained school. This is supplemented by further guidance on the process published by the Department for Education.

A broad timetable, which is subject to change, for the overall process to be applied in respect of a proposal to close Bleasdale Church of England Primary School is set out below:

Action	Start
Cabinet approval to consult	3 December 2018
Stage 1 Consultation	7 January 2019 – 15 February 2019
Report back on consultation and Cabinet decision whether to publish Statutory Notice CURRENT STAGE	11 April 2019
Stage 2 and 3 Publication of Statutory Notice and representation period	April/May 2019
Stage 4 Decision	July 2019
Stage 5 Implementation	August 2019

Consultations

The Department for Education's statutory guidance, 'Opening and Closing Maintained Schools' (November 2018), states that proposers, in this case the local authority, must consult organisations, groups and individuals they feel to be appropriate.

In line with the statutory guidance, a consultation document was produced (set out at Appendix 'A') which was available on Lancashire County Council's website and was widely circulated to interested parties, such as parents, staff and governors at the school, Wyre Borough Council, parish councils, other local schools and stakeholders.

A public consultation has been held during the Stage 1 consultation process. This report is requesting the publication of a Statutory Notice (Stage 2), which will lead to a further statutory consultation (Stage 3), in order to determine the proposal.

For the consultation, paper questionnaires were made available at the school and online questionnaires could be accessed from www.lancashire.gov.uk. Paper questionnaires were also given to parents and staff at the school.

One of the questions in the consultation document asked respondents to say whether they agreed or disagreed with the option of closing the school. The responses received were as follows:

Number of responses	Strongly agree	Tend to agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Tend to disagree	Strongly disagree
7	14% (1/7)	57% (4/7)	14% (1/7)	14% (1/7)	0%

During the consultation period, a consultation event was held at the school between 3pm and 8pm on 28 January 2019 for parents, staff, governors and any other interested parties to ask questions and make comments on the proposal. At the event, 9 appointments took place. Two staff, a representative from the National Education Union, the landowner and five governors attended. Local Authority staff in attendance were as follows: Senior Adviser for Primary (North), School Adviser, Human Resources Business Partner, Area Pupil Access Officer (North), School Provision Planning Principal, School Statutory and Trading Support Manager (Finance). The Diocesan Director of Education was also in attendance.

At the appointment, people were asked whether they would be in support of the school closing. Eight of the nine attendees, whilst expressing their sadness acknowledged what they described as the 'reality' that the school was no longer financially viable with such low pupil numbers.

The responses to the questionnaire were similar to the views expressed at the consultation event. There was a sadness expressed that the closure of the school may be necessary, along with an acceptance that the financial position of the school

would become untenable. One questionnaire raised a question about why local parents were not choosing Bleasdale Church of England Primary School as their school of choice, and a number expressed concern that once the school was closed there would be no provision in the area should new families arrive. One questionnaire made the point that the number of families in the area fluctuated from time to time.

The Local Authority response to these concerns is as follows:

If Bleasdale Church of England Primary School were to close, there is sufficient capacity in the other two local schools to accommodate the pupil who will remain on roll at the end of this academic year. In addition, the housing forecasts over the next five years are only expected to yield approximately three pupils across the Bleasdale, Calder Vale and Claughton planning area of the Wyre District and there is sufficient capacity to accommodate these pupils in other schools. The fluctuation in the number of families means that there is not a sustainable level of intake for the school.

A formal consultation was not conducted with the pupils as there will only be one pupil on roll in September 2019.

Implications:

This item has the following implications, as indicated:

Risk Management

The authority has a statutory duty to secure high quality school places for its residents. Alternative school places can be secured for current pupils affected by the proposed closure.

There are implications for staff employed in the school but the authority has experience in staff redeployment and retraining and a good record in avoiding compulsory redundancies. The Human Resources Service at Lancashire County Council is already supporting the school with staffing reduction procedures necessitated by the fall in pupil numbers.

Financial Implications

The current small budget surplus should see the school to September 2019 without falling into a significant budget deficit. However, with only two children on roll, the budget position from April 2019 will be poor and unsustainable going forward.

When a school is closed by an authority, any balance (whether surplus or deficit) reverts to the authority. The authority cannot transfer a closing balance to an individual school, even when that school is a successor to the closing school, except that a surplus or deficit transfers to an academy where a school converts to academy status under section 4(1)(a) of the Academies Act 2010.

Current Education and Skills Funding Agency guidance states that any deficit balance on a closing school is the responsibility of the authority. The Lancashire Schools Forum has an established reserve for some strategic school deficits. The authority will continue to receive Dedicated Schools Grant funding for the pupils when they relocate to new schools within the county.

Equality and Cohesion

A full Equality Analysis will be completed and reported at the determination stage of the proposal.

List of Background Papers

Paper	Date	Contact/Tel
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None		
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Reason for inclusion in Part II, if appropriate		
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