

Bleasdale Church of England Primary School

Factors to be considered by decision-makers when deciding prescribed alteration, establishment and discontinuance proposals

The Department for Education's (DfE) statutory guidance for decision-makers deciding prescribed alteration and establishment and discontinuance proposals, published in April 2016, sets out a number of factors which must be taken into consideration for all types of proposal. These factors are set out below, along with a supporting comment.

Related proposals

DfE guidance: Any proposal that is 'related' to another proposal must be considered together. A proposal should be regarded as 'related' if its implementation (or non-implementation) would prevent or undermine the effective implementation of another proposal.

Comment: This is a stand-alone proposal and is not reliant on the outcome or implementation of another proposal. The local authority's opinion is that this proposal is not related to any other proposals that have been, are, or are about to be published.

Conditional approval

DfE guidance: Decision-makers may give conditional approval for a proposal subject to certain prescribed events. The decision-maker must set a date by which the condition should be met but can modify the date if the proposer confirms, before the date expires, that the condition will be met later than originally thought.

Comment: It is not anticipated that the decision-maker will set any conditions in relation to the approval of this proposal.

Publishing decisions

DfE guidance: All decisions (rejected and approved – with or without modification) must give reasons for such a decision being made. **Within one week** of making a decision, the decision-maker should arrange (via the proposer where necessary) for the decision and the reasons behind it to be published on the website where the original proposal was published. The decision-maker must also arrange for the organisations listed to be notified of the decision and reasons: the governing body/proposers (as appropriate); the trustees of the school (if any); the local Church of England diocese; the local Roman Catholic diocese; any other organisation that they think is appropriate; and the Secretary of State (in school opening and closure cases only).

Comment: Arrangements are in place to ensure that the decision will be communicated to interested parties within one week of the decision being made. This will be done via the school organisation website, where the original proposal was published, and also by sending a letter to specific individuals or organisations, such as those stated in the guidance, local councillors and OfSTED.

Consideration of consultation and representation period

DfE Guidance: The decision-maker will need to be satisfied that the appropriate fair and open local consultation and/or representation period has been carried out and that the proposer has given full consideration to all the responses received. If the proposer has failed to meet the statutory requirements, a proposal may be deemed invalid and therefore should be rejected. The decision-maker must consider **ALL** the views submitted, including all support for, objections to and comments on the proposal.

Comment: The stage 1 consultation period ran from 7 January to 15 February 2019 and was for the recommended minimum period of six weeks during term time and all relevant parties were consulted.

For the stage 1 consultation when the future of the school was being considered, a booklet was produced by the local authority which set out the key factors and information related to the proposal. This booklet included a questionnaire which sought views on the proposal from interested parties and stakeholders. The questionnaire was also made available online and this could be accessed via the local authority's website. The school also arranged for copies of the booklet to be distributed to all parents, carers, staff and governors of the school. Additional copies were also placed in the school's reception. The local authority also ensured that copies of the booklet were made available in prominent locations, such as Wyre Borough Council and local libraries.

One of the questions in the questionnaire asked respondents to say whether they agreed or disagreed with the proposal to close 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, nine appointments took place and 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.

The local authority then published a stage 2 statutory notice and an accompanying proposal document on 24 April 2019, the first day of the stage 3 representation period. These documents were available on the Lancashire County Council website and were widely circulated to interested parties, such as Wyre Borough Council, parish councils, Lancashire County Councillors for the district, the Regional Schools Commissioner and OfSTED. The school also made arrangements to share this information with parents, carers, staff and governors, to display the statutory notice and to include these documents on their website.

No responses were received during the representation period.

Educational standards and diversity of provision

DfE Guidance: Decision-makers should consider the quality and diversity of schools in the relevant area and whether the proposal will meet or affect the needs of parents; raise local standards and narrow attainment gaps.

Comment: Currently, the local authority has no concerns about the educational standards achieved by pupils at Bleasdale Church of England Primary School. The latest published inspection of Bleasdale Church of England Primary School was in September 2015 when it was judged as Good in all areas. The school was judged as Requires Improvement at its previous inspection.

There are two alternative primary schools within the local planning area. One is a voluntary aided Catholic school and the other is a voluntary aided Church of England school. These schools have been judged as 'Outstanding' and 'Good' by OfSTED.

With only one pupil on roll from September 2019, it is expected that the educational provision would become unviable. There is evidence that schools with a small number of pupils may experience challenges in providing diversity within the curriculum as school budgets are largely determined by the numbers of pupils on roll.

It is noted that the closure of any school does represent a reduction in choice and diversity. However, there were no admissions to the school in September 2018 and no applications for places in September 2019. The first preference applications for the schools in the local area are set out in the table below:

		Five years previous figures										Walking distance in miles from proposed closed school
		2015/16		2016/17		2017/18		2018/19		2019/20		
School	PAN	1 st pref	Total pref	1 st pref	Total pref	1 st pref	Total pref	1 st pref	Total pref	1 st pref	Total pref	
Bleasdale CE Primary	8	1	2	0	0	1	4	0	3	0	4	
St. Mary's Catholic Primary, Claughton-on-Brock	7	7	14	8	19	5	13	3	11	5	11	4.35 m
Calder Vale St. John CE	10	4	8	0	2	4	15	5	12	2	12	2.98 m
Total 1 st pref		12		8		10		8		7		
Bleasdale CE School % of all 1 st pref		8.3%		0%		10%		0%		0%		

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 would remain on roll at the end of this academic year.

A school-led system with every school an academy

DfE guidance: The 2016 White Paper, Education Excellence Everywhere, sets out the department's aim that by the end of 2020, all schools will be academies or in the process of becoming academies. The decision-maker should, therefore, take into account the extent to which the proposal is consistent with this policy.

Comment: Whilst alignment with the Education Excellence Everywhere has been considered, the creation of/conversion to an academy is not appropriate. Both the local authority and the school, governing body and diocese have given consideration to the alternatives to closing the school and no adequate, long term solutions can be found. Given the pupil numbers and the limited growth for the local area of the next five years, joining a multi-academy trust is not possible as the financial due diligence will show that the school is not viable.

Demand v need

DfE guidance: The decision-maker should take into account the quality and popularity of the schools in which spare capacity exists and evidence of parents' aspirations for a new school or for places in a school proposed for expansion. The existence of surplus capacity in neighbouring less popular schools should not in itself prevent the addition of new places.

Reducing surplus places is not a priority (unless running at very high levels). For parental choice to work effectively, there may be some surplus capacity in the system as a whole. Competition from additional schools and places in the system will lead to pressure on existing schools to improve standards.

Comment: Bleasdale Church of England Primary School has seen a reduction in the number of pupils on roll from 16 in January 2014 to 2 in September 2018. There are no pupils in Reception, Year 1, Year 2 or Year 3 and there were no admissions to the school in September 2018.

As at March 2019, the school had two pupils on roll, one in Year 4 and one in Year 6. The pupil in Year 6 will leave the school at the end of this academic year to progress on to secondary school. There were no admissions to the school in September 2018 and no applications for September 2019. In the next 5 years, just 17 new houses are expected to be completed which may impact upon the schools within the Bleasdale, Calder Vale and Claughton Planning area of the Wyre District. This is expected to yield approximately three pupils for the whole area. Neither the emerging Local Plan nor the available housing data show any additional housing planned for the area which may impact upon future numbers at this school. There is sufficient capacity to accommodate these pupils in other schools.

Should Bleasdale Church of England Primary School close, there is sufficient capacity in other local schools to accommodate the current pupil population. As at January 2019, the pupil numbers (numbers on roll (NOR)) at the alternative local schools are shown in the table below:

School	Number on roll as at January 2019 School Census								PAN* in 2018/19	Net Capacity
	R	Y1	Y2	Y3	Y4	Y5	Y6	Total		
Bleasdale CE Primary	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	2	8	56
St Mary's Catholic Primary	6	4	7	4	5	3	6	35	7	52
Calder Vale St John CE	3	5	0	5	5	0	5	23	10	53
Total	9	9	7	9	11	3	12	60	25	161

* PAN – Published Admission Number

School size

DfE guidance: Decision-makers should not make blanket assumptions that schools should be of a certain size to be good schools, although the viability and cost-effectiveness of a proposal is an important factor for consideration. The decision-maker should also consider the impact on the LA's budget of the need to provide additional funding to a small school to compensate for its size.

Comment: The small size of the school is the cause for concern regarding its future and the resulting impact on both educational and financial viability.

With only one pupil on roll from September 2019, it is expected that the educational provision would become unviable. There is evidence that schools with a small number of pupils may experience challenges in providing diversity within the curriculum as school budgets are largely determined by the numbers of pupils on roll.

Proposed admission arrangements

DfE guidance: In assessing demand, the decision-maker should consider all expected admission applications, not only from the area of the LA in which the school is situated.

Before approving a proposal that is likely to affect admissions to the school the decision-maker should confirm that the admission arrangements of the school are compliant with the School Admissions Code.

Comment: There were no admissions to the school in September 2018 and no applications for September 2019.

In summary, the information in the tables above show that if the school were to close, the local authority is satisfied that an alternative school place can be secured for the pupil affected by the proposed closure within a reasonable travelling distance.

National curriculum

DfE guidance: All maintained schools must follow the National Curriculum unless they have secured an exemption for groups of pupils or the school community.

Comment: The pupils at Bleasdale Church of England Primary School currently follow the national curriculum, but the provision of a broad and balanced curriculum is a significant challenge with such small numbers of pupils on roll.

Equal opportunity issues

DfE guidance: The decision-maker must have regard to the Public Sector Equality Duty (PSED) of LAs/governing bodies, which requires them to have 'due regard' to the need to: eliminate discrimination; advance equality of opportunity; and foster good relations.

The decision-maker should consider whether there are any sex, race or disability discrimination issues that arise from the changes being proposed, for example that where there is a proposed change to single sex provision in the area, there is equal access to single sex provision for the other sex to meet parental demand. Similarly there should be a commitment to provide access to a range of opportunities which reflect the ethnic and cultural mix of the area, while ensuring that such opportunities are open to all.

Comment: Please refer to the Equality Impact Assessment at Appendix 'D'.

During the representation period, no comments were made in relation to equality issues.

Community cohesion

DfE guidance: Schools have a part to play in providing opportunities for young people from different backgrounds to learn with, from and about each other; by encouraging, through their teaching, an understanding of, and respect for, other cultures, faiths and communities. When considering a proposal, the decision-maker must consider its impact on community cohesion. This will need to be considered on a case-by-case basis, taking account of the community served by the school and the views of different sections within the community.

Comment: Please refer to the Equality Impact Assessment at Appendix 'D'.

The local authority recognises that the closure of a school can impact on the wider community, particularly when this is a rural school as is the case with this proposal.

The local community has access to a Parish Hall, which is located across the road from the school. The Parish Hall is made up of a main hall, a meeting room, a kitchen and storage areas, as well as ample car parking. The local church is also located a short way past the school, on the same road. If the school was to close, the local authority is satisfied that the local community would continue to have access to suitable community facilities.

Travel and accessibility

DfE guidance: Decision-makers should satisfy themselves that accessibility planning has been properly taken into account and the proposed changes should not adversely impact on disadvantaged groups.

The decision-maker should bear in mind that a proposal should not unreasonably extend journey times or increase transport costs, or result in too many children being prevented from travelling sustainably due to unsuitable walking or cycling routes.

A proposal should also be considered on the basis of how it will support and contribute to the LA's duty to promote the use of sustainable travel and transport to school.

Comment: Please refer to the Equality Impact Assessment at Appendix 'D'.

During the representation period, no comments were made in relation to travel and transport. 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 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.

Funding

DfE guidance: The decision-maker should be satisfied that any land, premises or necessary funding required to implement the proposal will be available and that all relevant local parties (e.g. trustees or religious authority) have given their agreement. A proposal **cannot** be approved conditionally upon funding being made available.

Where proposers are relying on the department as the source of capital funding, there can be no assumption that the approval of a proposal will trigger the release of capital funds from the department, unless the department has previously confirmed in writing that such resources will be available; nor can any allocation 'in principle' be increased. In such circumstances, the proposal should be rejected, or consideration deferred until it is clear that the capital necessary to implement the proposal will be provided.

Comment:

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.

School premises and playing fields

DfE guidance: Under the School Premises Regulations all schools are required to provide suitable outdoor space in order to enable physical education to be provided to pupils in accordance with the school curriculum; and for pupils to play outside safely.

Comment: There will be no adverse impact on the school's playing fields as a result of this proposal. The school currently hires its playing field.

Additional factors for consideration

The DfE's statutory guidance for decision-makers sets out a number of additional factors which must be taken into consideration for discontinuance (closure) proposals. These factors are set out below, along with a supporting comment.

Closure proposals (under s15 of the Education and Inspections Act 2006)

DfE Guidance: The decision-maker should be satisfied that there is sufficient capacity to accommodate displaced pupils in the area, taking into account the overall quality of provision, the likely supply and future demand for places. The decision-maker should consider the popularity with parents of the schools in which spare capacity exists and evidence of parents' aspirations for those schools.

Comment: Should Bleasdale Church of England Primary School close, there is sufficient capacity in other local schools (currently graded good or outstanding) to accommodate the current pupil population.

Schools to be replaced by a more successful/popular school

DfE Guidance: Such proposals should normally be approved, subject to evidence provided.

Comment: This is not applicable for this proposal.

Schools causing concern

DfE guidance: In determining proposals, decision-makers must ensure that the guidance on schools causing concern (intervening in failing, underperforming and coasting schools) has been followed where necessary.

Comment: This is not applicable for this proposal.

Rural schools and the presumption against closure

DfE Guidance: There is a presumption against the closure of rural schools. This does not mean that a rural school will never close, but the case for closure should be strong and the proposal clearly in the best interests of educational provision in the area. Those proposing closure should provide evidence to show that they have carefully considered the following:

- alternatives to closure including the potential for federation with another local school or conversion to academy status and joining a multi-academy trust or umbrella trust to increase the school's viability;

- the scope for an extended school to provide local community services and facilities e.g. child care facilities, family and adult learning, healthcare, community internet access etc;
- the transport implications; and
- the overall and long term impact on local people and the community of closure of the village school and of the loss of the building as a community facility.

When deciding a proposal for the closure of a rural primary school, the decision-maker must refer to the Designation of Rural Primary Schools Order to confirm that the school is a rural school.

Comment: The school is listed on 'Get information about schools' and in the DfE's 'Designation of Rural Primary Schools Order' as being in a 'rural hamlet and isolated dwellings'.

Whilst the factors to be considered in the DfE's guidance for decision makers have all been addressed in this document, further information is as follows:

- As there will only be one child on roll at the point of the proposed closure, there were no admissions to the school in September 2018 and no applications for September 2019, the local authority does not believe that there will be an adverse impact on the local community. It is also noted that the local community will continue to have access to other local facilities, namely the Parish Hall and the church.
- The nearest Church of England primary school is Calder Vale St John's Church of England Primary School, which is located 3.5 miles away by car. This is felt to be a reasonable distance from the current school and the local authority does not believe that this will have a notable impact on the increased use of motor vehicles. This will not result in a significant adverse impact.
- Both the local authority and the school, governing body and diocese have given consideration to the alternatives to closing the school and no adequate, long term solutions can be found. Given the pupil numbers and the limited growth for the local area of the next five years, joining a multi-academy trust is not possible as the financial due diligence will show that the school is not viable. In addition, the school has been part of a number of collaborations, including at the time the governing body, in partnership with the Diocese of Blackburn, approached the local authority to consult on its future. Any structural solution would require ongoing financial support to make it viable and, therefore, no adequate solution has been found.

Early years provision

DfE Guidance: In considering a proposal to close a school which currently includes early years provision, the decision-maker should consider whether the alternative provision will integrate pre-school education with childcare services and/or with other services for young children and their families; and should have particular regard to the views of the Early Years Development and Childcare Partnership.

Comment: The school does not include pre-school education, therefore this consideration is not applicable. The pre-school that uses the premises informally will be able to use other local community space.

Nursery schools and the presumption against closure

DfE Guidance: There is a presumption against the closure of nursery schools. This does not mean that a nursery school will never close, but the case for closure should be strong.

Comment: The school does not include nursery provision, therefore this consideration is not applicable.

Balance of denominational provision

DfE Guidance: In deciding a proposal to close a school that has been designated with a religious character, decision-makers should consider the effect that this will have on the balance of denominational provision in the area.

Comment: The school is a voluntary-aided Church of England Primary School. Should Bleasdale Church of England Primary School close, there is sufficient capacity in other local schools with a church denomination to accommodate the current pupil population.

Community Services

DfE Guidance: Some schools may be a focal point for family and community activity, providing extended services for a range of users, and its closure may have wider social consequences. The effect on families and the community should be considered when considering proposals about the closure of such schools. Where the school is providing access to extended services, provision should be made for pupils and their families to access similar services through their new schools or other means.

Comment:
No extended services are available on this site.

Conclusion

This report has demonstrated that, on the basis of the DfE criteria, the decision-maker is recommended to approve the proposal to close Bleasdale Church of England Primary School, with effect from 31 August 2019.