

Report to the Cabinet Member for Children, Young People and Schools
Report submitted by: Executive Director for Children and Young People
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Part I

Electoral Division affected:
Skerton

The Future of Skerton Community High School: Lancaster

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Executive Summary

The purpose of this report is to seek approval to undertake a formal consultation on the possible closure of Skerton Community High School in Lancaster. The report outlines the main reasons for proposing closure which are educational standards and very low pupil numbers on roll. The report also identifies the opportunities available in the area for children to continue their education at another local school and the process to be followed in undertaking closure of a maintained school.

Recommendation

The Cabinet Member for Children, Young People and Schools is recommended to agree that stage 1 consultation be undertaken on the proposed closure of Skerton Community High School with effect from 31 August 2014.

Background and Advice

Context

Skerton Community High School is one of two community secondary schools in the city of Lancaster; the other secondary schools in Lancaster city being two selective entry grammar schools which are both academies; and two faith schools - one voluntary aided Catholic and one Church of England academy.

There are a number of circumstances applying to Skerton Community High School that now require the local authority to consider its future. Lancashire County Council's 'Strategy for School Places and School's Capital Investment 2013/14 to 2015/16' identifies concerns around educational and financial viability as being reasons for making a closure proposal and the school's most recent Ofsted inspection places some urgency around the consideration of the school's future.

Educational Standards

Educational standards at Skerton Community High School have been a concern for a number of years. In 2008, the school performed below the national floor standards and was included in the National Challenge Programme which brought in a significant amount of additional national revenue funding over the three years from 2009 to 2011, including support from a National Challenge Adviser. In addition, over the past four years the school has received large scale and intensive support from the local authority in order to secure improved performance across the school.

Since 2011, local authority officers have been in discussion with the governing body of Skerton Community High School about the future of the school. In December 2011, three key priorities were outlined for the school to achieve, in order for it to successfully move forward as a community high school. These were:

- The school performing above the Government's "floor standard";
- The school achieving an OFSTED rating of Satisfactory, (Requiring Improvement on the current framework); and
- The school increasing its intake to reach a sustainable level.

Correspondence from the local authority to the Chair of Governors in February 2013 stated that, with regards to these three points, the performance of the school was as follows:

- The school had performed below the national floor standard in each of the last four years on all three measures;
- In January 2011, Ofsted judged the school to be satisfactory with satisfactory capacity to improve. However, with the profile of achievement since the inspection there was a real and significant risk that inspectors would place the school in a category of concern when they next visited;
- Intake at the school had not risen significantly and parental preferences did not indicate that the trend would improve.

Against this background, it was the view of local authority officers that the school could not continue to be maintained as a community high school. This view has been communicated to the governing body.

In April 2013, the school was inspected by Ofsted and the report was published on 10 June 2013. The Ofsted report published the following information about the school:

- The proportion of students joining and leaving other than at normal times is much higher than in most schools.

- Most students are of White British heritage and very few speak English as an additional language.
- The percentage of students for whom the school receives the pupil premium is more than double the national average. Pupil premium funding supports those students who are known to be eligible for free school meals, those in the care of a local authority and those whose families are in the military forces.
- The proportion of students supported by school action is twice the national average and the proportion of students supported by school action plus or with a statement of special educational needs is more than double the national average.
- The school does not meet the government's current floor standard, which sets the minimum expectations for attainment and progress.
- The school uses Lancaster and Morecambe College and Lancaster Training Services to provide alternative education experiences for students and off-site provision is run for some its most vulnerable students which is also accessed by two other secondary schools.
- Prior to the appointment of the current headteacher in 2011, the school had had five headteachers in the previous eight years. Although the school continues to experience instability as a result of external factors, leadership is now stable.

The school received an Ofsted grade of 4: 'inadequate'. The school was judged to have 'serious weaknesses', being inadequate in the quality of teaching and the achievement of pupils, and requiring improvement in leadership and management and the behaviour and safety of pupils.

The local authority is supporting the school with a range of measures, including support from another outstanding school. However, there are significant challenges in raising achievement, improving teaching and learning, and developing leadership and management of the school. The fall in pupil numbers and the resultant budgetary difficulties is impacting on staff numbers. There are real concerns that the school will be unable to deliver an appropriate secondary curriculum, of sufficient range and breadth of subjects and with appropriate specialist teachers, to all levels of students at all key stages. Tracking data indicates that the school will not exceed national floor targets in 2013.

The 'Strategy for School Places and School's Capital Investment' states that 'For primary and secondary schools in special measures, with a notice to improve or otherwise identified as requiring intervention, Lancashire County Council will consider a range of options and take action according to the urgency of the situation and local circumstances... In these circumstances, Lancashire County Council reserves the right to move to closure proposals.'

Pupil Numbers

Skerton Community High School now has 191 pupils on roll, which has fallen from 236 in January 2008. 22 pupils have been offered places in Y7 at Skerton for

September 2013 which will see the total number on roll falling to around 166 as 47 pupils leave Y11 at the end of the summer term. The 'Strategy for School Places and School's Capital Investment' identifies a preferred size for secondary schools at 600 pupils and above, in line with research indicating that the unit costs of provision rises steeply at below 600 pupils, and evidence that small schools may experience challenges in providing diversity within the curriculum. Clearly the pupil numbers at Skerton Community High School fall well below 600 which is due, in large part, to parental preferences and, secondly, to falling secondary school pupil numbers in the Lancaster District.

Pupil numbers at Lancaster city secondary schools in May 2013 were as follows:

School	Type	PAN	Pupil Numbers at May 13							Total	Net Cap
			Y7	Y8	Y9	Y10	Y11	Post 16			
Skerton	Comm	90	28	44	38	34	47		191	447	
Lancaster Central	Comm	150	122	144	152	144	145	63	770	863	
Our Lady's Catholic College	VA	200	100	87	130	146	174	190	827	1140	
Ripley St Thomas CE	Acad	270	271	263	266	254	256	355	1665	1754	
Lancaster Girls Grammar	Acad	112	114	112	114	116	108	348	912	924	
Lancaster Royal Grammar	Acad	142	140	142	142	144	141	335	1044	1163	
Total		964	775	792	842	838	871	1291	5409	6291	

Pupil intakes in the area have fallen by almost 100 per year group in the space of five years and it is evident that some schools have experienced the decline more keenly than others. Because Skerton Community High was already a very small school there was very little flexibility for pupil numbers to fall and for the school to remain educationally and financially viable.

A number of Skerton Community High School's pupils live in Morecambe and other parts of Lancaster District. The numbers of pupils on roll in these schools are as follows:

	Type	PAN	Pupil Numbers at May 13							Total	Net Cap
			Y7	Y8	Y9	Y10	Y11	Post 16			
Heysham High	Comm	220	178	186	193	172	186	158	1073	1322	
Morecambe High	Comm	260	237	215	241	264	238	250	1445	1527	
Carnforth High	Comm	132	118	131	128	105	112	50	644	751	
Total		612	533	532	562	541	536	458	3162	3600	

There are clearly sufficient places in the city of Lancaster schools and Lancaster District schools for any pupils affected by the proposed closure of Skerton Community High School. There are also sufficient secondary school places available for children living in Lancaster, in the medium term, should Skerton Community High School close.

However, local authorities have a duty to secure sufficient school places for children living within their area and longer term future pupil numbers should be taken into account when planning changes to school organisation.

The local authority is able to predict future secondary pupil numbers by reference to pupil numbers in primary schools and applying a migration factor based on past trends (to reflect parental preferences and/or movement into and out of the area). To these 'raw' figures, pupil yield from proposed new housing is taken into account. The 'raw' figures indicate that, whilst pupil numbers are expected to rise significantly, there will be sufficient school places for children living in the Lancaster District up until the 2019/20 academic year, though provision will be tight. However:

- Only 96% of pupils in Lancaster District primary schools attend a Lancaster District secondary school. If parental preferences alter in the future then Lancaster District secondary schools could need additional places in 2019;
- In Lancaster City Council's Strategic Plan there is a proposal to develop 1,650 houses in South Lancaster and 1,200 in East Lancaster over a number of years. This has the potential to yield at least another 257 pupils – all of which will require additional secondary school places, should Skerton Community High School close. When the places will be required depends on the speed of development.

Regardless of the above factors, it is estimated that additional secondary school places will be required in the Lancaster District by 2021/22, as additional primary school places are required for September 2014 (pupils entering the secondary sector in September 2021).

Whilst additional secondary school places are likely to be required in Lancaster District in the longer term, action needs to be taken now to address the educational and financial viability of Skerton Community High School. The need for additional places will be dealt with as a separate issue at such point in the future when they are required.

School Budget

As a result of falling pupil numbers and changes to school funding, Skerton Community High School now experiences significant budgetary difficulties. From a healthy balance in 2011/12, the school budget went into deficit in the following year and in 2013/14 it is estimated that the deficit will be in the region of £96,000. A budget recovery plan is currently being constructed.

Alternative Provision

An important feature of any consultation on the closure of a maintained school is the alternative provision to be made for the pupils if the school closes. Consideration must be given to the types of schools available; the distances that pupils will need to travel and the standards offered by any receiving schools.

Information provided on pupil numbers demonstrates that there are sufficient places available within most other schools in the Lancaster District, including schools in the city of Lancaster, to accommodate the Skerton Community High School pupils, should the school close.

Because the Skerton Community High School pupils live in various locations in the District and because there are available places across most schools in the area, it is not proposed to name a receiving school which will guarantee places to displaced pupils if the school closes. Alternatively, parents will be asked to express preferences for alternative schools and the local authority will allocate a place at a school which most closely matches their stated preferences.

When making proposals for closure, the local authority must consider the quality of the alternative education provision for displaced pupils. The educational standards at the other Lancaster secondary schools that have available places are higher than those at Skerton Community High as rated by Ofsted. Our Lady's Catholic College; Lancaster Central; Morecambe and Carnforth are all graded 'Good'; Ripley St Thomas CE 'Outstanding' and Heysham High 'Requires Improvement'.

When a secondary school closes it is vitally important to secure the continued curriculum options chosen by those pupils in Year 10. Should Skerton Community High School close, Our Lady's Catholic College and Lancaster Central have both undertaken to accommodate all of the Year 10 pupils at the time of closure and ensure that those pupils are able to continue with their chosen studies. Parents will be made aware of this when choosing their preferred alternative schools.

Use of Site

It is proposed that, should Skerton Community High School close, the site will be utilised for educational and community purposes, the details of which are in the process of development.

Closing a Maintained Mainstream School: Guidance and Process

There is a defined statutory process set out for the process which must be taken 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. There are 5 statutory stages for a proposal as set out below;

Stage1	Stage 2	Stage 3	Stage 4	Stage 5
Consultation	Publication	Representation	Decision	Implementation
Likely to be no longer than 12	This requires publication of	6 weeks	LA should determine	No prescribed timescale but

months and a minimum of 6 weeks during school term time is recommended	the proposal in an appropriate local newspaper		proposals within 2 months, if longer it is referred to the schools adjudicator	must be specified in the published notice
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An outline timetable for the process to be applied in respect of a proposal to close Skerton Community High School is set out below;

Action	Start	Finish
Cabinet Member Decision to consult		5 August 2013
Stage 1 Consultation	9 September 2013	25 October 2013
Report back on consultation and Cabinet Member decision whether to publish statutory notice	10 December 2013	
Publication of Statutory Notice and representation period	6 January 2014	16 February 2014
Decision	March / April 2014	
Implementation		31 August 2014

The timetable is provisional and is subject to variation.

Consultations

Skerton Community High School Governing Body has been consulted. The report is requesting further, statutory, consultation in order to determine the proposal.

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. A failure to address the falling numbers and consequent concerns around the future educational viability of the school runs the risk of the Authority being seen by DfE and Ofsted to be failing in its statutory responsibilities. Alternative school places can be secured for children 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.

Financial Implications

Current policy is that any deficit balance resulting from a closing school will be charged to the Lancashire Schools Forum Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) Reserve. The authority will continue to receive DSG funding for the pupils when they relocate to new schools within the county.

Equality and Diversity

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

List of Background Papers

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