

## **Report to the Cabinet**

Meeting to be held on Monday, 3 December 2018

### **Report of the Head of Service, Education, Quality and Performance**

#### **Part I**

Electoral Division affected:  
Wyre Rural East;

### **The Future of Bleasdale Church of England Primary School**

(Appendices 'A' to 'C' refer)

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#### **Executive Summary**

At a meeting of the governing body on 4 July 2018, the governing body of Bleasdale Church of England Primary School resolved to ask the Local Authority to consult on the future of the school and this decision was supported by the Blackburn Church of England Diocese.

The purpose of this report is to seek approval to undertake a formal consultation on the future of Bleasdale Church of England Primary School. The report proposes stage 1 consultation on the possible 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. The report identifies the reasons for the proposal, and sets out the process to be followed in undertaking potential closure of a maintained school.

#### **Recommendation**

Cabinet is asked to:

- (i) Consider the information in this report.
- (ii) Approve the proposal that stage 1 consultation be undertaken, starting on 7 January 2019, on the proposed closure of Bleasdale Church of England Primary School, with effect from 31 August 2019.

#### **Background and Advice**

Bleasdale Church of England Primary School is a 4-11 local authority maintained Church of England voluntary aided school located in Wyre Rural East and is deemed

by Department for Education categorisation to be a rural school. The most recent inspection of the school was in September 2015 when, overall, the school was judged to be good. At the previous inspection, the school was judged as 'requires improvement'. At the time of the last inspection, the school was part of a collaboration with another rural school and shared a headteacher across both schools.

Following the retirement of the headteacher at the end of August 2016, the school has been led by two different part-time associate headteachers.

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 no adverse effect of a closure on the local community, standards in neighbouring schools or travel/transport.

The building would transfer to the ownership of the trustees who are the Vicar and the two Church wardens. Reverter applies and so land will be subject to a reversion process and the full extent of the land would need to be ascertained at closure as the boundaries are not defined in the deed. The Diocese of Blackburn are custodian trustees and it is understood that there is no Local Authority land involved. The school does not have a school field, but leases the field from the Bleasdale Village Hall Committee.

The next nearest school of any denomination is Calder Vale St John's Church of England Primary School which is 2.98 miles away, which had 23 pupils (plus 5 in Nursery) on roll in October 2018, with a net capacity of 70.

### **Key Factors for Consideration**

A number of key factors have been taken into consideration in relation to this proposal and these are: pupil numbers and admissions, financial viability and school performance. The key information and findings on the factors outlined above can be found in Appendices 'A' and 'B'. Appendix 'C' sets out a map of the area, which shows where other primary schools in the area are located.

### **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. There are 5 statutory stages for a proposal as set out below:

Stage 1	Stage 2	Stage 3	Stage 4	Stage 5
Consultation	Publication	Representation	Decision	Implementation
Likely to be no longer than 12 months and a minimum of 6 weeks during school term time is recommended	This requires publication of the statutory notice in an appropriate local newspaper and on the school premises and at all entrances of the school within 12 months of the consultation. An accompanying proposal is also required	Must be a minimum of 4 weeks, from the date the statutory proposal is published	Local Authority will be the decision-maker and must determine proposals within 2 months. If longer, it must be referred to the schools adjudicator within a week of the end of the 2 month period	No prescribed timescale but proposers must be expected to show good reason if the timescale is longer than 3 years

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	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

## Conclusion

As can be seen from the pupil numbers and longer-term financial viability of the school, Bleasdale Church of England Primary School is not viable. Given the pupil numbers and no projected rise, joining a Multi-Academy Trust is not possible as financial due diligence will clearly outline that the school is not viable. Equally, the school has been a part of a number of collaborations including at the time the governing body made this decision to consult on the future of the school. Any structural solution would require ongoing cash injection to be viable and, therefore, none of these options will provide an adequate solution.

## Consultations

At a meeting of the governing body on 4 July 2018, the governing body of Bleasdale Church of England Primary School resolved to ask the Local Authority to consult on the future of the school and this decision was supported by the Blackburn Church of England Diocese.

**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
None		

Reason for inclusion in Part II, if appropriate

N/A