

Report to the Cabinet

Meeting to be held on Thursday, 6 October 2022

Report of the (Acting) Director of Education, Culture and Skills

Part I

Electoral Division affected:
(All Divisions);

Corporate Priorities:
Caring for the vulnerable;

Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Sufficiency - Bleasdale School, Silverdale

(Appendix 'A' refers)

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Brief Summary

This report relates to the residential element of Bleasdale School, which is an all through school for pupils with profound and multiple learning difficulties in the north of Lancashire. The number of residential pupils has reduced significantly over recent years and Cabinet is asked to consider different options in relation to the future of the boarding provision at the school, and to make a decision about which option to adopt and/or investigate further.

Four possible options are presented within this report, as alternative approaches as to the use of the residential site of Bleasdale School, in an effort to try and avoid the under-utilisation of the facilities available and to optimise the efficient use of public funds.

This is deemed to be a Key Decision and the provisions of Standing Order C19 have been complied with.

Recommendation

Cabinet is asked to:

- (i) Consider the information set out in the report, including the options for the future of the residential provision at Bleasdale School.



- (ii) Determine the preferred approach or approaches to be adopted in relation to the residential provision at Bleasdale School.
- (iii) Subject to the outcome of (ii) above, approve the initiation of relevant feasibility studies.

Detail

Bleasdale School is a school for up to 40 pupils with profound and multiple learning difficulties between the ages of two and 19 years. The school can provide residential provision for up to nineteen children and young people for up to a maximum of 38 weeks of the year.

The school also offers a Summer Holiday Club during the first two weeks of the summer holidays, for all pupils, which can include day-time activities, the possibility of residential provision or a combination of the two.

Bleasdale School has been categorised as an outstanding school by Ofsted since 2009.

Location

The school is in Silverdale, a small village 11 miles north of Lancaster and five miles away from the nearest junction of the M6 and close to the west coast of Lancashire and the border with Cumbria.

Concerns have been raised in the past about the accessibility of the site for emergency services where pupils have required urgent medical care related to their complex health needs. The headteacher has reported that there have been very few incidents in the last few years where pupils have required emergency medical attention and that, on these occasions, air ambulances have been available to transport pupils very quickly to hospital.

The school is situated on two sites on either side of a small road towards the peripheries of the village. The residential building is situated across the road from the day school. Both buildings are fully fitted with overhead tracking and hoisting facilities; these are purpose-built in the residential building and a mobile gantry hoist is available to enable pupil access to outside environments.

School population

As of September 2022, there were 35 pupils on roll at the school, 32 of whom have an education, health and care plan maintained by Lancashire County Council. The other three pupils have education, health and care plans maintained by Cumbria and North Yorkshire County Councils.



The breakdown of school places by key stage is presented in the table below:

Key Stage	Number of pupils
1	13
2	8
3	5
4	5
5	4

It can be seen from the table above that the largest cohort is in key stage one, and the reception class and year one groups are the largest within the school, having five and six pupils respectively. Generally speaking, the other year groups have one or two pupils in each, with the exception of year four which has four pupils and year seven that has three pupils.

Other factors

- 1) The demand for residential provision at Bleasdale School has reduced significantly over time, as more families are electing to keep their children at home.
- 2) There are significant costs to both the high needs block for a residential school that is under-utilised, and separately to the social care budget for residential care where families are not able to care for their children.
- 3) A school is considered to be a children's home if, at any time, accommodation for children at the school is in excess of 295 days (Care Standards Act 2000) and therefore there is not an option for the school to extend their offer to full-time throughout the year. The children most difficult to place are those requiring 52-week placements.
- 4) The location of the school has meant it has been difficult to recruit residential staff, particularly in the current climate and where the contracts for care staff are for term time only rather than full time. The head of care post has been vacant intermittently throughout the course of the last academic year. This is a regulatory requirement and has been managed through the deployment of the school equivalent from within the school's senior leadership team. Factors serving to compound this issue include the uncertainty of the future of the school, given the ever-decreasing numbers of residential pupils, and the fair pay policy requirements within the public sector which mean it is not possible to offer a sufficiently attractive salary. The children's commissioning team are currently looking at options to see whether it is possible to assist with the engagement of overnight care staff.
- 5) There are facilities that include a hydrotherapy pool and a rebound therapy centre that are located within the residential building site and are used regularly by day pupils.
- 6) Much of the school's external play area is also located on the residential site. All maintained schools must provide suitable outdoor space to enable physical education, and prior consent of the Secretary of State for Education is required to dispose of this type of land.



- 7) The head teacher retired at the end of the last academic year. The deputy head teacher has become the acting head teacher for the new academic year, during which time arrangements will be put in place to secure a permanent appointment. The existing head teacher will provide managerial support for two days per week, whilst the interim arrangements are in place.

Proposals

There are a number of different options that could be considered which include maintaining the current position, selling the residential building, or creating one or more children's homes on the site. Consideration has also been given to the creation of a short breaks unit. However, there is not sufficient demand for this in the immediate area, and the location of the building means the journey times for children with more complex needs would be significant.

The regulations in relation to children's homes are such that it is very unlikely a home providing more than six beds would be agreed by the regulatory bodies, and it is becoming increasingly apparent that smaller children's homes are preferred as they present a move away from institutionalised care. There are also occasions where the needs of an individual child are such that their presence has a very significant and adverse effect on any other potential occupants. In this situation, it may be necessary to limit the number of children living within the home, thereby reducing the occupancy, which, on occasions, could result in single occupancy. The impact one child has on another varies considerably. It is more likely in smaller homes that it will be possible to minimise the number of redundant beds for two reasons. Firstly, smaller homes reduce the number of children and therefore the number of interactions between them, and thus, with careful matching, it is more likely that it will be possible to identify children who can live together successfully. Secondly, in a two or three bedded children's home, only one or two beds would be unoccupied if the child's needs were so significant that they could not be placed with other children, whereas in a six bedded home this could be up to five.

The approach adopted by providers, currently offered by most of the larger 52-week residential placements that include education, is the use of multiple children's homes each in its own separate building, often a bungalow.

Four options are presented in the table below to try to avoid the under-utilisation of the facilities available at Bleasdale School, and to optimise the efficient use of public funds.

Option	Approach	Potential benefits	Potential drawbacks
1	Maintain existing arrangements	No disruption to existing services for children, young people and their families or staff.	1) Continued inefficient use of public resources both in relation to high needs funding and the social care budget. 2) Continued difficulties with the recruitment and retention of overnight care staff.



2	Disposal of the residential building	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) It reduces the demand on high needs funding by £926,000 per annum for residential provision that is under-utilised. 2) Capital receipt for the residential building estimated to be up to £1.5 million. 3) No requirement to address issues associated with it being one of the more energy inefficient buildings within the Council's property portfolio. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Disruption to the care and education of the remaining residential pupil. 2) Potential for redundancy of existing care workers. 3) Reduced/no access to facilities, such as the hydrotherapy pool rebound centre and play areas to day pupils. 4) Failure to maximise the benefits of expenditure on specialist equipment and adaptations to the residential building. 5) Complicated arrangements relating to the use of the external play area if achievable are likely to reduce the appeal of the sale of the building. 6) Very limited external play area on the main school site, is likely to mean this would be insufficient and Secretary of State approval is required for the change of purpose or disposal of this land.
3	Change the purpose of the residential building to create a six bedded children's home for children with complex health needs that is maintained by the local authority in the main residential building and	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Minimises disruption for existing residential pupil and others who may require residential options in the future. 2) Provides more flexibility and support planning for children with the most complex needs as residential placements can be adapted/tailored to individual needs. 3) Potential to enhance coordination between care and education provision for individual pupils. 4) Optimises the use of existing specialist equipment and facilities 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) If one six bed occupancy children's home is created this does not make use of all the accommodation available. 2) The regulations to create one or more separate children's homes within the same building is likely to present a significant challenge. 3) Significant financial investment will be required if separate buildings for children's homes are created. 4) Potential to reduce



	consider other options to create one or more smaller three bedded homes either within the same building or within the same site	<p>and knowledge and skills.</p> <p>5) Addresses shortfall in residential placements for children with complex needs.</p> <p>6) Reduces dependency on private providers and additional costs associated with this.</p> <p>7) Potential to increase the uptake of pupil placements at the school and reduce the requirement to find an alternative school for pupils who require 52-week residential placements.</p> <p>8) Minimises travelling time and associated transport costs between care and educational setting.</p>	<p>access for families and/or to increase transport costs because of the location.</p> <p>5) Arrangements for using specialist equipment and facilities and outdoor play area likely to be more complicated than existing arrangements.</p> <p>6) Continued difficulties with the recruitment and retention of care staff.</p> <p>7) Loss of residential school and the flexibility this affords for a limited number of pupils.</p> <p>8) Requirement to address issues associated with it being one of the more energy inefficient buildings within the Council's property portfolio.</p>
4	Change the purpose of the residential building to a children's home for children with disabilities with a private provider.	<p>1) As above except for 5).</p> <p>2) Private provider becomes responsible for the management the residential provision, including any difficulties with recruitment and retention.</p> <p>3) No requirements to address issues associated with it being one of the more energy inefficient buildings within the Council's property portfolio.</p>	<p>1) Annual fees are likely to be higher than for local authority run residential provision.</p> <p>2) Potential to reduce access for families because of the location.</p> <p>3) Arrangements for using specialist equipment and facilities and outdoor play area likely to be more complicated than existing arrangements.</p>

Recommendation

Dependent on the approach(es) approved, approval is being sought to undertake feasibility studies to look at the options. A separate report will be presented to a future meeting of Cabinet for options appraisals considering all four of the above options, once this feasibility study has been carried out.

Consultations

No consultations have been undertaken at this time.



Implications:

This item has the following implications, as indicated:

Financial

The financial implications are set out at Appendix 'A' and are deemed to be exempt from publication for the reason set out below:

This section of the report contains information relating to the financial or business affairs of any particular person (including the authority holding that information).

An estimate of cost to undertake a feasibility study would be £20,000. This would be funded from the High Needs Capital budget.

Human Resources

Staff will be/have been consulted on the proposals so that any concerns raised can be addressed.

Risk management

The county council and partners across education, health and care are required to work together to plan for and meet the needs of children and young people who have special educational needs and disabilities, in line with the Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Code of Practice 2014, the Chronically Sick and Disabled Persons Act 1970 and the Children Act 1989.

If the decision was not to proceed with the proposals contained within the report, the risk would be insufficient places for children with disabilities who have been taken into the care of the local authority, and the potential for increased costs out of area as there will be increased dependency on private providers. This proposal mitigates the risk of this and the county council failing to fulfil its duties in terms of safeguarding and promoting the welfare of children, and in ensuring they have access to fulltime education.

Equality and Cohesion

This proposal impacts on both the age (young people) and disability protected characteristics of the Equality Act 2010 and potentially also on staff at the school whose protected characteristics are not known at present. To meet the requirements of the Public Sector Equality Duty fuller consideration will be given to these aspects as part of any feasibility study or further development of this proposal so that any potential adverse impacts can be fully considered as part of the process.

List of Background Papers

Paper	Date	Contact/Tel
None		



Reason for inclusion in Part II, if appropriate

Appendix 'A' is not for publication - Exempt information as defined in Paragraph 3 of Part 1 of Schedule 12A to the Local Government Act 1972. The appendix contains information relating to the financial or business affairs of any particular person (including the authority holding that information). It is considered that in all the circumstances of the case the public interest in maintaining the exemption outweighs the public interest in disclosing the information.

