

Report to: Cabinet

Date of meeting: 19 July 2016

By: Director of Children's Services

Title: Proposed closure of Rodmell CE Primary School

Purpose: To consider the outcome of the public consultation in relation to the proposed closure of Rodmell CE Primary School and to recommend next steps

RECOMMENDATIONS

Cabinet is recommended to halt the proposed closure of Rodmell CE Primary School and allow the governing body of Rodmell CE Primary School further time to submit a firm and viable proposal that would ensure a sustainable future model for the school for review by the Council during Term 5.

1 Background

1.1 In October 2014 the Lead Member agreed that a review of primary schools should be undertaken in the Lewes area. This was in the context of the Council's principles for planning the provision of education places in East Sussex as set out in the *Education Commissioning Plan 2014 – 2018* and the Council's strategy for school improvement *Excellence for All*. The Local Authority has a duty to ensure there is sufficient provision to meet the predicted demand for places and to also look more widely at the organisation of schools to make sure they are well placed to deliver a high quality education to their local communities.

1.2 The Area Review raised significant concerns about the long term sustainability of Rodmell CE Primary School in terms of the risks to its financial stability, securing good outcomes for pupils and its ability to attract pupils from within its community area. For these reasons and having considered alternative options including federation, amalgamation and academisation, approval was sought from the Lead Member for Education and Inclusion, Special Educational Needs and Disability on 21 March 2016 to consult on a proposal to close Rodmell CE Primary School. The Lead Member agreed that the Children's Services Department (CSD) should consult on the closure of the school but instructed CSD to fully consider any proposals coming from the schools or from other consultees around federation or amalgamation which would lead to a sustainable solution.

1.3 The Diocese of Chichester shares the Council's concerns and agreed that the Local Authority should consult on closure of the school.

1.4 The consultation period commenced on 15 April 2016 and ran until 27 May 2016. A report on the consultation is provided in **Appendix A**. Members must read and have regard to the full version of the consultation report with responses.

1.5 The school is listed in the Designation of Rural Primary Schools (England) Order 2012 (as amended 2015) and is therefore within the designation of "rural" school. Under current Department for Education (DfE) guidance there is a presumption against the closure of rural schools. This does not mean that a rural school will never close, but that the case should be strong and a proposal clearly in the best interests of educational provision in the area.

2 Supporting information

2.1 Pupil Numbers

2.1.1 The average annual birth rate in the Rodmell and Southease Parish in the period 2001/02 (reception year intake 2006/07) to 2010/11 (reception year intake 2015/16) was only

3.4. In the period 2011/12 (reception year intake 2016/17) to 2014/15 (reception year intake 2019/20) the average annual birth rate was even lower at 2.5.

2.1.2 The majority of children attending Rodmell CE Primary School do not live within the local area to the school. Only 19% of pupils attending the school at the January 2016 census came from the community area. The significant majority of children living in the community area choose to attend other local schools. No child allocated a reception year place for September 2016 lives in the school's community area.

2.1.3 Even if Rodmell CE Primary School were to fill to capacity it would remain a very small school (63 places). There are insufficient pupils in the community area now, and predicted for the future, to sustain an educationally and financially viable primary school in the long term without relying on attracting pupils from areas closer to other schools.

2.1.4 The latest set of pupil forecasts for the area, which take account of proposed housing developments indicate that there would be sufficient primary reception year places in the period to 2022/23 were Rodmell CE Primary School to close. If at any point in the future temporary shortfalls were to appear in the Newhaven area as a result of housing developments in Newhaven, there is capacity at other schools in the town to provide one off bulge classes if required. **Appendix B** sets out CSD's forecasting methodology and predictions for the area.

2.1.5 There will be sufficient places available in other schools in the area in 2017/18 for children from Rodmell CE Primary School if it were to close. There might be a very small shortfall of places in Newhaven in Years 1, 5 and 6 depending on which schools parents express a preference for. This would be addressed through working with the other schools in the area.

2.1.6 Asking schools to exceed PAN is a strategy adopted in other parts of the county where there is pressure on places but the level of demand does not justify the creation of bulge classes. Forecasts indicate that this strategy would only need to be in place for a very short period of time until the larger cohorts leave the primary phase. It should be noted that there is no class size legislation in Key Stage 2 which limits class sizes to 30 pupils.

2.2 Leadership

The substantive headteacher resigned her position with effect from end of August 2016. Recruitment to Headteacher roles in small schools is challenging, both locally and nationally. Recruitment activity across the county indicates that it will be very difficult, if not impossible, for Rodmell CE Primary to recruit to a headteacher vacancy. Attempts to recruit on an interim basis have not yet proved successful.

2.3 Budget

2.3.1 The Council has been working with Rodmell CE Primary School on its three year budget plan; the school has recognised that the initial budget plan they submitted as a balanced budget did not balance across the three years. The school has recognised that in order to create a balanced budget for this financial year it will require reorganisation of key resources, including reducing to two teaching classes from September 2017. The Council and the school had explored this option prior to the consultation on closure. The Council and governors recognise that taking these steps will have a significant impact on the school. The school will be left with a very challenging budget with no flexibility or contingency built in. In addition, in order to secure a balanced budget this year, the Council will be required to provide additional resources. The Council has agreed with the school arrangements for the school to monitor the budget regularly.

2.3.2 The Council is concerned about the impact and the quality of the education and development of children at the school when it reduces to two classes: with 4-7 year olds in one class and 8-11 year olds in the second class. The school currently operates with three classes: maintaining standards will be much more difficult with one class per Key Stage and will present significant challenges in meeting national curriculum requirements.

2.4 Performance

2.4.1 The Council provided significant support to Rodmell CE Primary School to enable its move from 'Requires Improvement' to 'Good'. However, attainment in Early Years Foundation Stage and Key Stage 1 show variation year on year with many results below national average. Attainment at Key Stage 2 has been below national average L4+ for Reading/Writing/Mathematics for the last three years. The recently received provisional outcomes data for Key Stage 2 for this year shows that no children (0%) achieved the expected standard in reading, writing, maths combined against an East Sussex average of 51.5%.

2.4.2 It is recognised that trends are difficult to establish as cohort numbers are very small. However, we have a responsibility to ensure that all children make expected levels of progress by the time they leave Year 6.

2.4.3 It is considered that in such a small school it would be extremely challenging to provide a wide and diverse curriculum and would limit the range of opportunities available for all pupils both for their academic and social development.

2.5 Petition

2.5.1 During the consultation period a 5,000+ signature petition in relation to the proposed closures of both Rodmell CE Primary School and Pells CE Primary was submitted to the Local Authority. The petition is available for members to view.

2.5.2 The petition was presented at Full Council on 10 May 2016 where the following motion was moved.

In view of the increasing need for Primary School places in and around Lewes in the next five years, the strength of public feeling shown by a petition of over 5,000 signatories and the emerging plans for the future at both Rodmell School and Pells School, the Council recommends to Cabinet that the process towards the closure of these two schools is halted at the end of the consultation to enable these plans to be put into place.

2.5.3 A recorded vote on the motion was requested and taken. The motion was carried, the votes being cast as follows - 28 for the motion and 20 against the motion. In accordance with the Lead Member decision and the resolution of the Council we have sought to look at possible alternative options and to engage with stakeholders to consider any emerging plans that are put forward.

2.6 Alternative Options

2.6.1 The Council has been actively promoting federation with schools since November 2014 and has, along with the Diocese, spent a considerable amount of time exploring options for Rodmell CE Primary School. No Academy has expressed an interest in taking the school into their Trust; the low admission number; very limited number of births in the local area; significant long term financial challenges and small site means that it does not present as a viable proposition and is therefore is not attractive to an Academy Trust.

2.6.2 The Council has a role in supporting schools to explore federation but it is not responsible for securing those partnerships. Federation is a decision made by the governing bodies of schools and the Local Authority can only direct governing bodies to federate in exceptional circumstances.

2.6.3 A proposal has been submitted by the 'Save our Schools' campaign group which has been set up by parents. This proposal has been evaluated by officers who have concluded that the proposal is not viable, it does not address the challenges that the school faces and will not lead to the future sustainability of the school. The proposal and evaluation are provided in **Appendix C**.

2.6.4 The Council has looked at alternative plans. It has taken forward discussions with Iford and Kingston CE Primary School about the interim leadership support that the school could provide to Rodmell CE Primary School during the 2016/17 academic year. Representatives of the governing body of Rodmell CE Primary School engaged in subsequent discussions to further explore this. However, the governing body of Iford and Kingston CE Primary School

has since confirmed that it feels unable to support Rodmell CE Primary School for 2016/17 due to their forthcoming building works and their upcoming Ofsted inspection. The governing body feel that the focus of management at the school needed to be firmly on their own school over the next twelve months. The governing body has however indicated a willingness to consider the possibility of partnership between the schools in the future if it is agreed that the school will not close. The governing body have indicated that they feel a sense of moral purpose to support Rodmell CE Primary School given the close geographical proximity of the two schools but have concerns about their capacity to do so.

2.6.5 Across the county there are models of successful partnerships between schools, including small rural schools, and whilst this partnership by no means presents a straight forward or guaranteed solution to addressing the challenges faced by Rodmell CE Primary School it nonetheless may present an opportunity, worthy of further exploration, for securing a more sustainable future for the school. It could be considered premature to close down this opportunity to explore this partnership.

2.6.6 It should be recognised that allowing time to explore this option could have a negative impact on the school as it will extend the period of uncertainty for parents and staff. In this event, to mitigate this the Council and governing body should commit to maintain regular communication. It should also be noted that there is no firm commitment from Iford and Kingston CE Primary School to agree to partnership just a willingness to further explore this option. The Council will investigate and evaluate fully any proposals brought forward by the governing body.

2.7 Equality Impact Assessment

2.7.1 Members are required to have 'due regard' to the duties set out in Section 149 of the Equality Act 2010 ('the PSED') in determining the proposal to halt the proposed closure of Rodmell. The Equality Impact Assessment (EqIA) has been prepared in order to analyse the equality implications of this proposal and to identify any appropriate mitigations. The EqIA is appended to the Consultation Report. Members must read the EqIA and take their findings into consideration when determining the proposal. The EqIA is attached at **Appendix D**.

2.8 Scrutiny Committee

2.8.1 At the recommendation of CMT, Scrutiny Committee considered the report on Rodmell CE Primary School at an additional meeting on Monday 4 July 2016. A summary of the Committee's discussion and responses to the proposal is included in **Appendix E**.

3. **Conclusion and reasons for recommendations**

3.1 The number of responses from the consultation demonstrates that the majority of parents, pupils, staff, the governing body and the local community are against the proposed closure of the school.

3.2 At Full Council it was resolved that the process for closure be halted while emerging plans are put in place. The Council remains very concerned about the long term sustainability of the school in terms of its financial stability, its ability to secure consistently good outcomes for pupils, its ability to appoint high quality long term leadership that can move the school forward and its ability to attract pupils from within its community area. However it is minded to allow time for the school to explore a sustainable partnership model which should include further discussion with Iford and Kingston CE Primary School.

3.3 For the reasons set out in this report Cabinet is recommended to:

Halt the proposed closure of Rodmell CE Primary School and allow the governing body of Rodmell CE Primary School further time to submit a firm and viable proposal that would ensure a sustainable future model for the school for review by the Council during Term 5.

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LOCAL MEMBERS

Councillor Carla Butler

APPENDICES

Appendix A Consultation Report
Appendix B Pupil Forecasting and School Places
Appendix C Proposal and Evaluation
Appendix D Equality Impact Assessment
Appendix E Summary of Scrutiny Committee

BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS

Lead Member Report and Minute of 21 March 2016