

Report to: Lead Member for Education and Inclusion, Special Educational Needs and Disability

Date of meeting: 22 May 2023

By: Director of Children’s Services

Title: Holy Cross CE Primary School

Purpose: To consider the future of Holy Cross CE Primary School.

RECOMMENDATION:

The Lead Member is recommended to approve the Local Authority taking forward a statutory process to consult on the closure of Holy Cross CE Primary School by 31 December 2023.

1. Background

1.1 Holy Cross CE Primary School (the school) is a Voluntary Aided (VA) school located in Uckfield. It has a Published Admission Number (PAN) of 30 and capacity for 210 pupils.

1.2 In recent years, the school has faced many challenges relating to leadership, retention of staff, quality of provision and low pupil numbers which, despite significant support from both East Sussex County Council (ESCC) as the Local Authority and the Diocese of Chichester (the Diocese), it has not been able to overcome. As a result, the school is considered extremely vulnerable. The challenges are set out below.

2. Supporting information

Pupil numbers

2.1 The school has suffered from a lack of popularity in the local community for some years. This is illustrated by Table 1 which shows the number of first preferences received by the school in the last seven years against its PAN of 30.

Table 1

Holy Cross CE Primary School	Year R first preferences						
	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23
Yr R first preferences	6	9	11	8	10	11	7

Source: Admissions data

2.2 This lack of popularity has led to falling pupil numbers going back over a decade. Table 2 illustrates the level of decline in the last ten years, a fall of 62 pupils, or 50%.

Table 2

Holy Cross CE Primary School	Primary capacity and primary total number on roll									
	2013/14	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23
Primary capacity	210	210	210	210	210	210	210	210	210	210
Primary total NOR	124	126	117	106	110	105	84	77	76	62
Surplus places	86	84	93	104	100	105	126	133	134	148
Surplus places %	41%	40%	44%	50%	48%	50%	60%	63%	64%	70%

Source: January school censuses

2.3 In recent months the school has lost further pupils, linked to the leadership challenges the school has faced and the high turnover of teaching staff (paragraphs 2.9 and 2.10). At the time of writing, pupil numbers had fallen to 27, meaning there is currently 87% surplus capacity in the school. Only seven first preference applications were received by the school for a place in Reception in September 2023. This reduced to two following withdrawals from five families. Two places were allocated on National Offer Day; given the uncertain future faced by the school, the families were also offered places at alternative schools should they wish to accept them instead.

Demand for places in Uckfield

2.4 Births in Uckfield have fallen significantly in recent years, from 189 in-area births in 2011/12 to 137 in 2020/21. This has resulted in low pupil numbers in the town, with historically popular schools carrying surplus places.

2.5 At the January 2023 school census, there were 1,053 children on roll across the five primary schools in Uckfield, with surplus capacity standing at 16%. Table 3 illustrates this.

Table 3

Uckfield primary schools	Primary capacity and primary total number on roll							
	Year R	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4	Year 5	Year 6	Total
Year group capacity	180	180	180	180	180	180	180	1260
Year group NOR	138	146	159	157	160	134	159	1053
Surplus places	42	34	21	23	20	46	21	207
Surplus places %	23%	19%	12%	13%	11%	26%	12%	16%

Source: January 2023 school census

Uckfield schools: Harlands Primary School, Holy Cross CE Primary School, Manor Primary School, Rocks Park Primary School, St Philip's Catholic Primary School

2.6 At the same time, there was 14% surplus capacity in the rural primary schools surrounding Uckfield, as can be seen in Table 4.

Table 4

Rural primary schools near Uckfield	Primary capacity and primary total number on roll							
	Year R	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4	Year 5	Year 6	Total
Year group capacity	90	90	90	90	90	90	90	630
Year group NOR	59	72	82	83	94	76	80	546
Surplus places	31	18	8	7	0	14	10	88
Surplus places %	34%	20%	9%	8%	0%	16%	11%	14%

Source: January 2023 school census

Surrounding rural schools: Bonners CE Primary School, Buxted CE Primary School, Fletching CE Primary School, Framfield CE Primary School, Little Horsted CE Primary School

2.7 Pupil forecasts in the Local Authority's [School Organisation Plan 2022 to 2026](#) indicate that intakes to Reception in Uckfield schools will remain low in the forthcoming years, with surplus capacity in the town expected to reach 21% by 2025/26.

Quality of education

2.8 The school has struggled to secure good outcomes for pupils over time, this is reflected in the grades received in Ofsted Inspections over the last eight years.

- 2006 - Full Inspection – Satisfactory
- 2009 - Full Inspection – Satisfactory
- 2013 - Full Inspection – Requires Improvement
- 2015 - Full Inspection - Requires Improvement

- 2017 - Full Inspection – Good
- 2022 – Ofsted completed a ‘Section 8’ or ungraded inspection having previously judged the school to be Good during the graded or full inspection in 2017. The Section 8 inspection found that *‘There has been no change to this school’s overall judgement of good as a result of this initial (section 8) inspection. However, the evidence gathered suggests that the inspection grade might not be as high if a full inspection were carried out now. The next inspection will therefore be a full (section 5) inspection’*.

2.9 As a result of the falling pupil numbers, the school has had to reorganise its class structure since the beginning of the 2022/23 academic year. Having started the year with three classes, there are now only two classes, for Reception to Year 2 and Years 3 to 6. This, together with the significant turnover of teaching staff has impacted on the quality and consistency of education. This is a major concern to both the Diocese and the Local Authority which has provided significant resources to support the school in terms of additional financial resources and officer capacity, particularly around leadership, additional support for teaching, safeguarding and support for pupils with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND).

School leadership

2.10 In recent years the school has experienced several changes of leadership and, therefore, a lack of stability in this area. The last substantive headteacher left on 31 December 2021. At that point, the then governing board approached the Local Authority for support with interim leadership. An interim leader was deployed to the school, full time, from January 2022. A number of different and temporary leadership arrangements were subsequently put in place at the school between November 2022 and February 2023. Additional leadership capacity is currently being provided to ensure sufficient capacity is in place to support the school and the vulnerable families throughout this turbulent time. Due to the falling roll at the school and the increasing pressure on the budget, the school cannot now afford a substantive full-time headteacher.

2.11 The Local Authority issued a warning notice to the governing board in February 2023 pursuant to s. 60 (2) b) of the Education and Inspections Act 2006 (as amended) because ‘there has been a long term, serious breakdown in the way the school is managed or governed which is prejudicing, or likely to prejudice, such standards of performance’. In responding to the warning notice, the governing board concluded that the right course of action was for the Local Authority to apply to the Department for Education (DfE) to appoint an Interim Executive Board (IEB) to replace the governing board. Governors took this decision having explored all the options available to secure the sustainability of the school and to ensure that appropriate support was in place to oversee the next steps for the school. The Local Authority applied to the DfE in February 2023 for an IEB, which was approved by the DfE Regional Director.

Interim Executive Board

2.12 In March 2023, the IEB met to review the due diligence undertaken by the previous governing board and consider the current situation of the school. Taking into account these findings, the subsequent further drop in pupil numbers, the challenges around recruitment and the quality of provision, the IEB agreed that the school is no longer viable and cannot meet the needs of its children and should therefore close.

2.13 On 21 March 2023, the IEB wrote to the Secretary of State asking that the Local Authority be directed to close the school on 31 August 2023. The DfE Regional Director responded to the IEB on 30 March 2023 stating:

‘The evidence you have presented clearly indicates the belief of the Interim Executive Board, East Sussex County Council and The Diocese of Chichester that closure of the school is in the best interests of the children who attend the school and the wider community. Your report highlights concerns about leadership and the quality of education which have been exacerbated by rapidly falling pupil numbers. The low number of pupils in the school is unlikely to recover and as a result there is little likelihood that a Multi Academy Trust would be willing to support the school’.

2.14 However, the Regional Director did not agree to the IEB’s request to issue a direction to close the school as the DfE stated it was for the Local Authority to take forward a statutory closure process if it considers the school to be unviable. On 26 April 2023, the IEB considered the DfE Regional Director’s

response and wrote to both the Local Authority and the diocese requesting that the Local Authority should follow the statutory process to close the school.

Alternative options to closure

2.15 The Local Authority and the Diocese have supported the school to try to identify a long term solution for the school without success. The low pupil numbers and the resulting significant impact this has on its budget means that the school is not an attractive proposition for school partners. This can be evidenced by some of the options we have explored:

- Brokering a school improvement partnership with the Diocese of Chichester Academy Trust (DCAT) with a view to the school joining the multi academy trust. This proved unsuccessful as DCAT concluded that the school was not viable.
- Supporting the school to explore partnership with a local church school. This again proved unsuccessful as the proposed partner school decided that there were too many challenges, including financial viability, to partner with the school.
- Supporting the school to explore joining another local federation. This again proved unsuccessful as the proposed federation similarly decided that there were too many challenges, including financial viability to partner with the school.
- The Diocese has supported the governing board to explore academy trust options with all existing Diocese of Chichester academy trusts, however, all the trusts expressed concern about the school's financial viability and subsequent impact on their own trusts. The falling numbers on roll and the impact this has on the school's budget has meant that the school is simply not attractive to academy trusts or other school partners.

2.16 All alternative options to closure have therefore been considered. Unfortunately, the Local Authority and the Diocese believe there are no other viable options available to the school.

3. Conclusion and reasons for recommendations

3.1 The Local Authority is committed to ensuring all children in East Sussex are able to receive an excellent standard of education. Regrettably, the Local Authority and the Diocese no longer believe that the education on offer at the school meets this standard. Given the urgency of the situation in terms of the rapidly decreasing number of children, the challenge of securing appropriate leadership and teaching staff for the school and the concerns over the quality of education that children are receiving, the Local Authority and the diocese believe that closure of the school at the earliest opportunity is in the best interests of the children and the school community. The Local Authority believes there would be sufficient places available in the local area for children at the school were it to close.

3.2 In conclusion, the Lead Member is recommended to approve the Local Authority taking forward a statutory process to consult on the closure of Holy Cross CE Primary School by 31 December 2023.

3.3 If approved, the Local Authority would consult with the school community in Term 6 of the current academic year. It is intended that the Local Authority would report the outcome of the consultation to the Lead Member at a decision making meeting on 11 September 2023.

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LOCAL MEMBERS

Councillor Claire Dowling

Councillor Chris Dowling

BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS

None