

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

Date: **11 September 2023**

By: **Director of Children’s Services**

Title of report: **Holy Cross Church of England Primary School**

Purpose of report: **To seek Lead Member approval to publish a statutory proposal in relation to the proposed closure of Holy Cross Church of England Primary School.**

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## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

**The Lead Member is recommended to:**

- 1. approve publication of a statutory proposal in respect of the proposed closure of Holy Cross Church of England Primary School on 31 December 2023; and**
  - 2. delegate authority to the Director of Children’s Services to amend the proposal prior to its publication if required.**
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### **1. Background**

1.1 On 22 May 2023, the Lead Member for Education and Inclusion, Special Educational Needs and Disability (“the Lead Member”) considered a report on the future of Holy Cross Church of England Primary School.

1.2 As described in the report, Holy Cross Church of England 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. In recent years, the school has faced many challenges relating to leadership, retention of staff, quality of provision and low pupil numbers. Despite significant support from both East Sussex County Council (“the local authority”) and the Diocese of Chichester (“the diocese”), these challenges remain. As a result, the school is considered extremely vulnerable. The challenges were set out in the [Report to Lead Member for Education and Inclusion, Special Educational Needs and Disability on 22 May 2023](#).

1.3 Having considered the report, the Lead Member gave approval for the local authority to commence a statutory consultation on a proposal to close the school on 31 December 2023.

### **2. Consultation**

2.1 In accordance with Section 15 of the Education and Inspections Act 2006 (“the EIA 2006”) (as amended) and the School Organisation (Establishment and Discontinuance of Schools) Regulations 2013 (“the Regulations”), the local authority consulted on the proposed closure of the school between 9 June and 21 July 2023. The local authority consulted with the school community, local schools, and other key stakeholders as prescribed in the Regulations. Consultation meetings were held for staff and parents and carers on 21 June 2023.

2.2 By the end of the consultation period 41 responses had been received, 38 via the local authority’s consultation hub and three via the consultation inbox or the consultation meetings.

2.3 In response to question 1 ‘Do you support the proposal to close Holy Cross CE Primary School on 31 December 2023?’:

- 21% support the proposal
- 71% do not support the proposal
- 5% are undecided
- 3% did not answer

2.4 The respondents described themselves as:

- 3% are pupils at Holy Cross CE Primary School
- 26% are parents/carers of a child at Holy Cross CE Primary School
- 3% are members of staff at Holy Cross CE Primary School
- 21% are parents/carers of a child at a local school
- 13% are members of staff at a local school
- 6% are governors at a local school
- 28% classified themselves as 'other' or did not provide an answer this part of the question.

2.5 34 respondents answered question 2 'If Holy Cross CE Primary School was to close, how would this directly impact on you and your family?'. From the information above and the comments received indications are that 17 respondents (41% of total responses) would be directly affected as they are either a child / have a child(ren) at the school or have a child(ren) at the on-site third party nursery.

2.6 Several key concerns arose from the consultation responses. These are set out below, along with the local authority's response to each point.

### 2.7 The impact on staff and children

The impact on the mental health and wellbeing of staff and children is a concern for respondents. The local authority will ensure that support is available to staff, children and their families for mental health and emotional wellbeing through support sessions and transition activities.

### 2.8 The sufficiency of school places in the town

Families of children at the school are concerned that there are insufficient places in other schools for their children. From the analysis the local authority has undertaken we believe there would be sufficient school places for the children currently at the school as below. At the May 2023 schools census there were 26 children on roll at the school, as set out in Table 1 below.

Table 1

Holy Cross CE Primary School	Primary total number on roll							
	Year R	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4	Year 5	Year 6	Total
	1	1	5	4	7	0	8	26

Source: May 2023 School Census

Across the other four schools in Uckfield there were 1,019 children on roll at the May 2023 schools census against a capacity of 1,050. This is illustrated in Table 2.

Table 2

Uckfield primary schools	Primary capacity and primary total number on roll (May 2023 schools census)							
	Year R	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4	Year 5	Year 6	Total
Year group capacity	150	150	150	150	150	150	150	1,050
Year group NOR	139	144	151	151	154	131	149	1,019
Surplus places	11	6	0	0	0	19	1	

Source: May 2023 School Census

Uckfield schools: Harlands Primary School, Manor Primary School, Rocks Park Primary School, St Philip's Catholic Primary School.

At the same time, there were 559 children on roll in the five rural primary schools surrounding Uckfield against a capacity of 630. See Table 3 below.

Table 3

Rural primary schools	Primary capacity and primary total number on roll (May 2023 school census)							
	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	84	89	96	78	81	559
Surplus places	31	18	6	1	0	12	9	

Source: May 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.

It should be noted that the Year 6 cohorts in each school have since transitioned from primary to secondary education to be replaced by a new Reception (Year R) cohort in the 2023/24 academic year. There are likely to be 137 Year R children on roll across the Uckfield schools (none at Holy Cross CE Primary School) and 79 in the five rural schools.

Based on the information provided above, it is possible that should the school close on 31 December 2023, places would be tight in the area in Years 3, 4 and 5. However, unlike at Key Stage 1 there is no class size limitation at Key Stage 2 and schools regularly have classes in excess of their PAN in those year groups. The local authority would work with local schools to ensure there are sufficient places available for children displaced from Holy Cross Church of England Primary School. In some instances, this may mean schools going over PAN in particular year groups. The local authority would support schools to ensure that they can effectively manage the increased number of children.

Parents and carers of children at the school would be given the opportunity to express a preference for a place at an alternative school. Parents and carers would be asked to complete an admissions application form and to name up to three schools they would prefer their child/ren to attend. Parents and carers would be offered a school place either at one of their preferred schools named on the application form or, if this is not possible, at the nearest school to the child's home where a place is available. We would try to meet parents and carers preferences wherever possible but cannot guarantee to do so. The allocation of places would be made in line with the admissions policy as set out in the school admissions booklet which is available on the local authority's website at:

<https://www.eastsussex.gov.uk/educationandlearning/schools/admissions/>

Free home to school transport would be provided for eligible pupils who meet the criteria set out in the link below. <https://www.eastsussex.gov.uk/educationandlearning/schools/transport/>

## **2.9 The impact on places of new housing developments in the town**

Concern was raised in the consultation responses about the pressure that new housing developments in the town will create on schools and that more places would be needed, not less. The local authority's pupil forecasts take account of housing growth in each school planning area based on information provided annually by local planning authorities. Although unlikely to create pressure in the short term, the development of 1,000 new homes at Ridgewood Farm to the southwest of the town is likely to generate a significant number of school age children in the medium to long term. Given the size of the development, a primary school will be required to serve the new houses. For this reason, the local authority has an option agreement on land within the development site for a new school and will bring forward proposals at the appropriate time to establish provision in the area. Holy Cross Church of England Primary School would not be easily accessible for families living in the new homes.

## **2.10 The impact on the third party nursery**

A number of respondents raised concerns about the future of the on-site third party nursery. Were the nursery to close as a result of the school closing, the local authority believes there would be sufficient early years places in the local area to meet demand. In summer 2023, the nursery had 18 children on roll (9 full-time equivalent). Currently there are in excess of 30 surplus full-time equivalent places in the town based on August 2023 early years data.

2.11 Question 3 asked 'Please let us know if you have any alternative suggestions on how we should address the challenges the school faces, as set out in the document'. These are set out below, along with the local authority's response to each point.

## **2.12 Appoint a permanent headteacher to drive forward change**

As set out in the 22 May 2023 Lead Member report, due to the decreasing number of pupils on roll and increasing pressure on its budget the school is unable to afford a substantive full-time headteacher.

## **2.13 Re-brand and promote the school with better funding**

The local authority and the diocese have supported the school to try to identify a long term solution including partnering with other schools and academy trust options, without success. The low pupil numbers and resulting impact on the school's budget means it has not proved an attractive proposition for school partners. Significant additional financial resource has already been provided by the local authority; no other funding is available. Re-branding the school by itself would not address these significant issues.

## **2.14 Reduce the Published Admission Number (PAN) at all Uckfield schools to spread the children more fairly**

Holy Cross Church of England Primary School has suffered from a lack of popularity in the local community for some years. Reducing the PAN as suggested would create organisational and budgetary challenges for the other schools in the town and would not necessarily address the popularity of Holy Cross Church of England Primary School in terms of the number of families selecting it as their first preference school. This suggestion could result in fewer families being offered a place at their preferred school.

## **2.15 Create an outreach special school on the school site**

No consideration has been given to what might happen to the site were the school to close. Part of the site is owned by the local authority and part by the Diocese. The local authority and the diocese would consider the future of the site only if a decision is made to close the school.

2.16 A consultation summary report, providing a more detailed analysis of the responses received during the consultation period, is available to view in the Cabinet and Members rooms at County Hall.

## **3. Statutory proposal**

3.1 Based on the information above, the local authority believes it is appropriate to continue with the proposed closure process by publishing a statutory proposal. If approved, a statutory proposal would be published in accordance with the EIA 2006 and the Regulations, providing interested parties with a further opportunity to comment on or object to the proposal. It is intended that a statutory notice would be published on the local authority's consultation hub in September 2023. The notice would also be published in the local newspaper and posted on the entrances to the school. Publication of the notice would trigger a four-week period of representation during which interested parties could comment on the proposal.

3.2 The local authority has a duty to determine the proposal within two months of the end of the representation period. We anticipate that a final decision on the proposal would therefore be taken at the Lead Member decision-making meeting in November 2023.

3.3 The Lead Member is required to have 'due regard' to the duties set out in Section 149 of the Equality Act 2010 (the Public Sector Equality Duty) in determining the proposal. An Equality Impact Assessment (EqIA) is being undertaken as part of the statutory process to identify any equality implications of the proposal and to address any concerns through appropriate mitigations. The EqIA will be reported to Lead Member prior to a final decision being taken on the proposal.

## **4. Conclusion and reasons for recommendations**

4.1 The majority of respondents to the consultation object to the proposed closure of the school, with concerns being raised about the impact on staff and children's mental health and emotional wellbeing and the sufficiency of school places in the area. However, the challenges the school has faced remain and will be made worse by the reduction of pupil numbers in the last year. No alternative suggestions have been identified through the consultation process that would address these critical issues.

4.2 The consultation responses have not identified any potential solutions or actions to address the issues the school faces. The views of the local authority and the diocese about the viability of the school remain the same. The very low pupil numbers, the challenge of securing appropriate leadership and teaching staff for the school and the concerns over the quality of education that children are receiving leads us to conclude that closing the school at the earliest opportunity is in the best interests of the children and the school community. The local authority would work with local schools to ensure there would be sufficient places available in the local area for children displaced from Holy Cross Church of England Primary School were it to close following the statutory process.

4.3 In conclusion, the Lead Member is recommended to:

1. approve publication of a statutory proposal in respect of the proposed closure of Holy Cross Church of England Primary School on 31 December 2023; and
2. delegate authority to the Director of Children's Services to amend the proposal prior to its publication if required.

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**LOCAL MEMBERS**

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