

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

Date: **14 November 2023**

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

Title of report: **St Pancras Catholic Primary School**

Purpose of report: **To determine the statutory proposal to discontinue St Pancras Catholic Primary School on 31 August 2024.**

RECOMMENDATIONS:

The Lead Member is recommended to approve the closure of St Pancras Catholic Primary School on 31 August 2024.

1. Background

1.1 St Pancras Catholic Primary School (“St Pancras”) is a voluntary aided (VA) school located in Lewes. It has a Published Admission Number (PAN) of 20 and capacity for 140 pupils from Reception to Year 6.

1.2 In March 2023, the governing board of St Pancras, supported by the Diocese of Arundel and Brighton (“the diocese”), resolved to consult on a proposal to discontinue (close) the school with effect from 31 August 2024. In a letter to parents and carers early in Term 5 of the 2022/23 academic year, the governing board stated:

“In the last few years, we have met an ever-increasing challenge. A declining birth rate in East Sussex has resulted in a significant and continuing surplus of places in Lewes, with our school, already smaller than average, being negatively affected. Our admission intakes have been falling, and with that, inevitably, the associated funding which is completely dependent on the number of children on roll. Whilst the support of the Diocese of Arundel & Brighton has been valuable in maintaining the site, the school is a state-funded school, and must remain financially viable on the basis of the amount of money that is received from the Government. We are advised that population projections for the short and medium term do not look more promising.

This severe reduction in numbers has meant that the school has been struggling to meet pupils’ needs. Faced by the prospect of being financially non-viable, last year we reduced the number of classes - and we want to record our thanks to all staff for the huge amount of effort and ingenuity they invested, to make this transition work for the children. However, numbers on roll have fallen more sharply, and we find that we are unable to sustain this financially without taking further action that would very seriously compromise the quality of education”.

1.3 The governing board and the diocese have become increasingly concerned about the future viability of St Pancras. In each of the last eight years, the number of families expressing a first preference for a place at the school have fallen below the school’s PAN of 20 which has impacted on the number of children on roll at the school.

Table 1: Historical first preference data for St Pancras Catholic Primary School

First preferences	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24
St Pancras Catholic Primary School	11	10	12	15	19	15	9	10

Source: East Sussex County Council school admissions data

1.4 At the May 2023 School Census, St Pancras had 105 children on roll, with 35 (25%) surplus places. At the time of writing, numbers on roll had fallen to 35, with 105 (75%) surplus places. The governing board acknowledged that consultation on school closure would cause uncertainty within the school community and contribute to a reduction in pupil numbers at the school.

1.5 The governing board is concerned that low pupil numbers make it difficult for the school to be financially viable and to regularly have good outcomes for pupils. St Pancras was rated as good by Ofsted in 2013 and 2018. The school was inspected by Ofsted on 14 March 2023. The outcome states: *“There has been no change to this school’s overall judgement of good as a result of this ungraded (section 8) inspection. However, the evidence gathered suggests that the inspection grade might not be as high if a graded (section 5) inspection were carried out now. The next inspection will therefore be a graded inspection.”* The governing board believes the school’s capacity to address the areas for improvement outlined in the report would be severely limited by its low pupil numbers and the subsequent impact on the budget. As a result, the governing board believes the school would not be able to operate effectively, nor crucially, provide the quality of education to which the pupils are entitled.

2. Statutory closure process

2.1 In accordance with Section 15 of the Education and Inspections Act 2006 (“the EIA 2006”), as amended by the Education Act 2011, and the School Organisation (Establishment and Discontinuance of Schools) (England) Regulations 2013 (“the Regulations”), the governing board of a VA school may publish proposals to close its own school. East Sussex County Council, as the local authority, is the decision maker for school closure proposals.

2.2 As set out in the Regulations, the reasons for closing a maintained school include, but are not limited to, where:

- there are surplus places elsewhere in the local area which can accommodate displaced pupils and there is no predicted demand for the school in the medium to long term;
- it is to be amalgamated with another school;
- it has been judged inadequate by Ofsted and the Secretary of State has revoked the academy order;
- it is no longer considered viable;
- it is being replaced by a new school.

2.3 The governing board has identified St Pancras as being at risk of closure due to the surplus places in the school and the wider area, and its anticipated limited capacity to address the areas for improvement outlined in the Ofsted judgement in March 2023. For these reasons the governing board and the diocese consider St Pancras to no longer be viable.

2.4 In accordance with the EIA 2006 and the Regulations, the governing board consulted with its school community and key stakeholders between 15 May and 3 July 2023. A copy of the consultation document can be viewed in the Cabinet and Members’ rooms at County Hall. Consultation meetings were held for staff and parents and carers on 22 May 2023, which the local authority attended. The school also undertook a pupil voice activity to understand how children at St Pancras felt about the proposal.

2.5 By the end of the consultation period, the governing board had received 25 responses from 23 families at the school (including one anonymous response) via the school’s consultation website. Of the responses, 14 (56%) agreed with the proposal and 11 (44%) did not. 22 responses were received from 21 parishioners (one parishioner responded twice) and one response was received from an interested party by email. Concerns identified by respondents include, but are not limited to, the impact on children at the school and the arrangements for finding places at alternative schools, the loss of Catholic education provision in the area and the number of new homes being built in Lewes. These concerns are addressed later in the report. A summary of all the responses received, and the feedback from the pupil voice activity, are available to view in the Cabinet and Members’ rooms at County Hall.

2.6 The governing board met on 11 July 2023 to consider the consultation responses and determine next steps. Governors resolved, by a majority vote, to proceed with the closure process by publishing a statutory proposal. A statutory proposal was published on the school’s website on 8 September 2023 and sent to stakeholders in accordance with the Regulations. A brief notice containing the website address of the full proposal and details on how interested parties could object to, or comment on, the proposal, was published in the Sussex Express and posted on the gates to the school’s premises. A copy of the statutory proposal can be viewed in the Cabinet and Members’ rooms at County Hall.

2.7 By the end of the representation period on 6 October 2023, five responses had been received, raising comments and concerns about the proposal and, in one case, questioning the consultation process. The responses are available to view in the Cabinet and Members' rooms at County Hall.

2.8 In accordance with the EIA 2006 and the Regulations, the local authority, as the responsible body, is required to determine the statutory proposal within two months of the end of the representation period. In doing so, the Lead Member, as decision maker, must give due regard to the factors set out in the following sections.

3. Pupil numbers and admissions

3.1 As referenced in 1.1 above, St Pancras has a PAN of 20 and capacity for 140 pupils from Reception to Year 6 (ages 4-11). It is a co-educational school for boys and girls. As a VA school, the governing board is the admissions authority for the school, with responsibility for determining its admissions arrangements.

3.2 At the May 2023 School Census, St Pancras had 105 children on roll. There were 35 (25%) surplus places.

Table 2: Pupil numbers at St Pancras Catholic Primary School, May 2023

Pupil numbers and surplus places	PAN	Capacity	2022/23 NOR								Surplus places	% Surplus places
			Year R	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4	Year 5	Year 6	Total		
St Pancras Catholic Primary School	20	140	11	13	18	15	16	17	15	105	33	25%

Source: May 2023 School Census

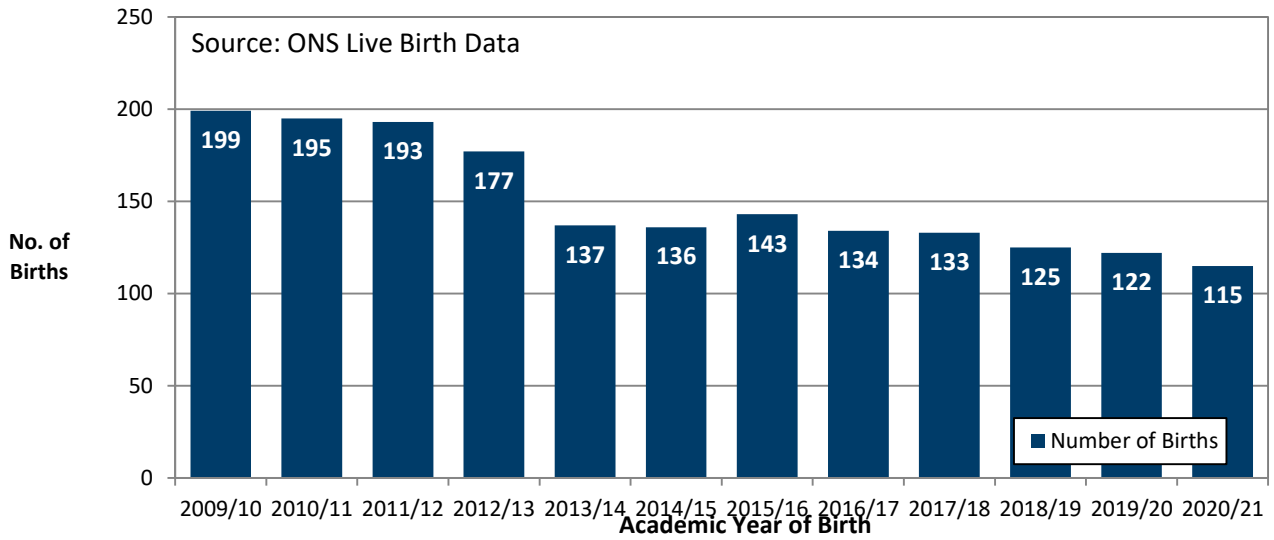
3.3 In the period since the governing board launched its closure consultation in May 2023, the number on roll at St Pancras has fallen noticeably. At the time of writing, there were 35 children on roll, with 105 (75%) surplus places.

3.4 At full capacity, St Pancras would be expected to organise across five classes. During the 2022/23 academic year, the school organised across four classes. Due to the noticeable fall in pupil numbers, the school moved to a three-class organisation from 1 September 2023.

4. Demand for places and displaced pupils

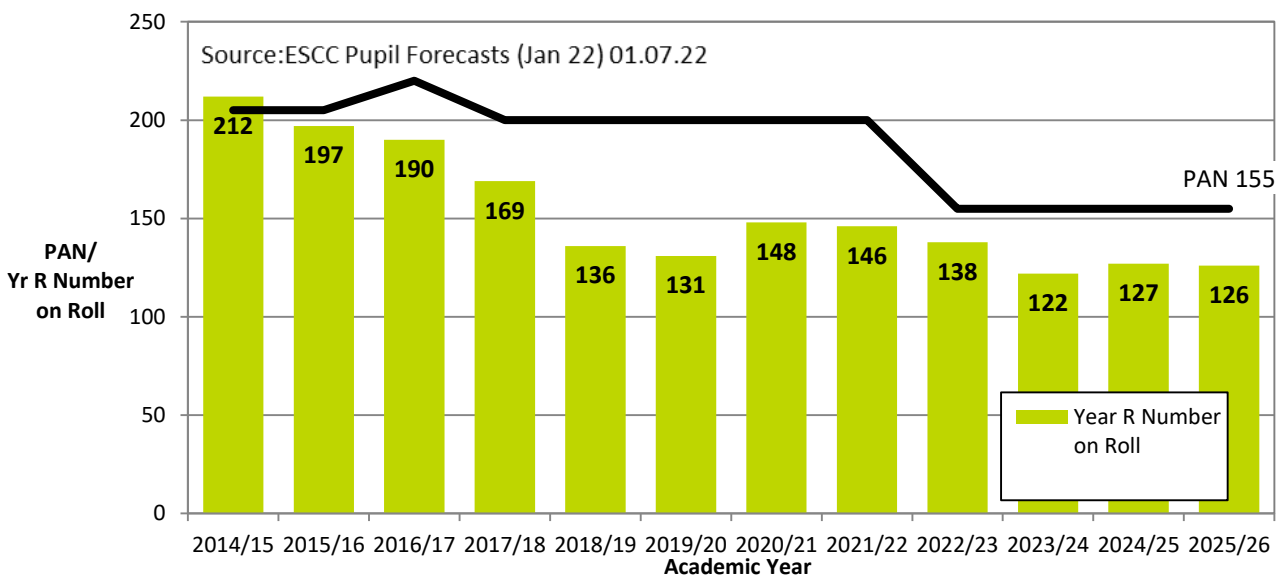
4.1 As described in the [School Organisation Plan 2022 to 2026](#), births in Lewes continue to fall and have been particularly low since 2013/14.

Table 3: Lewes births



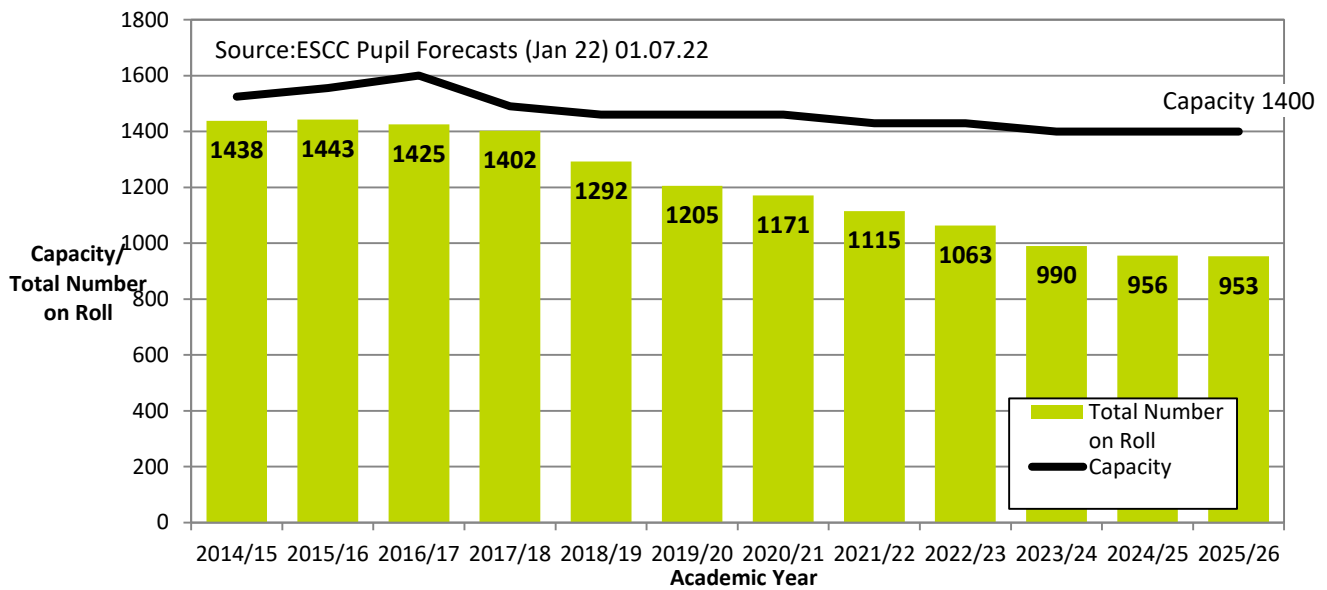
4.2 Based on birth and GP registration data, we expect Reception intakes in the town to remain low until at least 2025/26.

Table 4: Lewes Primary Reception numbers



4.3 Lower intakes are leading to higher numbers of surplus places in the town, potentially rising to 32% by 2025/26. Three schools in the area have 25% or more surplus places.

Table 5: Lewes total primary numbers



4.4 The local authority has undertaken an assessment of capacity in local schools using pupil number returns submitted by schools to the local authority in October 2023. This has enabled the local authority to assess the capacity of schools in the area to accommodate children displaced from St Pancras in the event that it should close on 31 August 2024. For the purposes of the analysis, the current year group cohorts (including those at St Pancras) have been rolled forward one year to assess the likely position in September 2024. The current Year 6 cohort, which will move on to secondary education in the 2024/25 academic year, has been replaced by the Reception intake forecast in table 4 above.

Table 6: Primary capacity and predicted numbers on roll 2024/25

Lewes 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 of schools excluding St Pancras	135	135	135	165	135	135	165	1,005
Year group NOR including St Pancras	127	128	137	149	145	141	130	957
Difference	8	7	-2	16	-10	-6	35	

Source: School number returns October 2023 rolled forward one year. Reception forecast taken from table 4. Lewes schools: South Malling CE Primary School, Southover CE Primary School, Wallands Community Primary School, Western Road Community Primary School.

4.5 As can be seen, there are forecast to be sufficient places in Reception and Years 1, 3 and 6, but insufficient places in Years 2, 4 and 5.

4.6 The majority of children that have left St Pancras in recent months have found places at either Wallands Community School or Southover CE Primary School. Of the 27 children currently on roll at St Pancras between Reception and Year 5, 23 are resident in Lewes.

4.7 As a result of falling Reception numbers and reduced demand for places at both schools, the local authority approved a reduction in the PAN at Southover CE Primary School (from 60 to 45) and Wallands Community Primary School (from 60 to 30) from the 2022/23 academic year. Accommodation was not removed from either school and can be brought back into use if required. In the event that St Pancras closes on 31 August 2024, it would be the local authority's intention to work with both schools to open additional capacity for September 2024, should it be necessary, to ensure there are sufficient places in the remaining Lewes schools for every child that wants a place.

4.8 In the event that St Pancras was to close, surplus capacity in the area would reduce to around 24% by 2025/26, based on table 5 above. This would still be significantly more than was recommended by the National Audit Office report on Capital Funding for new school places published in 2013, where it states:

“It is considered that on average 5 per cent was the bare minimum needed for authorities to meet their statutory duty with operational flexibility, while enabling parents to have some choice of schools”.

4.9 For those families who live outside Lewes and would like a place nearer to their home address, there are currently spaces available in their local schools.

4.10 In the event that a decision is taken to close St Pancras, parents and carers of children at the school would be asked 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 their child's home where a place is available. The local authority 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](#).

5. Impact on staff

5.1 The proposal also affects members of staff at the school. In the event that a decision is taken for the school to close, a formal consultation would begin with all members of staff, teaching and non-teaching, and trade union representatives in line with the local authority's Managing Change Policy. The local authority would work alongside the school to ensure that all of the procedures for managing the change process outlined in the policy are followed. All staff would be entitled to be considered for redeployment to a suitable alternative post within the local authority for centrally managed roles. For school based advertised vacancies, the local authority would liaise with East Sussex maintained schools regarding the availability of staff at risk of redundancy from 31 August 2024, to seek the agreement of a school with a suitable vacancy to participate in the redeployment process in order to fill the vacancy.

6. Impact on the community

6.1 It is recognised that if the proposal went ahead the closure of St Pancras would result in the loss of a community provision in the area. However, there would continue to be sufficient places in alternative schools.

6.2 In the event that St Pancras closes, surplus places in the area would reduce, thereby strengthening pupil numbers and the viability of other schools. All pupils would have continued access to good local provision; all other schools in Lewes have an Ofsted rating of Good.

6.3 Concern was raised by some respondents about the pressure that new housing developments in Lewes will create on schools and that it would be short-sighted to close St Pancras. The local authority's pupil forecasts take account of housing growth based on information provided annually by local planning authorities. As described above, there would still be significant surplus capacity in Lewes to meet demand generated from new housing developments in the town, with spare accommodation able to be brought back in to use at Southover CE Primary School and Wallands Community Primary School should that be required.

6.4 An external agency currently uses the St Pancras premises to run a holiday club. The school also rents out space to some private sports and dance clubs. There are a number of alternative facilities available for hire at other locations locally, meaning there would be little or no loss of enrichment clubs or programmes for local families in the community.

6.5 In any community, the loss of a school, organisation or business would undoubtedly have an impact. Good schools engage parents in their children's education and reach out to the wider community for support, as well as providing community facilities. However, these must be considered as additional benefits to the main duty of a school which is to provide a quality education to its children. Numbers on roll, financial position and quality of education must be the considerations in any decision on the future of a school and, while a community may be impacted by a decision to close, this cannot be the overriding factor.

7. Rural primary schools

7.1 St Pancras is not designated as a rural primary school under the Department for Education's Designation of Rural Primary Schools (England) Order 2022. Therefore, the presumption against the closure of rural primary schools does not apply in this instance.

8. Balance of denominational provision

8.1 Currently in Lewes, there are 770 denominational school places in three schools and 630 non-denominational places in two schools. In the event that St Pancras closes, the number of denominational places in the town would reduce to 630 in two schools. There is a mix of denominational and non-denominational schools in the surrounding area to Lewes. All non-denominational state funded schools in England must provide collective worship of "a broadly Christian character".

8.2 There are currently seven Catholic primary schools in East Sussex. As set out in 9.1 below, although not in the immediate vicinity, there are alternative Catholic primary schools between seven and 11 miles away in East Sussex and across the border in Brighton and Hove.

8.3 Data provided by the diocese indicates that the average number of Catholic children admitted to Reception at St Pancras in the last five years is three per year. In May 2023, 23 of the 90 children on roll (26%) at St Pancras between Reception and Year 5 were Catholic (note: the number of Catholic children in the then Year 6 have not been included as they left the school in July 2023).

8.4 Since May 2023, a large proportion of the Catholic children have secured places in other schools, meaning that at the time of writing there are fewer than five Catholic children on roll at the school. It is acknowledged that there may be a small number of children whose families want them to attend a local Catholic school. However, weighted against the quality of education that St Pancras would be able to provide going forward it is considered not enough of an impediment to reconsider the closure proposal.

9. Special educational needs and disability (SEND)

9.1 There is no designated specialist provision for children with SEND at St Pancras. Data for the school at the May 2023 School Census, showed that the percentage of SEND pupils identified by the school was 30.5% (32 out of 105), including those with an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP), of which there were fewer than five. In comparison, the East Sussex average for SEND pupils in primary schools was 17.1%. The percentage of pupils at St Pancras with an EHCP was below the East Sussex average.

9.2 All schools have the same duties under the Equality Act 2010 and the Children and Families Act 2014 to identify and provide for pupils with SEND. As the barriers to learning that a child with SEND might experience change over time, the local authority expects provision at a school to adapt and change alongside these developments.

9.3 In the event that St Pancras closes, the transition to new schools for the children would be managed very carefully with additional support to meet the identified needs of the children. The local authority recognises the additional challenges for staff, children, particularly those with SEND, and their families. It also recognises the potential impact on an individual's mental health and wellbeing. For this reason, a team of professionals from the local authority (including the Education Psychology Service, SEN Practice and Standards and the Mental Health Support Team) have offered support to the school and would continue to provide help to staff, children and families in the period to 31 August 2024.

10. Travel

10.1 The distance from St Pancras to local schools is set out below. These are measured by the shortest available route in each case.

Table 7: Distances from St Pancras Catholic Primary School

School	Distance (miles)
Lewes schools	
South Malling CE Primary School	1.29
Southover CE Primary School	0.49
Wallands Community Primary School	0.47
Western Road Community Primary School	0.49
Surrounding rural schools	
Iford and Kingston CE Primary School	1.95
Hamsey Community Primary School	2.37
Firle CE Primary School	4.86
Catholic primary schools	
Anney Catholic Primary School, Seaford	11.02
St Philip's Catholic Primary School, Uckfield	8.55
Our Lady of Lourdes RC School, Brighton	8.11
St Joseph's Catholic Primary School, Brighton	7.10

Source: East Sussex admissions database

10.2 As can be seen, all Lewes schools are within statutory walking distance from St Pancras. Distances to the closest surrounding rural schools and alternative Catholic schools varies. Most of these schools are well served by public transport.

10.3 Free home to school transport would be provided for eligible pupils who meet the criteria set out in the local authority's school transport [policy](#).

11. Maintained nursery school

11.1 St Pancras does not have a maintained nursery; therefore, no consideration should be given to this factor.

12. Sixth form provision

12.1 As a primary school, there is no sixth form provision at St Pancras. Therefore, no consideration should be given to this factor.

13. Alternatives to closure

13.1 Prior to taking the decision to consult on closure, the governing board and the Diocese considered alternatives to closure, including federation and academisation. However, neither of these alternatives were deemed viable options. There were no local workable options for federation due to geography and, as set out in the original consultation document, the declining pupil numbers and impact on the budget make school the school less viable and affects its ability to join a multi academy trust.

14. Equality Impact Assessment

14.1 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) has been undertaken to identify any equality implications of the proposal and to address any concerns through appropriate mitigations. The local authority considers the proposal to be a proportionate response to the issues that have arisen at St Pancras and is appropriate on the basis of concerns about the long-term viability of the school. It considers that all children impacted by the proposal, including those with protected characteristics, would be enabled to receive a good quality of education at an alternative school. All other schools in Lewes have an Ofsted rating of 'Good'. The local authority would work with local schools to put in place effective transition arrangements for all children.

14.2 The local authority does not consider that any other groups who share the protected characteristics, including any parents and carers or members of the local community who use the school, should be more affected by the proposal than any other. All potential impacts have been assessed and

appropriate mitigations set out in the EqIA. The EqIA is available to view in the Cabinet and Members' rooms at County Hall.

15. Conclusion and reasons for recommendations

15.1 A small majority of families at the school who responded to the governing board's consultation (56%) support the proposal to close St Pancras. Parishioners and other interested parties are generally opposed to the proposal. Five responses were received during the representation period following the publication of the statutory proposal, raising comments and concerns about the proposal.

15.2 While recognising the nature of objections to the proposal, the local authority believes the case for the closure of St Pancras is strong for the following reasons.

- Due to the surplus places in the area, the school has struggled for a number of years to be full.
- Surplus places in Lewes remain high. The local authority is confident there would be sufficient school places available in the area for children displaced from St Pancras on 31 August 2024. Pupil forecasts indicate that the situation in the area is unlikely to change markedly in the coming years.
- The low pupil numbers, and the impact on the budget, limit the school's capacity to improve the quality of education that it can provide.
- The governing board and the diocese have brought forward the proposal and are supportive of closure.

15.3 Having carefully considered the feedback received during the initial consultation and the subsequent representation period, the local authority has concluded that St Pancras can no longer be considered viable.

15.4 The Regulations set out the options the decision-maker has when making a decision on a closure proposal. The decision-maker can:

- reject the proposal;
- approve the proposal without modification;
- approve the proposal with such modifications as they think desirable; or
- approve the proposal, with or without modification, as specified in regulation 16 of the Establishment and Discontinuance Regulations.

15.5 For the reasons set out in the report, the Lead Member is recommended to approve the closure of St Pancras Catholic Primary School on 31 August 2024 without modifications or conditions to the closure proposal.

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LOCAL MEMBERS

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