

## **Delegated Decision**

**6 November 2023**

**Proposal to close Rookhope Primary School on 31 August 2024**

**Key Decision No. CYPS/02/2024**



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## **Report of John Pearce, Corporate Director of Children and Young People's Services.**

### **Electoral division(s) affected:**

Weardale.

### **Purpose of the Report**

- 1 To provide details on the outcome of consultation which was undertaken between 18 September 2023 and 29 October 2023 proposing to close Rookhope Primary School on 31 August 2024; and to seek approval to move to the next stage in the process which is to issue a statutory notice.

### **Executive summary**

- 2 In a report dated 21 August 2023, the Corporate Director of Children and Young People's Services used delegated powers to agree that consultation could commence on a proposal to close Rookhope Primary School on 31 August 2024. This followed a report dated 2 August 2023, which provided relevant background information on Rookhope Primary school, to enable a full understanding of possible options for the future provision of education in Upper Weardale.
- 3 Consultation was carried out between 18 September and 29 October 2023 with Governors, staff, parents, and the wider community.
- 4 Responses were received via email, paper-based forms and the online response form on the DCC website.
- 5 The majority of respondents supported the proposal and expressed the view that it is not financially viable for Rookhope Primary School to remain open. Rookhope School federated with Wearhead and St. John's Chapel Schools, Forest of Teesdale Primary Schools prior to

that school closing on 31 August 2022. More recently, Hamsterley Primary School has joined the Federation.

- 6 The five pupils on roll at Rookhope Primary School are currently being educated at St. John's Chapel Primary School. This has provided a more effective education and enabled children to socialise in bigger groups. With there being little possibility of pupil rolls in the area traditionally served by Rookhope Primary School, there is no option other than to close the school.
- 7 Those who did not support the proposal expressed concerns that the loss of provision in a remote rural area could be the beginning of more small rural schools closing and that parents should be encouraged to send their children to Rookhope Primary School to boost the numbers.

### **Recommendation(s)**

- 8 The majority of responses (77.2%) support the proposal, and those respondents who do not support it have not suggested alternative practicable solutions. The exceptionally low numbers and resulting financial implications make the option of retaining Rookhope Primary School unsustainable.
- 9 Respondents opposed to the proposal did not provide evidence of sustainable numbers or alternative viable options.
- 10 Therefore, the Corporate Director, Children and Young People's Services is recommended to give approval for officers to issue a statutory notice proposing to close Rookhope Primary School on 31 August 2024.

### **Background**

- 11 Rookhope Primary School, set in the rural community of Upper Weardale, has the lowest pupil numbers of any Durham school and serves the least populated part of the county. From 1 September 2023, there were 5 children on roll and those pupils are being taught at St. John's Chapel Primary School. The breadth of curriculum and the opportunity for social development of pupils at Rookhope Primary School will be enhanced by them being educated at St. John's Chapel Primary School. All of the children involved in this move have spent significant curriculum time with other pupils across the Federation, in St. John's Chapel Primary School. This was necessary to support effective teaching from September 2021
- 12 No preferences were expressed for a place in Reception in September 2022 or September 2023. There is no anticipated development in this part of the county that will bring about an increase to these numbers.

- 13 The most recent Ofsted inspection (date 18/10/2017) judged the school to be 'Good'. That report however did draw attention to the fact that those pupils with lower starting points did not make as much progress as their peers and that improving the quality of learning in early years remains a focus so that children are challenged to reach their full potential in all areas of the early years' curriculum.
- 14 A decision was made to enrich and widen the curriculum for pupils at the school in collaboration with other small primary schools in the upper dales including Wearhead, St John's Chapel and Forest of Teesdale Primary schools. The most recent Ofsted inspection (date 27 March 2019) judged St. John's Chapel Primary School to be 'Good' and the most recent Ofsted inspection for Wearhead Primary School (date 11 September 2019) judged the school to be 'Good'.
- 15 This group of schools became a formal Federation from September 2019 all keeping their own individual URN numbers but federating under one governing body.
- 16 An Executive Headteacher Post was created with leadership oversight across all of the schools with all school sites used to facilitate different parts of the curriculum.
- 17 Forest of Teesdale Primary School closed on 31 August 2022 due to the fact that only one pupil was on roll at the time and the school was becoming unviable. However, the Federation now also includes Hamsterley Primary School, therefore the proposed closure of Rookhope Primary School would mean that 3 schools remained in the Federation.
- 18 In a report dated 2 August 2023, relevant background information on Rookhope Primary school was provided to enable a full understanding of possible options for the future provision of education in Upper Weardale and to note that the Corporate Director of Children and Young People's Services would be requested to use delegated powers to agree consultation be undertaken on a proposal to close the school on 31 August 2024.
- 19 Consultation documents were distributed widely to relevant stakeholders. A meeting with the Governors of the Durham Dales Federation was held on 2 October 2023. A live event was held over Microsoft Teams on 5 October for parents, the wider community and other stakeholders to hear the proposal explained by senior council officers and for them to ask questions and express views.

## **Issues raised at the Consultation Meetings**

- 20 At the meeting with Governors of the Durham Dales Federation held on 2 October 2023, officers explained the reasons for the proposal and invited those present to express views and ask questions. Nobody attended the Live Event arranged for 5 October 2023. The key issues discussed at the meeting with the Federated Governing Body can be summarised as follows:
- (a) The Durham Dales Federation did not object to the proposal to close Rookhope Primary School as they agreed that a school with only five pupils on roll could not be sustainable for the long term. The five pupils on roll who are being educated at St. John's Chapel Primary School with other children have developed both educationally and socially and are happy in that school.
  - (b) Governors asked if there were negative implications for teaching only five pupils. It was explained that teaching only five pupils does not provide them with sufficient stimulation and is isolating for staff as well as children.
  - (c) Governors were concerned as to the future of the building and asked what would happen to it should the school close, for example could it be stipulated that it could only be used for education-type purposes. Officers explained that the Local Member was exploring options for businesses to be located in the building. The council don't want to see the building demolished as we know it is important to the village. We would all like to see the building used and Councillor Shuttleworth is working hard to engage interest.
  - (d) Governors asked what would happen if there was strong public opinion against the proposal to close the school. Officers explained that responses would need to provide educational arguments that closing the school was not in the best interests of children and their families. The fact that people may express displeasure would not be a reason in itself not to proceed with the proposal

## **Responses to the consultation**

- 21 The following information provides a summary of the 22 responses received to the consultation in writing or using the online response form:
- 22 10 respondents strongly disagree with the proposal, 3 respondents disagree with it, 8 respondents, including the Federated Governing Body strongly agree with it, and 1 neither agrees nor disagrees with it.

- (a) Some respondents who strongly disagreed with the proposal were of the view that the Council should have promoted the school more to attract pupils as it is in a picturesque location, the building for its age is immaculate and in excellent state of repair. Closing the school will take the heart out of Rookhope. It will affect the children, it will affect the families, it will stop new families coming into the area. Those without private transport will have difficulty going to another school because the transport infrastructure to the village is so poor!
- (b) Some respondents who strongly disagreed with the proposal expressed the view that affordable housing should be built in the area and jobs created to attract families which in turn will increase pupil numbers. There is a danger that Rookhope will become a holiday home village.
- (c) Some respondents felt that closure of the school can only result in a requirement for additional vehicle movements, which, in a rural area such as this, will almost certainly be conducted via ICE vehicles, contributing to climate change. This is negative not only locally, but globally.
- (d) Some respondents who disagreed with the proposal queried whether the school building could have dual purpose, part of it as a school and the rest for other uses such as rooms for hire, community cafe or other such community activities.
- (e) The Durham Dales Federated Governing Body strongly agree with the proposal. The Governors are very clear that this is an emotive issue and acknowledge that it is never an easy decision to close a school in any area, let alone a rural setting. They have also examined the consultation document, and this clearly indicates that future admissions to Rookhope Primary School are very unlikely. The existing arrangement with children attending St John's Chapel Primary School is providing a far more positive educational experience than attending Rookhope with just 5 children in attendance, mostly in different year groups. Keeping Rookhope Primary School open and returning children to this school environment would be a negative experience for them and could have a potential negative impact on the finances of the Durham Dales federation. Taking account of the added breadth of curriculum and positive social experience of these young people attending at St. John's Chapel rather than at Rookhope Primary School, acknowledging that free school transport has been provided to lessen impact upon parents and carers, and noting that there is no indication of any admissions to Rookhope Primary

School over the coming years, the Governing Body support the closure of Rookhope Primary School.

- (f) Some respondents who strongly agreed with the proposal felt that the proposal was the correct one due to low pupil numbers and financial viability.
- (g) Some respondents who strongly agreed with the proposal expressed the view that it is likely to positively impact the educational experience of the children affected.

## **Conclusion**

- 23 There was a relatively limited response to the consultation which is not unexpected given the isolated rural location and community that Rookhope Primary School serves.
- 24 Those respondents who either strongly disagree or disagree with the proposal are of the view that Rookhope Primary School should remain open to ensure that the heart is not ripped out of the village, carbon emissions do not increase and that more should be done to promote the village and the school so that pupil numbers will increase.
- 25 The key objective of the proposal is to improve educational outcomes for pupils in the area which have been negatively impacted by the extremely small number of children on roll at the school. This is affecting its ability to offer an effective education and also impacting on the financial viability of the school. The proposal to close the school supports the objective of the Council Plan that young people will have access to good quality education, training, and employment. Improving educational attainment is a key factor in children and young people gaining access to more and better jobs. This in turn benefits the economy in general as well as the individual. The proposal to close Rookhope Primary School on 31 August 2024 and for children in that area to be educated in a larger school that allows for more social interaction and which provides a broader education will provide a sustainable model to improve education outcomes in the area.
- 26 The data clearly indicates that Rookhope Primary School will not attract sufficient pupil numbers for it to be viable. There is no planned development in the area and retaining a school to serve a pupil roll of 5 with little likelihood of this number increasing is both unnecessary and an inefficient use of resources.
- 27 The Council has a statutory duty to ensure that there are sufficient school places in the right locations to meet demand. It is responsible for promoting a good supply of strong schools through planning, organising, and commissioning places in a way that raises attainment,

increases diversity, encourages collaboration between schools and promotes community cohesion. Officers believe that educational improvement and community cohesion can most effectively be brought about by closing Rookhope Primary School on 31 August 2024.

- 28 Officers believe this recommendation provides the best future option for the children and families of and Upper Weardale based on educational outcomes, pupil numbers, and sustainable finances.
- 29 The consultation responses did not bring forward any new options for consideration or provide evidence that retaining Rookhope Primary School was possible or sustainable.

### **Background papers**

- Report– 2 August 2023

### **Other useful documents**

- Consultation document

### **Author(s)**

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## **Appendix 1: Implications**

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### **Legal Implications**

The actions described in this report are intended to comply with the council's duty to exercise its functions with a view to promoting high standards and the fulfilment of each pupil's learning potential in accordance with S13A of the Education Act 1996.

### **Finance**

Schools are funded through the Dedicated Schools Grant, using a formula to determine allocations to schools. The closure of this school would not create savings for the council and would not result in a significant change in funding for other schools. The pupil-led element of formula funding that would otherwise be allocated to Rookhope would be allocated to the schools to which the pupils were admitted following closure.

The closure of Rookhope Primary School will enable pupils to be educated in a larger and financially more viable school rather than in a very small school that is offering a limited curriculum.

There may be costs associated with any redundancies.

### **Consultation**

The Cabinet Portfolio Holder for Children and Young People's Services and Local Members have been consulted about moving to the next stage in the process and have agreed that the Corporate Director, Children and Young People's Services uses delegated powers to approve that a statutory notice can be issued.

### **Equality and Diversity / Public Sector Equality Duty**

Although doing nothing and leaving the school as it is may initially be favoured by parents who tend to view the closure of any school in a negative manner, the fact is that because of its very small size it is likely to become unviable in the future if action is not taken in a planned way.

The proposal to close Rookhope Primary School is expected to bring about educational improvement for children by them being educated in a larger, more sustainable school in Upper Weardale.

The focus on improved education outcomes is seen as a positive experience in a child's education and ensures that children who are protected under the Equality and Diversity/Public Sector Equality Duty can maximise their potential.

The main groups affected are children attending Rookhope Primary School, their families and staff. An Equality Impact Assessment is attached as Appendix 2.



## **Climate Change**

The recommendation of this report involves increased use of transport from Rookhope to St. John's Chapel.

## **Human Rights**

Human rights are not affected by the recommendation in this report.

## **Crime and Disorder**

None

## **Staffing**

Some staff employed by the 3 schools in the Upper Weardale Federation are on temporary contracts which enables any staffing adjustments deemed necessary to be made by not extending temporary contracts.

## **Accommodation**

Should Rookhope Primary School close, the building will be declared surplus to CYPS requirements and be part of the council's disposal of buildings programme. Prior to the school closing, there may be issues with water ingress from the roof. Any work required to resolve this will come from the council's School Capital allocation.

## **Risk**

A key risk is that as a consequence of actions taken by the County Council (including the failure to make timely interventions), pupils and students do not receive an adequate education. There is an additional risk of reputational damage if the council does not appear to be able to resolve the problem of schools operating with significant and sometimes increasing budgetary difficulties and allows some schools to set deficit budgets whilst requiring other schools to balance their budgets.

## **Procurement**

N/A