

CABINET

Date: 8 February 2018

Proposal for Consultation on closure of Netherton Northside First School

Report of Cath McEvoy, Executive Director of Children's Services

Cabinet Member: Councillor Wayne Daley, Children's Services

Report prepared by Andy Johnson, Director of Education and Skills

Purpose of report

This report sets out a request from the Governing Body of Netherton Northside First to carry out consultation on a proposal to close the school with effect from 31 August 2018. A recommendation is set out in this report to request that Cabinet agree to permit consultation on this proposal.

Cabinet may be requested to permit the publication of Statutory Proposal in relation to this proposal at a future date following the outcomes of consultation.

Recommendations

It is recommended that Cabinet:

1. Agree that consultation takes place as requested by the Governing Body of Netherton Northside First School on a proposal to close the school with effect from 31 August 2018.
2. Delegate the decision to undertake further consultation on the proposal, if necessary, to the Executive DCS in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Children's Services;
3. Note that a further report following consultation would be submitted to a meeting of the Cabinet at which a decision on whether or not to issue a Statutory Proposal in relation to the proposal set out at Recommendation 1 above would be made.
4. Note that Netherton Northside First School is listed on the Designation of Rural Primary Schools (England) Order 2016 and therefore if Cabinet decided to approve the publication of a statutory proposal at a future date,

when formulating any following final decision, consideration would have to be given to the points set out in paragraph 14 of this report.

Key issues

1. Netherton Northside First School is a very small, rural school within the Morpeth Partnership of schools. The school has had falling pupil numbers for some time and has been surviving on the edge of viability. There are currently 3 pupils on roll at the school.
2. If Cabinet agrees to the requested consultation, a document would be made available to all relevant statutory stakeholders and interested parties for a period of 6 weeks (excluding school holidays). Council Officers and the Governing Body would hold meetings and a consultation event for staff, Governors, parents and pupils linked with the school and relevant other parties who may be impacted by the proposals who may have an interest during the consultation period.
3. If, as a result of consultation, it is felt necessary to consult on any modifications, the Executive DCS in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Children's Services would decide on the content and form of any further consultation on the proposal. The outcome of any further consultation would then be reported to a Cabinet meeting where, subject to a preferred model being recommended, a decision would then be made as to whether or not to progress to the issuing of a Statutory Proposal, taking into account the outcomes of the consultation.

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Proposal for Consultation on closure of Netherton Northside First School

Background

1. Netherton Northside First School is a very small, rural school within the Morpeth Partnership of schools. The school has had falling pupil numbers for some time and has been surviving on the edge of viability.
2. The Governing Body approached the Council in early 2017 to discuss the possibility of closure of the school; there were 8 children on roll at the school at that time, including children in Reception. However, it was agreed not to proceed with a proposal to close the school at that point. Since that time, numbers on roll at Netherton have steadily fallen, with 5 on roll in September 2017 and no children joining the school in Reception. In January 2018, there were 3 children on roll, 1 in Year 4 and 2 in Year 3 and therefore no children in the lower end of the school; as the Year 4 child will transfer to a middle or primary school according to parental preference in September 2018, there is a possibility there may be only 2 children on roll at that time. There is one prospective child in the catchment who could join the school in Reception in the future, but that would not occur until September 2019. Table 1 below shows the pattern of attendance at the school in the last 5 academic years

Table 1

Netherton Northside First School	Pupils Attending Jan 2018	Pupils Attending Sep 2017	Pupils Attending Sep 2016	Pupils Attending Sep 2015	Pupils Attending Sep 2014	Pupils Attending Sep 2013
Y0	0	0	2	1	3	0
Y1	0	1	0	3	0	1
Y2	0	0	2	0	2	2
Y3	2	2	0	2	2	1
Y4	1	2	2	3	1	2
TOTAL	3	5	6	9	8	6

3. In order to attract additional pupils to the school, over the last 2 years the Headteacher and Governing Body have carried out the following activities to attract additional pupils:
 - Placement of articles in the local Coquet valley magazine 'Over the Bridges' on several occasions;
 - Adverts in the Northumberland Gazette to highlight the school's Ofsted success;
 - Open morning in December 2016 – although this event was well attended, it was by people already connected with the school, with very few people attending who were not already involved with the school;
 - Relaunch of toddler group 'Bumps, Babies and Beyond' at Easter 2017 – again this group was quite well attended for the first 6 months, but attendance has since fallen away.

In summary, all of the above activities have not resulted in additional parents enrolling their children with the school. Furthermore, with fewer children also being born in the catchment areas of neighbouring small schools, e.g. Thropton Village First School and Harbottle CE First School, parents have a wide choice of

schools from which to choose. However, fluctuations in popularity can have a significant impact on small schools which makes it difficult for them to remain viable for a sustained period.

4. There are currently no issues with standards at the school. The school was judged to be good in November 2011 and this rating was maintained at an Ofsted short inspection in February 2017. However, in light of the school's reducing budget, the Governing Body now believe that with so few children on roll, and with little prospect of numbers increasing significantly in the near future, it will become increasingly difficult to sustain the broad and balanced curriculum required by the National Curriculum. Therefore, the Governing Body believes it would be in the best educational interests of the pupils to consult on a proposal to close the school with effect from 31 August 2018.

Consultation

5. If approved, the consultation at this stage would be categorised as 'informal' and would last for six weeks. A consultation document would be made available to all relevant stakeholders, including parents, pupils, and staff. The consultation would focus on a wide range of factors, including:-
 - Reasons and rationale for the various proposals
 - Pupil transition
 - Admissions arrangements
 - The home to school transport, and the travel and car use implications of the proposal
 - SEN/additional needs
 - Staffing issues
 - The Sport and Recreation implications of the proposal.
 - Catchment areas

Consultees would also be asked if they had any alternative suggestions that could be adopted that would address the issues facing the school.

6. Feedback from the informal consultation would be brought back to Cabinet for a decision on whether or not to proceed to the publication of a Statutory Proposal.

Catchment Areas

7. Views on which schools would be most appropriate to receive part or all of the Netherton Northside catchment area would be sought as part of the consultation. In any event, parents would be able to exercise parental preference in relation to alternative schools.

Table 2 below provides data on nearest other local schools within the Morpeth Partnership:

Table 2

School	Number on roll (R-Yr4)	Net Capacity	Surplus Places	Distance from Netherton Northside
Harbottle CE First School	25	37	12	5.9 miles
Thropton Village First School	34	50	16	4.7 miles
Rothbury First School	107	148	41	4.8 miles

SEN Provision

8. There is no specialist SEN provision currently within Netherton Northside and there are no pupils on roll who have an Education and Healthcare Plan.

Early Years Provision

9. Netherton Northside does not have provision for nursery aged children.

Implications for school buildings

10. The buildings of Netherton Northside First School are in the ownership of the Council, while the playing field is held on long term leasehold with a private owner. Any proposals for alternative use of the building and playing fields would be considered as part of the consultation process.

Any proposal to dispose of the school playing fields at any point in the future would be subject to the Government's 'Protection of school playing fields and public land' non-statutory guidance. Furthermore, Sport England is a statutory consultee on all planning applications for development affecting playing field land and it is its policy to oppose any plan that would involve the loss of playing fields unless it meets with one or more of the five exceptions within its "Policy on planning applications for development on playing fields".

The school building is not used by any community groups. Netherton village has a village hall where community activities are generally held.

Timeline for implementation

11. If the proposal to close Netherton Northside was approved at a later date, the timeline for implementation of the closure of the school would be as follows:

Proposed timeline

31 August 2018

- Netherton Northside First School would close.

1 September 2018

- Pupils in Year 4 at the school would transfer into Year 5 as usual to a local middle or primary school according to parental preference.
- Pupils in Years 1 to 3 at the school in August 2018 would transfer to join the cohort of the school or schools designated to be allocated the catchment area of Netherton Northside in September 2018 or to another school providing education in those year groups according to parental preference.

Implications for Staff

12. There would be implications for the staff of Netherton Northside should this proposal be approved at a future date. Detailed discussions with the Governing Body the school and with the Trades Unions would be undertaken about how any adverse implications of the proposals for staff could be minimised.

Transport

13. Transport for pupils affected by the proposals, should they be approved, would be arranged in accordance with the Council's Home to School Transport Policy.

Rural Schools and the presumption against closure

14. Netherton Northside First School is listed as a Rural School within the Department for Education's List of Designated Rural Schools 2016. Therefore, should Cabinet decided to approve the publication of a statutory proposals at a later date, any final decision on a proposal to close the school would need to take into account the DfE's Guidance on rural schools and the presumption against closure, as set out below

DfE Guidance - Rural schools and the presumption against closure

There is a presumption against the closure of rural schools. This does not mean that a rural school will never close, but the case for closure should be strong and the proposal clearly in the best interests of educational provision in the area. Those proposing closure should provide evidence to show that they have carefully considered the following:

- *alternatives to closure including the potential for federation with another local school or conversion to academy status and joining a multi-academy trust or umbrella trust to increase the school's viability;*
- *the transport implications;*

- *the overall and long term impact on local people and the community of closure of the village school and of the loss of the building as a community facility.'*

Sport and Recreation

15. Any potential impact on Sport and Recreation would be discussed as part of the consultation process.

BACKGROUND PAPERS

None

IMPLICATIONS ARISING OUT OF THE REPORT

Policy:	The consultation would be consistent with the Council's policy to review changes to schools in accordance with local wishes and needs.
Finance and value for money	<p>For information purposes, the possible closure of Netherton Northside would result in a saving of £110k in a full year, based on the current formula. This saving would accrue to the Dedicated Schools Grant and be spent on the education of pupils across the whole county.</p> <p>Should Netherton Northside be approved for closure, it may close with a surplus or a deficit depending upon the costs, including redundancy costs which the County Council may need to incur during the period leading up to the proposed closure. Any surplus would accrue to the DSG whilst any deficit would have to be met from either the DSG or other Children's Service's budgets.</p>
Human Resources:	There would be a need to support staff displaced as a result of the proposed reorganisation with redeployment opportunities.
Property	Refer to 'Finance and value for money' above
Equalities	An Equalities Impact Assessment would be carried out concurrently with the consultation process, should it be approved.
Risk Assessment	A full risk assessment would be carried out on the project should consultation be approved.
Carbon Reduction	It is not envisaged that this proposal would have a significant positive or negative impact on carbon reduction.
Crime & Disorder	This report has considered Section 17 (CDA) and the duty it imposes and there are no implications arising from it.
Customer Considerations:	The proposal set out in this report is based upon the request of the Governing Body of Netherton Northside First School on the basis that this proposal is in the best educational interests of the pupils
Consultation	This report has been considered by the Cabinet Member for Children's Services and the Chief Legal Officer.

Wards

Rothbury,

BACKGROUND PAPERS

None

Report sign off

Finance Officer	SD
Monitoring Officer/Legal	LH
Human Resources	n/a
Procurement	n/a
I.T.	n/a
Executive DCS	CM
Portfolio Holder	WD

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