

WIRRAL COUNCIL

CABINET – 25th NOVEMBER 2010

REPORT OF INTERIM DIRECTOR OF CHILDREN'S SERVICES

OUTCOME OF PROPOSAL FOR THE CLOSURE OF COLE STREET PRIMARY SCHOOL

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

At its meeting of 24th June 2010, Cabinet decided that following consultation with governing bodies, staff, parents and other stakeholders, and additional investigations into the possibility of sites for a new school, statutory notices should be published regarding the closure of Cole Street Primary School. Notices were published on 8th September 2010. This report describes the outcome of the subsequent representation period and recommends that the proposal be approved, and that authorisation be given for the proposal to close the school to be implemented.

1.0 Background

- 1.1 The outcome of the consultation was described in the 1st October 2009 report to Cabinet, in section 4.
- 1.2 A consultation meeting was held at Cole Street Primary school on 29th June 2009, and was attended by 52 persons. 13% of pupils on roll at that time were represented at the meeting by at least one parent/carer. A consultation meeting held at Cathcart Street Primary School on 22nd June 2009 was attended by 59 persons. 29% of pupils on roll at that time were represented at the meeting by at least one parent/carer.

In total, 67 written responses to the entire Phase 5 Primary Places Review consultation were received, of which 38 were from persons responding in relation to Cole Street Primary School, and 18 from persons connected to Cathcart Street Primary School.

- 1.3 In January 2009 (the most recent Census at that time) Cole Street Primary School had 124 pupils on roll, and at 41% and 86 surplus places had significantly exceeded the criterion of 25% and 30 surplus places. Cathcart Street Primary School had 101 pupils on roll, and had 109 or 52% surplus places. The combined roll indicated that a single school could serve pupils from both schools at a viable size.
- 1.4 On 1st October 2009 Cabinet agreed that a reduction of one community primary school in the area under review was necessary, but requested a further report on options involving either the retention of the Cathcart Street Primary School site (as recommended), or the establishment of a new build primary school on a new site.
- 1.5 In the January 2010 Census, Cole Street Primary School's roll had fallen to 113 pupils and 46% surplus places, whilst Cathcart Street Primary School's roll was 99 pupils and 53% surplus places. The combined roll was then 212 pupils, spread across two schools with 420 places in total.

1.6 The outcome of the site appraisal was reported to Cabinet on 24th June 2010. The option to build in Birkenhead Park was demonstrated to be highly unlikely to receive approval from English Heritage. Of the two existing school sites, the Cathcart Street site was recommended for retention as a school. Cabinet determined that proposals should be published in respect of the closure of Cole Street Primary School with effect from 31st August 2011.

2.0 Proposal Publication

2.1 On 8th September 2010, proposal notices for the closure of Cole Street Primary School were widely published, including the local press (Wirral Globe), and entrances to the school, Cathcart Street Primary School and Christ Church (CE) Controlled Primary School (Birkenhead). In addition, the notices were posted at the newsagents on the corner of Bentinck Street and South Cloughton Road, Birkenhead. The notices were also published on-line at the Council's consultation website, www.wirral-abc.gov.uk/PrimaryPlaces/North_Birkenhead.asp

2.2 Under the Education and Inspections Act 2006, in addition to the statutory proposal notice, a more detailed "complete proposal" must be produced. Copies of the notice and complete proposal were provided to the school, the Secretary of State, the Anglican and Catholic Diocesan bodies and all relevant persons and groups named in the guidance. The documentation was also made available on the Council's Primary Places Review website. The notice and complete proposal are attached as Appendix B. The full proposal and all supporting appendices have been provided to members on CD-ROM.

2.3 Following the publication of notices, there is a statutory six week representation period during which objections or comments on any proposal can be sent to the Director of Children's Services. This was clearly stated on the notices. Any person can request a copy of the full proposal, however no requests were received.

3.0 Outcome of the Representation Period

3.1 The statutory representation period ended on 20th October 2010. During this time, the Director of Children's Services received 42 written comments and one petition in relation to the proposal. The breakdown of the comments is as follows:

Responses	Total	Directly related	Others
Cathcart Street	0	0	0
Cole Street	42	20	22
Other	0		

All written responses (letters, e-mails) by respondent category and area

Please note: Totals may not match with previous table as some people fit into more than one category, for example parent and governor.

Category of Respondent	Number	Percentage	No. Previous respondent
Parents	13	31%	10
Staff	5	12%	5
Governors	4	10%	4
Other	22	52%	6

Overall, 86% of directly related respondents and 29% of “other” respondents had been previously involved in the formal consultation, as a meeting attendee, a respondent, or a petition signee.

- 3.2 During the representation period, a petition was received in support of a new school building, containing 120 entries, of which 47 appeared to be duplicates, incomplete or non-existent addresses, out of borough or persons not on the electoral roll. The date on the petition pages varied between 1st October 2009 and 24th June 2010.

Of the remaining 73 entries, representing 48 households:

Catchment zone	Percentage
Cathcart Street	4
Cole Street	47
Other Wirral	30

32% of signees (18 households) were parents/carers of a resident child attending Cole Street Primary School.

In combination with the written comments, 28% of pupils attending Cole Street Primary School were represented.

- 3.3 Under paragraph 8 of Schedule 2 to the Education and Inspections Act 2006 (EIA 2006), the decision on the proposal for the closure of Cole Street Primary School rests with the Council’s decision making body, which is Council’s Cabinet. The DfE Decision Makers Guidance on closure is provided on the members CD.

4.0 Comments on the Proposal

A list summarising the points made is attached as Appendix A.

Commentary on the Points Raised

4.1 Building and Site

The issues regarding the buildings and sites of the two schools have been dealt with in Section 2 of the 24th June report to Cabinet. To clarify some of the specific points made by respondents at this stage:

Cathcart Street is large enough to accommodate the pupils of both schools without any additional classroom provision.

Both schools already use the Park for outdoor sports and Cathcart Street is expected to continue to do so.

Cathcart Street is not “prefabricated”. It is a brick-built school constructed in the mid-1960s.

Cathcart Street is not “run down”. Both schools have received investment in recent years, as with most Wirral schools.

Cathcart Street does not have classrooms in porta-cabins. The CATS before and after school club occupies a double mobile, but this is not part of the school.

The Cathcart Street site is more than twice the size of the Cole Street site and offers far greater scope for expansion, if required in future.

Regarding vandalism and break-ins, any school can be subject to vandalism regardless of location. Investigation of the Council’s records indicate that in the last five years there have been no break-ins at either school, whilst both schools have experienced some broken window incidents due to vandalism or accidents. One respondent said that Cathcart Street was in an “industrial” area, with concerns for pupils’ health and safety. An examination of all properties within 150 metres of both schools indicates that three times as many properties close to Cole Street are non-residential (18.5%) than Cathcart Street (6%).

Some respondents indicated that they believed the Council was closing Cole Street solely in order to use the building for some other purpose. The decisions on the future of any building no longer required for school purposes are only made after all the educational decisions have been taken. There are no plans or planning applications in relation to the Cole Street site.

The outdoor playground space at Cole Street has been cited as “sufficient”. A 210 place primary school is recommended under Building Bulletin 99 to occupy a 9,592 m2 site at minimum. This can be reduced to 4,592 m2 if grassed pitches are provided off-site.

	BB 99 recommended minimum	Cole Street site	Cathcart Street site
Total site	9,592 (4,592)	2,698	7,391
Pitches	5,000 (off site)	Birkenhead Park	Birkenhead Park
Hard courts	1,020	None	553
Hard play	715	1,293 (incl rooftop playground)	1014
Total hard play area	1,735	1,293	1,567
Soft play	1,325	168	2,246
Habitat	410	20	481
Total “green area”	1,735	188	2,727

This table demonstrates that while both sites are below the recommended minimum area for a school with 210 pupils with on-site pitches, only Cathcart Street exceeds the minimum site size for a school with off-site pitches, and most closely meets the minimums for other area types. The green area outside Cole Street’s fence line which some respondents referred to as potentially able to be incorporated into the Cole Street site has been included in the table above for completeness as “soft play” area. Without this, there is no soft play area on the Cole Street site.

One respondent said that Cathcart Street had more outdoor space and that her children were often “bored” at Cole Street through lack of outdoor space.

The Cathcart Street site can be improved and enhanced. The extent of the refurbishment will depend on the availability of capital funding, but could include

new accommodation for the CATS club and the relocation of the Children's Centre and other facilities temporarily housed at the former St Laurence's Catholic Primary building. This is not a ground to reject the proposal.

4.2 Staff and Standards

Respondents praised the good standards of the school and the friendly, dedicated and supportive staff at Cole Street.

One respondent was particularly impressed with the support given by Cole Street staff in diagnosing her child's special educational needs, which she believed would not have occurred elsewhere. Wirral produces a Special Education Needs Handbook for schools which sets out their responsibilities and requirements. All Wirral schools have a policy for special educational needs which describes their arrangements for the identification and assessment of pupils with SEN and the provision which they make for them. Schools are also required to have Accessibility Plans which describe how the school provides access to the curriculum for all its pupils.

Concerns were expressed for the future of staff once the school closed. The Authority has an excellent record of redeployment, both for teaching and non-teaching staff, and this will continue. Over the previous four phases of the Review, no teacher has been made compulsorily redundant, and only one member of non-teaching staff.

There were concerns about the standards of education at Cathcart Street Primary, and one response said that it did not have a good reputation. Paragraph 5.3 below shows the 2009 and three year average of Contextual Value Added (CVA) at all schools within 2 miles. CVA aims to take account of various factors which might have an impact on pupil progress. This includes not only prior attainment but also gender, special needs, first language, mobility, age, in care status, ethnicity, free school meal eligibility and deprivation (IDACI). There is no statistically significant difference in the performance of Cole Street (100.1) and Cathcart Street Primary Schools (99.5) in terms of CVA – at both schools pupils are making the expected rate of progress.

One respondent said that more pupils from Cole Street had passed the Grammar school entrance exam than Cathcart Street. Over the last five years, 5% of former Cole Street pupils and 2% of former Cathcart Street pupils have gone on to attend a Grammar school.

In terms of class size, the arrangement of classes is a matter for individual governing bodies to decide, within the confines of the school's budget and accommodation. There is little correlation between overall school size, class size, and educational standards. Larger schools can afford to employ more staff, to enable more small group and one to one teaching outside the traditional classroom setting, which can be of great benefit to some children, particularly those with special or additional needs.

The Council is proud of the good work carried out in all its schools, by teams of dedicated teachers who treat every child and parent with respect. The individual

social, emotional and educational needs of children are the highest priority for staff in every school in Wirral. This is not a ground to reject the proposal.

Pupils

Respondents were concerned about the disruption of moving school, and that children would miss their friends.

The notice states that all Cole Street pupils can transfer to Cathcart Street, regardless of home address. This is intended to allow pupils to move together, so that they have friends in their new school. It is not a compulsion, as several respondents appeared to believe. One respondent said that attending a school with more pupils would allow her children to have more friends.

Some respondents said that in the event of closure, they would send their children to alternative schools rather than Cathcart Street or Christ Church CE (Birkenhead). This is not an issue. Whilst all former Cole Street pupils are guaranteed a place at Cathcart Street, the notice makes it clear that parents can apply for places at any primary school. Paragraph 4.6 below demonstrates that there are available places at alternative primary schools.

If the proposal for closure is approved, parents/carers would be asked to express a preference, and the Authority would try its utmost to fulfil those preferences. Places would then be allocated using the admissions criteria, which include “in-zone” status, and keeping brothers and sisters together at the same school wherever possible, subject to the Infant Class size limit.

Some responses suggested that parents would educate their children at home if Cole Street were to close. Under Section 7 of the Education Act 1996, all children of compulsory school age (5 to 16) must receive a suitable full-time education. Parents have a legal responsibility to make sure this happens - either by registering their child at a school or by making other arrangements to give them a suitable, full-time education. Once the child is registered at a school, parents are legally responsible for making sure they attend regularly. All parents have the right to decide to educate their children at home, either themselves, or by hiring a tutor. This is a major decision, and the Authority would recommend that any parent considering this option should think very carefully before making a decision to home-school their child. Educating children at home requires great commitment and stamina as well as a considerable investment in resources, as there are no central government grants available to support home education.

Local Authorities have a duty to satisfy themselves that children who are not in the school system are receiving a suitable education. Under Section 437 of the Education Act 1996, the LA can serve a notice requiring the parent to satisfy the LA that the child is receiving a suitable education, or a school attendance order which requires the parent to register the child at a named school. Under Section 444, 444A and 444ZA of the Education Act 1996, LAs are also responsible for taking legal action to enforce attendance at school through the Education Welfare Service.

When any school closes, a great deal of work from authority and school staff goes into the transition arrangements in order that children move smoothly between

schools with minimum disruption to their education. In the past, this has included joint assemblies, joint day trips and visits to the new school.

This is not a ground to reject the proposal.

4.4 **Traffic and Transport**

In terms of distance to alternative schools, there are 30 alternative primary schools within a 2 mile radius of the school. The distance between the Cole Street site and other primary schools are not great. Cathcart Street is half a mile away – about 12 minutes walk. A significant proportion of community and Church of England choice parents living within Cole Street’s catchment zone already choose alternative primary schools (71%) – principally The Priory CE (20%), Cathcart Street (12%), Christ Church CE (Birkenhead) (10%) and Woodchurch Road (9%).

The proposed changes to catchment zones are to divide the Cole Street zone between Cathcart Street and Christ Church CE (Controlled) Primary School (Birkenhead), and some parents may find they are closer to that school than Cathcart Street.

The Authority will pay for travel to school if the nearest appropriate school is more than 2 miles away for children under 8, and for children aged 8 to 11 whose families are entitled to a free school meal or receive the maximum level of Working Tax Credit. For children aged 8 or over, the Authority will pay if the nearest appropriate school is more than 3 miles travel. The exact travel distance for any individual pupil would depend on their home address.

Of the 113 pupils on roll in January 2010, three would travel more than 2 miles to both Cathcart Street and Christ Church CE Primary schools, but already travel more than 2 miles to Cole Street Primary School, so can be expected to use whichever means of transport they are already utilising. For 100% of pupils on roll, travel to one or more alternative primary schools would be shorter or similar in length.

In January 2010, there were 17 part-time pupils in the F1 class (8.5 FTE) at Cole Street Primary School. In school nurseries within 2 miles there were 269 empty F1 places, of which 53 were at schools within 1 mile.

The impact of closure of the school on travel and transport is expected to be minimal. This is not a ground to reject the proposal.

The Process

The options in the 2009 formal consultation included a suggestion that a new school building could be built in Birkenhead Park. The responses to the consultation made it clear that this did not draw much favour. Respondents allied to both schools expressed reservations about a new school sited in Birkenhead Park. Concerns were raised about litter, particularly broken glass and drug paraphernalia, “stranger danger”, general safety of children travelling to and from school, vandalism, security and potential for increased truancy. In general, few consultees from either school were in favour of an amalgamation into a new build primary school on a new site, rather than an existing site should be used, in particular that an existing building be renewed rather than rebuilt. However, even at this very early stage it was made

clear that any new build would be dependent upon (a) securing a site and (b) securing resource from the Primary Capital Programme. The resolution of the Cabinet on 1st October 2009 asked us to explore the amalgamation of Cole Street Primary School and Cathcart Street Primary School in a new build school on a new site following a petition submitted by Cole Street Primary School on the day of the Cabinet.

Many respondents suggested that there should have been more consultation on the possibility of building a new primary school in Birkenhead Park. One response cited the initial report commissioned by the Children and Young People's Department by Dr Hilary Taylor as being inconclusive on the issue, but fails to cite the subsequent English Heritage report which was far more robust in its objection to a school in Birkenhead Park. As reported to Cabinet on 24th June 2010, the option of building a new school in Birkenhead Park was not a possibility as this would be highly unlikely to receive English Heritage approval and planning permission following extensive discussions with them. Consequently further consultation on a non-viable option would have been pointless.

This therefore returned us to the position in October 2009. To consult on whether to close a school would have been a repeat of the Summer 2009 consultation and would have been contrary to the Cabinet's October 2009 decision that one school should close. To consult on which school to close would also have been a repeat of the summer 2009 consultation. The purpose of the representation period is to provide a further opportunity for comments to be made on the proposal as agreed for publication by Cabinet in June 2010.

Some respondents asked why Cole Street was still proposed to close if there would not be a new building, and felt that the school had been "picked on". It has been demonstrated that the falling roll means that there are no longer sufficient pupils to maintain both Cole Street and Cathcart Street Primary Schools. The combined roll of the two schools equates to a single form of entry primary school. Given that a reduction by one school is necessary, the remaining decision is to decide which site offers the best accommodation for pupils with the most scope. The issues surrounding the choice of site for the primary school serving this area have been dealt with in 4.1 above.

One respondent said that they understood the economic reasons why school building developments had been "scrapped". Another cited a comment allegedly made by the local MP regarding the Council "failing to apply" for funding for a new school. Funding for capital build for primary schools comes through the Primary Capital Strategy (the primary version of Building Schools for the Future). Other than the original 2008 submission to the DfE to enter the Primary Capital Strategy programme, there have been no other opportunities to bid for further funding. It is important to clarify that capital projects arising from the Primary Places Review remain the Council's highest priority for funding from the Primary Capital Strategy. No opportunities to bid for funding have been missed. There will be a clearer picture of the future of national school building programme funding in the New Year. However, the legal decisions to close or amalgamate schools must be made before any capital funding can be allocated, regardless of source, and whether this is for refurbishment or new build.

One respondent was concerned about a "triple move", whereby pupils would be moved to Cathcart Street, only to be moved back to Cole Street so that a new

school can be built on the Cathcart Street site. This concern assumes that a new school will be built in the near future, which at this stage cannot be guaranteed. Two respondents were upset that parents had not been invited to visit Cathcart Street earlier in the process. Until there has been a final decision to close, the Authority cannot organize group visits to potential receiving schools without being seen to prejudge the outcome of the process, although parents are themselves free to visit any school by appointment with the Headteacher. The Authority cannot comment on whether these visits have been “discouraged” by the schools concerned, although this may be a misunderstanding due to the general policy applied by Wirral schools of asking parents wishing to transfer schools mid-year to first return to the headteacher of the originating school to discuss their concerns, as this can sometimes resolve the issues that had prompted a transfer enquiry. Cabinet’s decision in October 2009 to ask for a report on possible sites for a new building, rather than to proceed directly to statutory notices (as in the case of St Laurence’s), in addition to the unavoidable delay introduced by the 2010 General Election, has extended the usual timescale of the Review process. The headteacher has expressed concerns about what she feels to be a lack of communication between herself and the Authority during the process. This perception is both saddening and disappointing. Every effort has been made to keep head teachers and chairs of governors informed throughout the long and complex Review and consultation process. The Review began in December 2008 with pre-consultation meetings with head teachers and chairs of governors of the schools in the planning, which included sharing all available information and inviting their professional views. The process has been clear, transparent and open from day one. Head teachers and chairs of governors have benefited from advance viewings of Cabinet reports prior to their “go live” date, which requires a special dispensation and a degree of trust that information will not be “leaked”. Both schools were written to in December 2009. Most recently, officers from Human Resources have met staff as a group in July, and on an individual basis in September this year. The review and consultation processes have been carried out fairly and properly. This is not a ground to reject the proposal.

Falling Rolls

In January 2010, the number on roll at Cole Street Primary had fallen to 113 pupils, and the school is now 50% empty.

The capacity of Cole Street, measured by the DfE Net Capacity method, is 210 places. The school has already given over former classroom spaces for use as: a Parents room; an Art room, a library and an additional Foundation 1 room. Had these alterations not been carried out, the capacity at Cole Street would now be 350 pupils – which would mean 237 surplus places (68%).

In the January 2010 Cathcart Street Primary School’s roll was 99 pupils and there were 53% surplus places. Former classroom spaces are now in use as: a Parents room, an SEN room and a Library. Had these alterations not been carried out, the capacity at Cathcart Street would now be 294 pupils, which would mean 195 surplus places (66%).

The combined roll across the two schools was 212 pupils, compared with 420 total places (based on the current capacities).

One respondent said that the decision should not be based on the number of pupils on roll. Small schools inevitably cost more to maintain than larger schools. Wirral policy says that schools become increasingly more difficult to maintain as they fall below 180 pupils on roll. DfE guidance says that “*Schools with fewer than 150 pupils may be educationally and financially sustainable only through substantial subsidies via their local authorities funding formula*”. Financially, the total sum available for spending on all our children does not increase if we choose as an Authority to organise our children in more schools than is necessary for the efficient and effective delivery of education. It follows that the maintenance of small schools, where this is not necessary, comes at the expense of all other children. In 2010-2011, expenditure per pupil at Cole Street was £4,342, and at Cathcart Street £4,726, compared with the Wirral average of £3,169. These were the second and sixth highest expenditures per pupil of all Wirral primary schools.

Some respondents cited housing improvements in the area as a factor in drawing in more families, and one said that people were still sending their children to the school despite the closure proposal. Part of the Cole Street’s catchment zone is within the Newheartlands Housing Market Renewal Initiative Pathfinder area. The major target of HMRI in Cole Street’s zone is the Craven Street/Paterson Street Neighbourhood Facelift scheme, due to be completed in Summer 2011. Works to the properties include roof renewal, chimney and flashing renewal, pointing of external brickwork, window and door renewal, new gutters and downspouts, boundary wall improvements and external decoration. The Council meets at least 75% of the cost of the work with the remaining 25% being paid by the property owner. Low income applicants are assessed on their ability to pay and may have their contribution reduced accordingly. While refurbishment of individual houses may improve and stabilise an area, it does not draw large numbers of new households. Small numbers of new units have also been constructed – on Fox Street, Bentinck Street, Knowles Street and Grange Mount. Any “new” families are likely to be existing Wirral residents, who may continue to attend their previous school. The Authority’s projections for all schools in the North Birkenhead planning area indicate that the number of primary age pupils will rise from 1,745 in 2010 to 1,840 by 2015 – a rise of just 95 pupils spread across all eight schools in the planning area will not mitigate the long-term falling roll, or the issues faced by small schools in this area.

One respondent said that the number of children in nursery classes should be taken into account. Foundation 1 children are not included in the roll of the school as they are not of statutory school age, however the Authority is aware of the number of children attending nursery classes, and this is taken into account in future projections of school roll. Some respondents said that as Cole Street had more pupils than Cathcart Street, the Cole Street site should be kept. The difference in January 2010 amounted to 14 more pupils at Cole Street than at Cathcart Street.

One respondent said that 30 pupils had left Cole Street due to the consultation on closure. Taking May 2009 as a starting point prior to the formal consultation, 30 pupils have indeed left across the age range from F1 to Year 4 (Years 5 and 6 having left to attend secondary school). Of these, two-thirds have either relocated to another area of Wirral or left the borough entirely. Of the remaining 10 pupils, 2 have left to attend Wirral special schools. Some of this outward movement has been offset by inward migration of 12 pupils into those year groups, although overall there has been a net loss. There are many reasons why parents choose to transfer

schools, and the level of leavers involved, even if due to the closure consultation, is not sufficient to be the cause of long-term falling pupil numbers at the school. There were 277 on roll at the last peak in 1999, more than double the number on roll in 2010 (113 pupils).

Places at alternative primary schools

Some respondents were concerned that there were no places in alternative local primary schools. There are 30 alternative primary schools within a 2 mile radius, at which in January 2010 there were 1,601 surplus places, compared to the number on roll of 113 pupils. Excluding those schools in Wallasey, there are projected to be 1,147 surplus places within 2 miles in 2011.

There are expected to be 95 existing compulsory school age pupils who will require a place in an alternative primary school in September 2011. The table below shows a breakdown by age group as at September 2010. It should be noted that the number of vacant places in a particular year group in any school is likely to vary throughout the year due to natural pupil movement.

Current Year Group	Cole Street Number of pupils (Sept 10)	Within 2 miles Number of surplus places	Within 1 mile Number of surplus places
F2	20	169	40
Y1	19	198	50
Y2	19	224	64
Y3	10	247	65
Y4	16	312	111
Y5	11	264	86

The statutory notice indicates that all former Cole Street pupils who wish to transfer to Cathcart Street Primary School can do so, regardless of home address. This is a suggestion, not an enforcement as some respondents seemed to believe. The Infant Class size limit of 30 will not be breached should additional classes be required, as the Age Weighted Pupil Unit (AWPU) will offset any additional staffing costs.

Any additional temporary or permanent works required to any school as a result of the closure of Cole Street Primary School will be prioritised by the LA once parental preferences have been received and the allocation finalised.

The number of pupils to be accommodated is relatively small, and there are more than enough places at other primary schools within the local area. These are not grounds to reject the proposal.

4.7 Financial

One respondent gave their view that the Council should support the school financially, offset by the saving in staff retirement costs that would otherwise be incurred when the school closed, until the pupil numbers returned to an economically viable level.

The costs of early voluntary retirement (EVR) of school staff are funded centrally by the Council, not by the school. Staff over 55 receive an enhancement, which is also centrally funded. The EVR budget is entirely separate from the school's delegated budget, which is allocated from the ring-fenced Dedicated Schools Budget using a formula that is largely based on pupil numbers.

Authorities with large numbers of small rural schools, where closure would mean transporting children many miles to the next nearest school, receive additional Sparsity funding from the Government so that maintaining those small schools does not come at the expense of all other schools. Wirral does not receive Sparsity funding, and consequently if the Council chooses to maintain more schools than are required to educate children, it does so at the expense of all Wirral's children. Section 4.6 of this report also discusses the financial implications of maintaining more schools than are needed.

The Council does not make a direct contribution to a Delegated School Budget. There is some discretion to use other budgets, for example, Standards Fund, if a school is in financial difficulty and needs support to implement a deficit recovery plan, but this would be targeted support rather than general. In theory, with the approval of the Schools Forum, the Council could agree to create a "Support for schools in financial difficulty" budget, but this would be drawn from the Dedicated Schools Grant at the expense of all other schools, not from central Council funds.

Regarding waiting for a rise in rolls, the Office for National Statistics is expecting the number of Wirral children aged 0 to 9 to remain relatively stable to about 2017, rising slightly for a few years, then falling again to an even lower level after 2025. The number of primary age children is unlikely to reach the far higher levels of 10, 15 or 20 years ago.

Closing schools does not save any money for the Council. Any savings made are ring-fenced to the Direct Schools Budget and recycled to benefit all Wirral's children. The priority of the Primary Places Review is to provide an efficient and high quality education which will see this and future generations of Birkenhead's children into a secure and stable future. This is not a ground to reject the proposal.

4.8 Other Comments

The issue of the contribution of the school to its community is an important one and one to which we have tried to give consideration and drawn to the attention of elected members. Every school has the support of its parents, staff and governors, but this does not mean we can do nothing. The main focus of the review has to be with ensuring the effectiveness of educational provision and the best use of resources in the interests of all children.

This is not a ground to reject the proposal.

5.0 Other Factors to be Considered

5.1 Surplus Places

Cole Street Primary has 113 pupils on roll, having last had more than 210 pupils on roll in 2002 (218), following a long decline from 1997 when the school had 277 pupils on roll.

There were a large number of surplus places in January 2010 (50%, 97 places) and this situation is predicted to improve only slightly over the next five years (35%, 72 places).

- 5.2 The DFE guidance for Decision Makers says that they “*should normally approve proposals to close schools in order to remove surplus places where the school proposed for closure has a quarter or more places unfilled, and at least 30 surplus places, and where standards are low compared to standards across the LA*”. The 2009 contextual value added measure (CVA) of 100.9 at Cole Street Primary School indicates that pupils made the expected rate of progress, and standards are therefore not low in Wirral terms. The Decision Makers guidance suggests that in this situation, the following factors should be considered:

standards at alternative schools (5.3)

geographical issues such as travel distance to alternative schools (5.4)

impact on community use of the building (5.5)

5.3 Standards

With regard to standards, a three year average of the overall Key Stage 2 CVA score (2007 to 2009) shows that with the exception of Bedford Drive Primary School, pupils at all schools within 2 miles are making at least the expected rate of progress or better.

School	CVA 2009	3 Year Average
Bedford Drive Primary School	97.8	98.8
Bidston Avenue Primary School	100.4	99.8
Birkenhead High Academy for Girls*		
Cathcart Street Primary School	99.4	99.5
Christ Church CE (Birkenhead) Primary School	101.2	100.7
Cole Street Primary School	100.9	100.1
Devonshire Park Primary School	100.5	100.1
Egremont Primary School (W)	99.8	100.1
Hillside Primary School	99.9	99.6
Holy Cross Catholic Primary School	98.6	99.3
Kingsway Primary School (W)	100.7	100.2
Manor Primary School	98.7	99.0
Mersey Park Primary School	99.4	100.0
Our Lady and St Edwards Catholic Primary School	100.6	100.7
Oxton St Saviours CE Primary School	100.6	100.6
Park Primary School (W)	100.0	99.9
Portland Primary School	101.4	101.5
Prenton Primary School	101.2	100.5
Riverside Primary School (W)	100.7	100.7

Rock Ferry Primary School	99.2	99.8
Somerville Primary School (W)	100.8	100.8
St Anne's Catholic Primary School (W)	99.0	99.1
St Joseph's Catholic Primary School (Birkenhead)	99.3	99.9
St Joseph's Catholic Primary School (W)	98.2	99.6
St Peter's Catholic Primary School	101.4	101.0
St Werburgh's Catholic Primary School	99.8	100.5
The Priory CE Primary School	100.4	100.8
Townfield Primary School	99.9	100.5
Well Lane Primary School	98.8	99.7
Woodchurch Road Primary School	101.7	100.9
Woodlands Primary School	101.3	101.1

* No Key Stage 2 results available for Birkenhead High School Academy, which was an independent school until September 2009. (W) indicates the school is in the Wallasey area. Unshaded cells indicate that pupils have made the expected rate of progress. Green shading indicates pupils have made more than the expected rate of progress, red shading indicates pupils have not made the expected rate of progress.

Accordingly, closure of the school would not be expected to reduce standards, and this is not a ground to reject the proposal.

Travel

This is covered in 4.1 above.

The impact of closure of the school on travel and transport is expected to be minimal. This is not a ground to reject the proposal.

5.5 Impact on Community Use

Cole Street Primary provides various after school and lunch time sporting activities such as touch rugby, football, netball, athletics and High 5, and a gardening club.

The CATS club at Cathcart Street Primary School site runs after school activities until 5.30 pm and holiday clubs out of term time. Out of school and lunchtime activities at the school include outdoor and indoor games and sports, cookery club, mathematics club, children's newsletter and dance.

Christ Church CE Primary School (Birkenhead) operates a Breakfast Club. The school has a Sports Barn on site, and sporting activities include hockey, netball, football, badminton, dance, gymnastics, rugby, cricket, athletics and tennis. Other activities include chess club, guitar club and art tuition.

All school governing bodies are encouraged to provide out of school activities as part of the Extended Schools and Healthy Schools agenda.

This is not a ground to reject the proposal.

5.6 Conclusion

The Council must consider whether a small school is being maintained when it is not necessary to do so. Surplus places at this school are high and projected to continue to be high. Travel to alternative, high quality school provision is not difficult, and community access to services would not be significantly impacted upon by

closure. Taking all factors into account, it is recommended that this proposal is approved.

6.0 Risk Assessment

- 6.1 If the proposal is not approved, Cole Street and Cathcart Street will remain small schools with high levels of surplus places. The Council's Primary Capital Strategy for Change (PCS) identifies four key priorities. This includes "*Improving value for money in services*" (see 7.0 below).

The PCS also identifies four key aims in line with the Children and Young People's Plan. The first of these is that children and young people "*attend educational settings that are viable, inclusive and cost effective*". Indirectly, the removal of surplus spaces and school rationalisation leads to revenue savings to be redistributed amongst remaining schools. This is at risk if the proposal is not approved.

- 6.2 The legal decisions to re-organise school provision must be made before any decisions to allocate capital funding can be taken. Failure to address surplus places may result in projects not meeting the criteria in order to draw on future Primary Capital Programme (PCP) or other central government funding.

7.0 Financial Implications and Value for Money

- 7.1 To date the review process has generated and redistributed over £0.75 million of revenue savings into schools following closures and amalgamations. In addition, changes to the Wirral Funding Formula over the 2008-2011 period have increased funding to schools serving more deprived children and increased the proportion of expenditure in the primary phase. The resultant increases in funding at schools serving areas of high deprivation will contribute to narrowing achievement gaps.
- 7.2 The closure of Cole Street Primary School, excluding those pupil led elements which follow pupils to their destination schools, will release approximately £96,807 annually (on 2010/2011 figures) into the individual Schools Budget as a whole.

If the decision is to approve the proposal, Cole Street Primary School would be allocated a 5/12ths budget for 2011/2012. The remaining 7/12ths budget would then be redistributed through the Budget formula to Wirral schools.

The recommended closure of Cole Street Primary School may have capital implications in respect of the re-location of current pupils. The level of capital required will depend upon the final, approved proposals and will require further, detailed development work. An amount of £250,000 is included in the 2009/10 Schools Capital Programme for "scheme development resulting from primary reviews" which was approved at the Cabinet meeting of 28th May 2009. This will allow schemes to be drawn up, costed and tendered, with any balance contributing to build costs. The balance of the capital build costs would need to be drawn from the following sources: Primary Capital Programme, Modernisation Grant, council capital including capital receipts from the disposal of surplus assets, Prudential Borrowing and capital forming part of other national initiatives. Further details on the future national availability of capital grant are expected early in 2011.

8.0 Staffing Implications

- 8.1 When a school closes, all staff at the school are made redundant.
- 8.2 The Authority has a long and successful track record in assisting redundant teaching and non-teaching staff into new positions. Wirral does not currently have a redeployment scheme in place for teaching staff, and the present arrangement relies on the co-operation of governing bodies when making appointments, and supporting individual members of staff.

9.0 Equal Opportunities Implications/Health Impact Assessment

- 9.1 It is essential to plan school provision across the Authority so that it is both efficient and effective in the interests of all pupils.
- 9.2 An equality impact assessment will be carried out on this report.

10.0 Community Safety Implications

- 10.1 Rationalisation and refurbishment of schools allow the most vulnerable accommodation to be removed and other security improvements carried out.

11.0 Local Agenda 21 Statement

- 11.1 The provision of efficient and effective education is a vital part of serving local communities; inefficient use of resources is wasteful both in educational and physical resource terms.

12.0 Planning Implications

- 12.1 The sites concerned would be subject to the usual planning permissions.

13.0 Anti-Poverty Implications

- 13.1 The redistribution of funding released by school reorganisation, in combination with the Authority's intention to realign the schools budget to give higher levels of funding to schools with high levels of deprivation, as well as improved accommodation, goes towards raising aspirations and narrowing the attainment gap for vulnerable groups.

14.0 Social Inclusion Implications

- 14.1 School re-organisation and transforming accommodation through the Primary Capital Programme and other schemes, provides opportunities to promote joint agency work to promote co-ordinated solutions for pupils and their families.

15.0 Local Member Support Implications

- 15.1 The schools specifically mentioned and the Claughton, Bidston and St James and Birkenhead and Tranmere Wards.

16.0 Background Papers

- 16.1 Previous Cabinet reports
Primary Capital Strategy for Change
Responses to Consultation.

Recommendations

That the proposal for the closure of Cole Street Primary School be approved, and that the Director of Children's Services be authorised to take all necessary steps to ensure the prescribed procedures are followed, including proposals for the re-zoning of schools, in furtherance of the proposal, with closure of the school on 31st August 2011.

David Armstrong
Interim Director of Children's Services