

OUTCOME OF PROPOSAL FOR THE CLOSURE OF ARROWE HILL PRIMARY SCHOOL

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

At its meeting of 12th June 2008, Cabinet decided that following consultation with governing bodies, staff, parents and other stakeholders, statutory notices should be published regarding the closure of Arrowe Hill Primary School. Notices were published on 22nd October 2008. 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 12th June 2008 report to Cabinet, in section 4. The Cabinet report and minute are attached as Appendix A.
- 1.2 A consultation meeting was held at the school on 29th January 2008, and was attended by 65 persons. 38% of pupils on roll at that time were represented at the meeting by at least one parent/carer. In total, 98 written responses to the whole Phase 4 consultation were received, of which 6 were from persons directly related to Arrowe Hill Primary School.
- 1.3 In January 2008 Arrowe Hill Primary School had 115 pupils on roll, and at 45% and 95 surplus places had significantly exceeded the criterion of 25% and 30 surplus places. Respondents were concerned about the fate of closed buildings and sites, the impact on traffic and travel to alternative schools, potential loss of extended school and community facilities, disruption to pupils education and standards, class sizes and the future of staff.
- 1.4 Cabinet determined that proposals should be published in respect of the closure of Arrowe Hill Primary School with effect from 31st August 2010.
- 1.5 In the report to Cabinet of 16th October 2008, an alteration to Cabinet's original decision was recommended. This arose from discussions with stakeholders at Arrowe Hill Primary School which suggested that the original date for the proposed implementation of the closure of the school in Summer 2010, which was intended to allow any necessary building works to be carried out ahead of the transfer of pupils to their destination schools, could produce more disadvantages than advantages. The governing body of Arrowe Hill Primary School confirmed this view to the Authority in writing, attached as Appendix B. Consequently, Cabinet approved an amendment to its earlier decision, so that date for implementation in the statutory notice was given as 31st August 2009. The minute is attached as Appendix C.

2.0 Proposal publication

- 2.1 On 22nd October 2008, proposal notices for the closure of Arrowe Hill Primary School were widely published, including the local press (Wirral Globe and Daily Post), entrances to the school, as well as at Fender Primary School, Overchurch Infant School and Overchurch Junior School. In addition, the notices were posted at Ganneys

Meadow Early Years Centre, Woodchurch community library, Little Robins' Pre-school (Upton), and at Woodchurch post office on Hoole Road, Woodchurch. The notices were also published on-line at the Council's consultation website, www.wirral-abc.gov.uk/PrimaryPlaces/Woodchurch.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 D.
- 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 3rd December 2008. During this time, the Director of Children's Services received via e-mail and post, written comments from one individual, the parent of a pupil at Arrowe Hill Primary School. These comments are attached as Appendix E.
- 3.2 On that basis, under paragraph 8 of Schedule 2 to the Education and Inspections Act 2006 (EIA 2006), the decision on the proposal for the closure of Arrowe Hill Primary School rests with the Council's decision making body, which is Council's Cabinet. The DCSF Decision Makers Guidance is attached as Appendix F.

4.0 Comments on the proposal

A summary of the points raised by the single respondent is as follows:

Review Process

- Query regarding criticism of Council for acting to reduce surplus places
- Parents not properly notified of proposal for closure
- Notice published during half-term
- Allocation of places in alternative schools
- Authority treatment of respondents

Financial

- Availability of funding for new uniforms, bags etc

Travel and Transport

- Arrangements for travel to alternative primary schools

Commentary on the points raised

4.1 Review Process

i) This reference is to criticism of Wirral Council in 2004 by the Audit Commission and again in 2005 by Ofsted's Children's Services Inspection for maintaining too many surplus places in primary schools, and for acting too slowly to reduce primary surplus places. The Primary Places Review was established by the Council in 2004 as a rolling programme to manage surplus places, and the 2005 Children's Services Inspection stated that "Progress in reducing surplus primary school places has been slow, but a clear strategy is now being implemented which is likely to involve some school closures."

ii) The decision to publish notices proposing the closure of Arrowe Hill Primary School followed extensive consultation with staff, governors, parents, carers and other stakeholders regarding the future of primary school provision in the Woodchurch area, including leaflets for every parent/carers as well as consultation meetings at both community primary schools and at Ganneys Meadow Early Years Centre. Parents/carers will have been aware of the potential proposal for the closure of Arrowe Hill Primary School for quite some time.

The legal notices have been published properly in accordance with statutory requirements. This includes the front gate and main entrances to Arrowe Hill Primary School. As schools named in the full proposal, the notices were also published at Fender Primary School, Overchurch Infant School and Overchurch Junior School. In addition, the notices were posted at Ganneys Meadow Early Years Centre, Woodchurch community library, Little Robins' Pre-school (Upton), and at Woodchurch post office on Hoole Road, Woodchurch. The notices were published in the Wirral Globe, the Daily Post and on-line at the Council's consultation website. It is not part of the statutory guidance, or Council policy, to contact individual parents directly regarding statutory notices.

iii) The respondent states that the statutory notice was posted during half-term. Autumn half-term in 2008 ran from Monday 27th October to Friday 31st October. The notices regarding the proposed closure of Arrowe Hill Primary School were posted before half-term on Wednesday 22nd October 2008. The six week representation period ran until Wednesday 3rd December, allowing plenty of time for respondents to comment on the proposal if they wished to do so.

iv) Guarantees of places cannot be made prior to Cabinet's decision on the proposal. If the final decision is that Arrowe Hill Primary School should close, 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. Pupils who have experienced difficulties at a particular school are not usually expected to return to that school.

v) The utmost respect and sensitivity to the views of parents/carers and all those affected by school reorganisation is intrinsic to the Primary Places Review process. All respondents are dealt with professionally, politely and sensitively, endeavouring to answer enquiries as best as possible. Understandably, school re-organisation is a difficult and upsetting time for all concerned and sometimes people receive answers that are not what they want to hear. In some cases, an enquiry cannot be given a definitive answer, for example with regard to pupil admissions, when guarantees for a particular child cannot be given at that time.

The review has been carried out properly. These objections do not constitute grounds to reject the proposal.

4.2 Financial

Not all primary schools operate a school uniform policy, and the Authority does not make a grant towards buying primary school clothing. The governing body of the school to which a child transfers may make their own arrangements to assist with purchasing uniforms, bags and so on, but this is a decision for the individual governing body to take. In previous school closures, governing bodies have sometimes made transitional arrangements whereby children can continue to wear their existing uniform until it is replaced in the usual course of events. This comment does not constitute grounds to reject the proposal.

4.3 Travel and Transport

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 Local Authority's Information booklet for parents provides further information on travel to school arrangements. It is available on-line at www.wirral-abc.gov.uk/Admissions/ or by telephoning the Pupil Services section on 0151 606 2000 during office hours. 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.

5.0 **Other factors to be considered**

Arrowe Hill Primary had 115 pupils on roll in January 2008, about a third of the number on roll 12 years ago (343). This is largely the result of the falling population, although 73% of potential community school parents living in the catchment zone choose to send their children elsewhere, principally to Woodchurch CE Primary School (37%, 101 pupils), Overchurch Infant and Junior (13%, 34 pupils) and Fender Primary School (11%, 30 pupils). There were a large number of surplus places in January 2008 (45%, 95 places), and this situation is not predicted to improve over the next five years.

5.1 Small schools

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. DCSF 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 2006-2007, expenditure per pupil at Arrowe Hill was £5,171 compared with the Wirral average of £3,249.

In September 2008, the number on roll at Arrowe Hill had fallen from 115 pupils to 63 pupils, about a third of the viable size indicated by Wirral policy.

5.2 Surplus places

The school's buildings have already been substantially rationalised by "mothballing" the former Infant building, now used by the Council for storage. Modifications to the former Junior building were made, including an improved entrance and office facilities, bringing disabled access up to legal requirements, improving energy efficiency, installing a new fire and intruder alarm system and make necessary changes to accommodate the full age range of pupils within a building formerly occupied solely by Key Stage 2 pupils.

This project has cost £360,500. It was funded via a combination of the Council's capital programme, Arrowe Hill's formula capital budget and other external funding sources including the Schools Access Initiative and Extended Schools grant.

The Net Capacity of the two buildings before the modifications in 2004/2005 was 325 places. On the September 2008 number on roll, this would equate to 262 surplus places, with the school being 81% empty. Despite the rationalisation to a Net Capacity of 210 places, in September 2008, surplus places at Arrowe Hill Primary School have now reached 70% and 147 places, well above the 25% and 30 places criterion set out by the DCSF.

- 5.3 The DCSF guidance for Decision Makers at paragraph 4.35 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*”.

Members will be aware of significant problems at a national level in delivering this year's national curriculum test results. As a result, 2008 Key Stage 2 data for Wirral primary schools is not yet available. The 2007 contextual value added measure (CVA) of 102.1 at Arrowe Hill Primary School indicates that pupils made above 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 (5.4)
- geographical issues such as travel distance to alternative schools (5.5)
- impact on community use of the building (5.6).

5.4 Standards

With regard to standards, Key Stage 2 CVA scores in 2007 at schools within a 2 mile radius of Arrowe Hill Primary School in 2007 indicate that all pupils made the expected rate of progress or above.

School	CVA 2007	3 Year Average
Arrowe Hill Primary	102.1	100.8
Brookdale Primary	100.2	100.7
Christchurch CE (Moreton) Primary	99.4	99.7
Fender Primary	99.5	99.7
Greasby Junior	100.0	100.3
Hillside Primary	99.2	98.7
Irby Primary	99.5	100.2
Manor Primary	102.2	100.6
Our Lady of Pity Catholic Primary	101.0	101.1
Overchurch Junior	100.0	100.3
Prenton Primary	99.3	99.9
Sacred Heart Catholic Primary	100.3	100.8
St Joseph's Catholic Primary (Upton)	100.5	100.0
St Michael and All Angels Catholic Primary	100.1	100.6
St Paul's Catholic Primary	99.1	99.4
St Peter's Catholic Primary	99.9	99.5
Sandbrook Primary	100.1	100.2
Thingwall Primary	100.6	100.8

Townfield Primary	100.7	100.0
Woodchurch CE Primary	99.3	100.0

A three year average of the overall CVA score (2005 to 2007) shows that pupils at Arrowse Hill, Fender, Woodchurch CE and Overchurch Junior are making the expected rate of progress (100.8, 99.7, 100.0 and 100.3 respectively) with no significant difference in performance. Averaged over this time period, at all bar one of the alternative primary schools, standards were similar to or better than are currently achieved at Arrowse Hill Primary School. Accordingly, closure of the school would not be expected to reduce standards, and this is not a ground to reject the proposal.

5.5 Travel

With regard to travel, the proposal to close the school indicates that the catchment zone of Arrowse Hill Primary School would be combined with that of Fender Primary school to produce a single community catchment zone for Woodchurch. Some adjustments would be made at the upper end of the boundary to designate a small number of streets to Overchurch Infant and Overchurch Junior schools. 41 of the 50 pupils expected to be on roll at September 2009 would be in-zone for Fender Primary School. Three pupils would be potentially be entitled to an in-zone place at Overchurch Infant or Overchurch Junior School, should parents decide to apply.

An anonymised table showing individual distances is given in Section 15 of the complete proposal document in Appendix B. The number on roll at January 2008 at Arrowse Hill Primary was 115 pupils, and in September 2008 had fallen to 63 pupils. Excluding those pupils in Year 6 who will have moved onto secondary school in September 2009, there are expected to be 50 pupils to transfer to an alternative local primary school. Of the 50 pupils expected to be on roll at September 2009, four would travel more than 2 miles to both Fender or Overchurch Infant/Junior, but all four already travel more than 2 miles to Arrowse Hill Primary, so can be expected to use whichever means of transport they are already utilising. For just one pupil, the distance to Fender Primary is significantly further than the distance to Arrowse Hill Primary School.

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.

5.6 Impact on community use

The school offers various out of school clubs including football, badminton and cricket, art, choir, ICT and French. A breakfast club operates from Arrowse Hill Primary School, with a joint afterschool club being held in collaboration with Woodchurch CE Primary School at the Woodchurch CE site. The school has also operated Family Learning courses in literacy, numeracy, ICT and parenting skills.

The afterschool club based at Woodchurch CE Primary School would not be affected by the closure of Arrowse Hill. Similar out of school activities are held at other primary schools in the area, and would be expected to continue. For example, Fender Primary offers out of school clubs for football, baseball, netball, rugby, golf, athletics, yoga, dance, boxercise, choir, ICT, recorders, reading and study, art, sewing and cooking. The school participates in the Children's University. Various Family Learning courses are also operated, including parenting skills. A breakfast or afterschool club is not offered at present, with parents being directed to the facility at St Michael and All Angels Catholic Primary School, however, Fender Primary School is currently undertaking a survey of parents to establish whether there is sufficient demand for before/afterschool care at the school itself. If Arrowse Hill were to close, funding for the breakfast club could be transferred to Fender Primary School. This is not a ground to reject the proposal.

5.7 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 school provision with equivalent standards is not difficult, and community use of the building would not be significantly impacted upon by closure. These factors are not a ground to reject the proposal.

6.0 Financial Implications and Value for Money

6.1 The closure of Arrowe Hill Primary School, excluding those pupil led elements which follow pupils to their destination schools, will release approximately £134,631 annually (on 2006/2007 figures) into the individual Schools Budget as a whole.

6.2 In the interim period prior to Cabinet's decision, Arrowe Hill Primary School has been allocated a 5/12ths budget for 2009/2010. The remaining 7/12ths budget would then be redistributed through the Budget formula to Wirral schools.

6.3 There has been no intention signalled to change the Green Belt in the near future and the Council's policy for new housing development in the west of the Borough now includes the extension of the Interim Planning Policy for new Housing into the east of the Borough. Woodchurch is no longer an area favoured for new housing development, except within the constraints of the Interim Planning Policy for New Housing. Should the site be declared surplus to requirements as a school, it could be considered for other departmental or Council purposes. The former Infant building is in use by the Council for storage purposes.

6.4 The recommended closure of Arrowe Hill Primary School has capital implications in respect of the re-location of current pupils and the re-allocation of future pupils to schools. The level of capital required will depend upon the final, approved proposals and will require further, detailed development work. An amount of £50,000 is included in the 2008/09 Schools Capital Programme for "scheme development resulting from primary reviews" which was approved at the Cabinet meeting of 22nd May 2008. 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: DCSF Modernisation Grant, council capital including capital receipts from the disposal of surplus assets, Prudential Borrowing and capital forming part of other national initiatives.

7.0 Staffing Implications

7.1 When a school closes, all staff at the school are made redundant.

7.2 The Authority has a long and successful track record in assisting redundant teaching and non-teaching staff into new positions. Wirral does not have a redeployment scheme in place for teaching staff at present, and the present arrangement relies on the co-operation of governing bodies when making appointments.

8.0 Equal Opportunities Implications

8.1 It is essential to plan school provision across the Authority so that it is both efficient and effective in the interests of all pupils.

9.0 Community Safety Implications

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

10.0 Local Agenda 21 Statement

10.1 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.

11.0 Planning Implications

11.1 The site would be subject to the usual planning permissions.

12.0 Anti-Poverty Implications

12.1 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.

13.0 Social Inclusion Implications

13.1 Woodchurch Library occupies the same site as Ganneys Meadow Early Years Centre and Fender Primary School. The Cabinet report of 27th November 2008, "Transforming Wirral – Delivering the Strategic Asset Review", in paragraph 7.9, recommends that Woodchurch Library is retained and "forms the nucleus of a multi-purpose complex".

13.2 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.

14.0 Local Member Support Implications

14.1 The schools specifically mentioned and the Upton ward.

15.0 Background Papers

15.1 Previous Cabinet reports

Responses to Consultation.

16.0 Recommendations

That the proposal for the closure of Arrowe Hill 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 2009.

Howard Cooper

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