

Cabinet - 15 June 2005

Redhouse Primary School: outcome of consultation

Portfolio	Councillor Eddie Hughes, Children's Services
Service Area	Education Walsall
Wards	Aldridge Central and South
Forward Plan	Yes

Summary of report

This report provides details of the outcome of consultation on the future of the school following a recent substantial decline in pupil numbers.

Recommendations

Cabinet approve the publication of a statutory proposal to close Redhouse Primary School from 31 December 2005.

Resource and legal considerations

The proposed closure of Redhouse Primary School would be subject to the approval of a statutory proposal. This would be published following the Cabinet decision and a six-week representation period would then follow. If no objections are received during this period, the final decision regarding the future of the school would be for the Cabinet to take. If any objections are received, the final decision would be taken by the School Organisation Committee. It is anticipated that the final decision would be considered in September 2005.

As a result of the fall in pupil numbers to date and the associated impact on the school's financial position, there will necessarily be a large reduction in staffing for September 2005. Closure of the school may result in some redundancies although every effort would be made to assist staff to secure alternative suitable employment at other schools in Walsall and thereby minimise redundancies. If closure is the outcome then every effort will be made to encourage schools receiving groups of pupils from Redhouse to consider the employment of Redhouse staff

During the period of consultation discussions would take place with the remaining parents regarding their preferred choice of school if Redhouse school were to close. We will also seek confirmation on which groups of children may wish to move together in 'friendship groups'. We will then explore the possibility of moving pupils together in such groups if closure is the final outcome.

A number of parents raised issues relating to the distance their children would have to travel to reach other schools. Whilst understanding these concerns the majority of children living within the locality of Redhouse School already attend other schools. During the period of consultation with parents we will discuss how to minimise difficulties in terms of travel.

The Governors and staff of the school have made significant efforts to get positive publicity for the school and there have been a number of positive newspaper articles featuring former pupils. Numbers of pupils at the school, however, have continued to decline as parents apparently feel they would be more able to have their choice of school now than once closure is announced.

Citizen impact

The provision of an educational environment in which children can be happy, grow, learn and achieve is of paramount importance for parents and teachers. The Council seeks to provide a lively and relevant education for children in viable and sustainable schools.

There has been a significant loss of parental confidence in this school and there appears to be little likelihood of this being reversed. The reduction in pupil numbers stems from the removal of children from the school by parents as well as from the admission of smaller cohorts to Reception in recent years. There are 210 places available for pupils at Redhouse Primary School, however, currently there are only 70 pupils on roll and it is expected that this will fall to 55 in September 2005. In an urban setting, a school with this number of pupils is not viable educationally, socially or financially.

Community safety

If the final decision is to close Redhouse Primary School, every effort would be made to provide alternative places at nearby schools for the children.

Environmental impact

There are none arising directly from this report.

Performance and risk management issues

The overall percentage of surplus places and the percentage of primary schools with 25% or more surplus places are both performance indicators on which the performance of the Council is considered.

The Department for Education and Skills expects local education authorities to develop proposals regarding the future of schools with 25% or more surplus places. Currently there are 140 surplus places at Redhouse Primary School; this equates to 67%. These figures will worsen in September when 19 children in Year 6 leave the school and only 3 pupils are admitted to the reception class.

Failure to take action would bring with it the possibility of future legal action against the Council for failure to provide a suitable standard of education for pupils and would also have financial implications for the Council as an irretrievable deficit is forecast for the school.

Equality implications

The provision of alternative places for pupils at another school would enable pupils to receive their entitlement to education in a school which is viable educationally, socially and financially.

Consultation

On 2 March 2005, Cabinet approved the consultation on the future of Redhouse Primary School. The consultation period commenced on 3 March 2005 and ended on 13 April 2005. A consultation document was circulated to parents, staff and governors and was also made available to the local community. Consultation meetings were held at the school on 7 March 2005 and attendance is detailed in the table below.

Table 1 Attendance at Consultation Meetings

School	Parents	Staff	Governors
Redhouse Primary	48	13	11

Further meetings for parents, staff and governors were offered together with a 'drop in' session for parents.

A number of earlier meetings had been held with the governors who were increasingly concerned about the decline in pupil numbers and requested that consideration be given to the future of the school.

The consultation was on the basis of the following four options agreed by Cabinet.

Option 1 Close Redhouse Primary School

- Option 2 Close Redhouse Primary School and increase capacity at another school nearby
- Option 3 Amalgamate Redhouse Primary school with another primary school
- Option 4 Federate Redhouse Primary School with another school

Fifteen consultation responses from 14 people have been received; details of these are provided in the table below. A petition has also been received.

Table 2 Consultation Responses

	Parents	Staff	Governors	Local residents	Local Councillor
Responses	6	2	3*	2	1

* 1 governor also responded as a local resident

At the consultation meetings there was wide ranging discussion about all of the options but generally the federation option was the one that met with most support. However, it must be emphasised that this option would not in itself impact on the viability of the school. In order to take this option forward there would need to be a soundly based business plan which demonstrated that the trend in pupil numbers would be reversed and that pupil numbers would increase within a set timescale to a level that would enable the school to be viable educationally, socially and financially. Deficit budgets can only be agreed for a school where there is a clear, agreed plan for the repayment of the deficit. There is no evidence that this could be achieved for Redhouse Primary School.

The governors of Redhouse Primary School have focused on the federation option and have contacted a number of local primary schools and a secondary school with a view to taking this forward. Consideration of the future of Redhouse Primary School was deferred from the May Cabinet meeting in order to give the governors more time to seek a partner school with which to federate. However, none of the primary schools approached by the governors has decided in favour of further exploring the possibility of federation.

Federation with a secondary school would not be appropriate: the management expertise required to turn around a primary school in which parents have lost confidence is most unlikely to be found outside the sector. Federation with a secondary school would not provide any opportunities for the 'economies of scale' that would be provided by federation with a primary school and, therefore, could not help resolve the financial issues in the school. In addition, federation with a secondary school would significantly increase the responsibilities which would fall to a federated governing body: governors from the secondary school and the primary school would have responsibility for both schools and this would be exacerbated by the composition of the governing body which would have fewer governors from each school. Aldridge secondary school expressed an interest in considering a federation but understandably wished to ensure the school would be financially viable and to see a 'business plan' with regard to that. The Governors have been unable to progress such

a plan and Education Walsall staff can see no way in which the school can become viable in financial and curriculum terms with its current and predicted pupil numbers. Aldridge Governors have now confirmed that, despite their desire to support their local community by considering federation with Redhouse Primary, they are unlikely to change their admission procedure in any way that would assist Redhouse to increase its numbers and they agree the analysis from Education Walsall that a federation is unlikely to be viable.

Redhouse Governors have managed to set a balanced budget for the academic year 2005/06. This, however, requires 5 staff redundancies in this year. Budget prediction demonstrates the need to lose a further 3 teaching staff over the subsequent 2 years even if no more children leave the school.

In view of the continued fall in pupil numbers and the impact that this will have on the school's ability to set a balanced budget or repay a deficit, Cabinet is recommended to approve the publication of a statutory proposal to close Redhouse Primary School from 31 December 2005.

During the intervening period, staff would work closely with parents to identify preferences for the future education of their children and, dependent upon the outcomes, this may result in a need for additional places at one or more local schools.

The issues that closure of Redhouse Primary School would create for the local community are recognised but unfortunately the numbers of pupils are such that other options are not feasible and would not provide security of education provision for local families. Consideration will be given to support that may be necessary to facilitate transition for families.

Vision 2008

The proposed reorganisation of primary school places in the area would contribute to the delivery of Walsall's vision for 2008 – Section 4 Make Our Schools Great by the provision of a viable and sustainable education service provision for the local community.

Background papers

Cabinet report, 2 March 2005: Redhouse Primary School
Consultation document
Consultation responses

Contact officer

Susan Lupton
Strategic Leader: School Organisation, Admissions, Capital and Asset Management
Tel 01922 686231
susan.lupton@we.serco.com

Signed:



Executive Director: David McNulty

Date: 6.6.05

Signed:



**Managing Director, Education
Walsall**

Date: 6.6.05

Signed



Portfolio Holder: Councillor Eddie Hughes

Date: 6.6.05