

Westmorland and Furness Council

Report Title:	Consultation on a proposal to close North Walney Primary and Nursery School
Meeting:	Furness Locality Board Meeting
Meeting Date:	Tuesday 28 November 2023
Report Author:	Milorad Vasic, Director of Childrens' Services
Lead Cabinet Member(s):	Sue Sanderson, Cabinet Member for Children's Services, Education and Skills
Wards Affected?	Walney North and Walney South
PUBLIC, PART EXEMPT OR FULLY EXEMPT	
List of Appendices (if any)	Appendix A – Consultation Document Appendix B – Frequently Asked Questions Appendix C – Equality Impact Assessment

1. Executive Summary

- 1.1 Westmorland and Furness Council is currently consulting on a proposal to close North Walney Primary and Nursery School from 31 August 2024.
- 1.2 Westmorland and Furness Council is concerned about the increasing pressure upon both the school's leadership and staff to continue to provide a quality educational offer given the decline in the number of pupils at the school and the resulting impact on the school's financial position. Given this, the Council considers that it has a responsibility to all members of the North Walney school community to formally consult on the school's future sustainability.
- 1.3 This proposal is being presented to Furness Locality Board for the Board's response as part of the consultation process.
- 1.4 A copy of the consultation document and the associated frequently asked questions relating to the proposal are attached for information at **Appendices A and B**.

2. Recommendation

It is recommended that Members of the Furness Locality Board note:

- 2.1 the rationale and details of the consultation proposal and respond to the consultation as board members feel appropriate.
- 2.2 that Cabinet will consider all responses arising from the consultation, including any response made by the Furness Locality Board, before deciding on whether or not to proceed to the next stage of the statutory process.

3. Information: Rationale for the Proposal

3.1 The Local Authority recognises that it is to the credit of the school's leadership, staff, parents and pupils that the school has continued to provide a quality educational offer during what has proven to have been a challenging period for the school.

3.2 Current Pupil Numbers and Future Projections

As of September 2023, the confirmed number of pupils on roll at North Walney Primary school was 27. The total capacity of the school based upon the school's current published admission number is 161.

3.3 There has been a continuous drop in numbers across all year groups over recent years. In 2019/20 the number on roll was 84, by 2021/22 this number had fallen to 67 with a further reduction to 22 by 2022/23. The number of pupils on roll is predicted to remain low.

3.4. In line with national trends, the number of births in the North Walney catchment area has reduced in recent years, as it has across Walney Island. In addition, there is little opportunity for pupil growth from new housing developments as a result of inward migration to the area. Given this, there is little prospect of a significant increase in pupil numbers for North Walney Primary and Nursey School in the foreseeable future.

3.5. There are five schools within a two-mile radius of North Walney Primary School, with four of them located on Walney Island. The Walney Island area has a significant number of surplus places overall with the projected percentage of surplus places projected to be at 30% from September 2024.

3.6. Financial Position

School budgets are directly linked to the number of children on roll at that school. Many costs are fixed regardless of pupil numbers, and it follows that, where the numbers on roll at a school are decreasing, there is less money available to the school to support teaching and learning. This makes it increasingly challenging for a school to provide a broad and balanced quality educational offer. Whilst the school has taken steps to reduce costs over the years, the impact of the falling pupil roll has made balancing the budget very challenging with no potential to address projected deficits.

3.7. Quality of Education

The Local Authority recognises that it is to the credit of the school's leadership, staff, parents and pupils that the school has continued to provide a quality educational offer during what has proven to have been a challenging period for the school.

- 3.8. However, the Local Authority is concerned that the school's current financial position is increasing the workload on school staff to levels that the Council believes is reaching an unsustainable level. This will inevitably impact on teaching standards and would likely give a reduced rating under the current Ofsted inspection framework. The current framework requires all schools to evidence a 'good' quality of education over time, demonstrating a broad, rich curriculum sequenced in a logical progression to enable all children to acquire the intended knowledge and skills from Reception to Year Six.
- 3.9. The Local Authority is concerned that staffing instability and funding have also hampered development of leadership at subject level and impacted on the professional development, workload and well-being of staff.

4. Link to Council Plan Priorities: (People, Climate, Communities, Economy and Culture, Customers, Workforce)

- 4.1. This proposal is being consulted upon in order to ensure that the Local Authority meets its statutory duties to ensure that appropriate standard of care and education is being delivered, contributing to a thriving community.

5. Consultation Outcomes (with services, ward councillors & public consultation where required)

- 5.1 A public consultation exercise on the closure proposal is currently underway. The consultation began on 1 November 2023 and will end on 12 December 2023. This report is being presented to the Local Board as part of this consultation process.
- 5.2 A post-consultation report, setting out all of the responses raised during the consultation, will be presented to Cabinet in January 2024 for a decision as to whether, or not, to proceed to the next stage of the statutory school organisation process.
- 5.3 If the Council's Cabinet decide to proceed to the next stage of the statutory process the Local Authority will be required to formally publish a statutory notice setting out the proposal to close the school. This will allow all stakeholders a further four weeks to make 'representations' about the proposal. Following the completion of the four-week statutory representation period a report will be submitted to the Cabinet in March 2024 for a final decision as to whether, or not, the school should close on 31 August 2024.

6. Alternative Options Considered

- 6.1 Take no action and allow the school to continue to operate without consulting on the school's future sustainability.
- 6.2 The Local Authority appreciates the concerns that a school closure proposal is likely to generate within the school community and the wider local community and, as such, has not taken the decision to consult on this proposal without a strong rationale.

- 6.3 Westmorland and Furness Council is concerned about the increasing pressure upon both the school's leadership and its staff to continue to provide a quality educational offer given the ongoing decline in the number of pupils at the school and the resulting impact on the school's financial position. Given these risks, taking no action is not an option as the Council considers that it has a responsibility to all members of the North Walney school community to formally consult on the school's future sustainability.

7. Financial Implications and risk

- 7.1 North Walney Nursery and Primary School is a maintained school funded through the Schools Block of the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG). Funding is based on the National Funding Formula meaning the majority of the funding is linked to numbers of pupils in school on the October census day.
- 7.2 The school closed financial year 2022/23 with a cumulative deficit of £161k and has been in deficit since 2012/13. If the school closes any deficit at the point of closure will transfer to the Council and be funded from the DSG contingency budget.

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8. Legal & Governance Implications

- 8.1. In accordance with 14.12.3(c) of the Constitution the Locality Board is able to consider the policies and actions of the Cabinet as to their appropriateness to the needs and aspirations of local communities. Also 14.12.3(e) Act as a forum for discussion on matters of local interest and in particular to elicit/hear the views of local bodies and organisations.
- 8.2. The Locality Board may note the contents of this report and provide a response to the consultation as members feel appropriate for Cabinet to consider.
- 8.2 It is the responsibility of local authorities, proposers and school governing bodies to ensure that they act in accordance with the relevant legislation and have regard to statutory guidance when seeking to open or close a maintained school. Cabinet as the decision maker, will need to be satisfied that the consultation and representation period were appropriate, fair and open, and that the proposer has given full consideration to all the responses to the consultation. [EJH 21.11.23]

9. Human Resources Implications

- 9.1 The Local Authority understands that staff at the North Walney Primary and Nursery School will have both professional and personal concerns about the implications of the consultation. During the consultation, officers from the Local Authority will be listening very carefully to the views of the school staff and their union representatives to ensure that all members of staff are given appropriate advice and support depending on their individual circumstances.
- 9.2. If following the completion of statutory school organisation process, then Local Authority takes the final decision to close the school then the Local Authority will consult with school staff in accordance with relevant employment related policies, procedures and statutory timescales.

10. Equality & Diversity Implications (including the public sector equality duty, Armed Forces Families, Care Leavers and Health inequalities implications)

- 10.1. A copy of the Equality Impact Assessment (EIA) relating to this proposal is attached at **Appendix C**. This EIA is an evolving document and will be updated as appropriate following the completion of the consultation process.
- 10.2. The Local recognises that pupils and parents will be concerned about this proposal and recognises the responsibility that arises from taking the decision to consult on a proposal to close a school. The school will continue to run as it currently does throughout the consultation and decision-making process.
- 10.3. If the decision is taken in March 2024 to close the school in August 2024, then the Local Authority will contact the parents of all the pupils at the school to discuss their individual circumstances.
- 10.4. Given the level of surplus school places across the area the Local Authority is confident that there are sufficient places available at other school to enable pupils to be accommodated at other schools in line with parental preference.
- 10.5. A package of support will be devised to assist parents in applying for new school places, discuss their transport arrangements, assist parents with the purchase of school uniform and ensure that all children, including those children that may have EHCP's and SEND needs, are fully supported to transition to their new school.

11. Background Information & Sources (used in preparation of this Report)

- 11.1. Ofsted report – North Walney Primary Nursery & Pre-School – June 2019
- 11.2. Office of National Statistics (ONS) Data

- 11.3. Department for Education School Census Data
- 11.4. GP registration data
- 11.5. Open and closing maintained schools: statutory guidance for proposers for decision makers – January 2023