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**REVIEW OF PRIMARY SCHOOL EDUCATION IN DARLINGTON**

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**Responsible Cabinet Member(s) – Councillor Chris McEwan, Children’s Services Portfolio**  
**Responsible Director(s) – Geoffrey Pennington**

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**Purpose of Report**

1. This report sets out proposals for taking forward the key recommendations made in the report of the Lifelong Learning Scrutiny committee (LLSC) Review on Primary Education in Darlington. The report concentrates on three specific courses of action including the closure of Rise Carr Primary School, the amalgamation of Albert Hill Nursery School and Gurney Pease Primary School and the reduction in size of Corporation Road Primary School.

**Information and Analysis**

2. Members have previously identified that there is a long-term issue regarding school places in terms of condition, sufficiency and suitability of provision. It has also previously been agreed that action must be taken to address this issue. To ignore the problem will store up more significant problems in five to 10 years time which could impact on the life chances of future generations of Darlington pupils.
3. The LLSC Review Group established a number of principles which are helpful and welcome in shaping the future of Primary provision. These principles have been used to identify a number of options, leading to difficult, but deliverable choices. These options are identified and appraised in this report.
4. Since Local Government Re-Organisation in 1997, Darlington has an impressive track record in dealing with the issues caused by surplus places in its schools. There has already been significant reorganisation of schools and school places, including the merging of some schools and closure of others. The need for change is generally understood and appreciated by schools, communities and partners. Following the LLSC review and further work undertaken with schools there is an expectation that action will be taken to address the issues identified in the report.
5. The Authority is currently in the process of providing eight schools with brand new, state of the art accommodation before the end of 2005. In addition, plans are currently being finalised to build a replacement for Cockerton Primary School (in conjunction with the Church of England) by 2006. By then fully 22% of our school population will be housed in new, purpose built accommodation, designed for delivering education in the 21st Century.
6. However, this success does not allow the Authority to rest on its laurels, there continues to be a great deal of work to address the on going issues in the remaining schools. The repairs and maintenance costs identified through condition surveys for all Primary schools over the

next five years amounts to £5 million. These costs do not include bringing school buildings up to a standard suitable for education in the 21st Century. For a number of schools (Rise Carr, Reid St, North Road and Corporation Road), which occupy unsuitable and restrictive sites, due to lack of playing fields, simply undertaking further repairs and maintenance does not address their suitability for modern education.

7. The optimum solution would meet all the principles outlined but where resources are likely to be restricted it is unlikely that such a position could be achieved in one move. This will mean that the issues and potential solutions will need to be revisited on a regular basis.

### Rise Carr Primary School

#### *Consultation and Statutory Process*

8. Although only showing a limited number (16.67%) of surplus places at present, this is anticipated to rise to 30.48 % by Sept 2007. However this is after discounting 70 places previously used for teaching as non-Primary phase use. This indicates current surplus capacity in the school of 37% growing to almost 48% in Sept 2007. All current pupils could be accommodated in other local schools with limited disruption. The school building is listed which reduces the flexibility to undertake works to the school and can significantly increase the costs of any repairs or improvements. There is already identified works costing £131,570 to bring the school up to an expected standard, (rather than improvements to aid the delivery of education). The school also suffers from the lack of on site playing field which cannot be remedied due to the nature of the current site. Figure 1 shows the forecast pupil population against current and previous capacity measures.

Fig 1

<b>Year</b>	<b>Pupils</b>	<b>Cap</b>	<b>Surplus</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Prev cap</b>	<b>Surplus</b>	<b>%</b>
Sept 2004	175	210	35	16.67	280	105	37.50
Sept 2005	157	210	53	25.24	280	123	43.93
Sept 2006	154	210	56	26.67	280	126	45.00
Sept 2007	146	210	64	30.48	280	134	47.86

9. Figure 2 shows a comparison of surplus against other schools in the Northern area (based on School Organisation Plan definitions). After making the changes to Rise Carr and Corporation Rd, there are still sufficient places in the remaining schools to cater for all pupils forecasted to attend the schools in this area of town. NB a significant number of children travel from outside the immediate area to attend these schools and based on experience from the closure of Sadberge, not all parents will want transfer to other schools within this area. Forecast numbers are based on current capacity and it is expected that these will reduce in line with capacity, based on experience in other schools, eg Firth Moor, Alderman Leach and Skerne Park on amalgamation.

Fig 2: Forecast pupil numbers for North area of town

School	Cap	Sept 2004			Sept 2005			Sept 2006			Sept 2007		
		Pupils	Surp	%	Pupils	Surp	%	Pupils	Surp	%	Pupils	Surp	%
Corporation Rd	321	286	35	10.9	277	44	13.7	284	37	11.5	279	42	13.08
North Road	462	356	106	22.9	333	129	27.9	320	142	30.7	304	158	34.20
Rise Carr	210	175	35	16.7	157	53	25.2	154	56	26.7	146	64	30.48
Harrowgate Hill	525	479	46	8.76	473	52	9.9	468	57	10.9	465	60	11.43
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,518</b>	<b>1,296</b>	<b>222</b>	<b>14.62</b>	<b>1,240</b>	<b>278</b>	<b>18.31</b>	<b>1,226</b>	<b>292</b>	<b>19.24</b>	<b>1,194</b>	<b>324</b>	<b>21.34</b>

This table shows that from September 2005 North Road and Harrowgate Hill schools have sufficient spare capacity to cater for all of Rise Carr's pupils. Corporation Rd is covered later in the report.

10. The final decision to approve the closure of a school does not, in fact, rest with the Borough Council. Legislation places this decision in the hands of the School Organisation Committee (SOC), a public body with Local Authority, Schools, Diocesan and Further Education representation. Any proposals placed before the SOC must obtain unanimous support from the Member groups. Failure to secure unanimous support will result in the proposals being referred to an adjudicator appointed by the Department for Education & Skills (DfES). In considering any proposals SOC will need to be satisfied that the Council has followed the guidance produced by DfES when considering the closure of a school. The exception to this is when any published proposals do not receive any 'representations' during their statutory publication period. In these circumstances the decision to approve the notices can be delegated to the Director of Education / Children's Services.
11. Having recently overseen the closure of Sadberge Primary School, the Authority is acutely aware that the closure of a school is an extremely emotive issue which will require extensive consultation with staff, parents, governors and the local community. Any timeframe for closure must provide sufficient time for consultation to be undertaken ahead of implementing the more formal statutory processes (the publication of statutory notices and referral to the SOC). Stakeholders will also need to be convinced that the arguments supporting the closure are both compelling and in the best interests of the pupils and staff. In particular, parents will need to have certainty concerning the continuity of education for their children.

#### *Pupil and Staffing Issues*

12. The Education Department has looked very closely at the potential displacement of both children and staff following the closure of Rise Carr Primary School. **Appendix 1** gives a visual representation of the location of the pupils currently attending Rise Carr Primary School. Although there is a large cluster of pupils close to the existing school, a number of pupils choose to travel across the Borough.
13. Of the 159 pupils currently in years Reception to Y5, it is anticipated that 139 could be accommodated at their next nearest schools from September 2005. Key Stage 1 legislation prevents the formation of classes above 30 pupils. However, for a limited period of time the proposals may result in the possible operation of classes of more than 30 in Key Stage 2, where no such legislation exists. This would then potentially allow a much higher

percentage of pupils to go to their nearest school. However, as the Authority cannot insist on the governing bodies of the schools concerned agreeing to this, we need to plan for the possibility of up to 20 pupils having to attend alternate schools to the one next nearest to them.

14. The staffing position is more problematic. As with the closure of Sadberge, all other schools, supported by the Education Department's Human Resources team, would be encouraged to employ any staff facing redundancy from Rise Carr Primary Schools. The potential redundancy costs for all staff at Rise Carr Primary School has been identified as costing a maximum of £120,000, which is based on no re-deployment of the existing staff. Consultation with the respective trade unions has been considered within the timetable for delivering the closure of the school.

#### *Timetable*

15. For educational and budgetary reasons the optimum time to close the school would be at the end of the Summer Term (31st August). This would allow children to complete their school year within a single setting and the transition to a new school would coincide with the beginning of the new school year. In addition, the school would have received their full budget share for the year in the previous April. The balance of the remaining school budget could then be used to offset costs of the changes such as funding to those schools that hit the trigger point for receiving additional funding as a result of an increase of 15 pupils or more.
16. It must be noted that to deliver closure for September 2005, action must begin with immediate effect.
17. Three factors are particularly important in agreeing a closure in 2005. Firstly, a number of the children being relocated from Rise Carr Primary School are anticipated to go to the new Harrowgate Hill Primary School, which opens in September 2005. For financial reasons this school (funded under a Private Finance Initiative) must remain at full capacity. It is highly unlikely therefore that any places will be available at Harrowgate Hill Primary School after September 2005.
18. Secondly, between 2005 and 2006 it is estimated that the number of surplus places in primary schools in Darlington will increase from 6.32% to 7.64%. This represents an additional 104 unfilled school places in the primary sector.
19. Finally, following the work of the Lifelong Learning Scrutiny Committee, schools are anticipating an early announcement on the future direction of primary school education in Darlington. Announcing our intention to close Rise Carr Primary School but delaying the closure beyond August 2005 would leave the school vulnerable and could result in parents removing their children immediately. It would be very difficult in educational and budgetary terms (as seen in Sadberge School) to sustain the school beyond August 2005.

#### *Premises*

20. One added complication Members need to be aware of within this proposal is the release and potential future use of the existing Rise Carr School building. The school has 'listed building' status and any adaptation or change of use is therefore very restricted. Currently Development & Environment are investigating alternative uses for the building / site which

would retain the listed features whilst allowing for potential development. If development is not possible one option could be use by the Authority for storage / staff accommodation but again this would be subject to both Council and planning approval. In the short term the school building may need to be 'boarded up' and ongoing security arranged.

### Gurney Pease and Albert Hill

21. The Best Value Review on Early Years carried out in 2000 suggested that Foundation Stage Units were developed on all appropriate primary school sites, this to be carried out over an undefined period of time. The School Organisation Plan identifies the option of amalgamating nursery schools with infant or primary schools using the same criteria as that for infant and junior school amalgamations. There are falling rolls at both Albert Hill Nursery and Gurney Pease Primary School which are causing concern. Financial projections indicate financial difficulties at Albert Hill as a result of this. The longer term effect of the pupil drops will only exacerbate this issue and it therefore calls into question the future of both schools if they remain separate.

### *Statutory Process and Consultation*

22. This proposal involves the closure of a school (Albert Hill Nursery School) and the change of character of another school, by the addition of a nursery (Gurney Pease), both of which require the publication of statutory notices and approval of the SOC (again, where no representations are received the decision to approve the statutory notices can be delegated to the Director of Education/ Children's Services). A recent similar proposal was recently successful in Darlington, seeing the closure of Eastbourne Nursery School and a change of character by the addition of a nursery at Dodmire Infants. The educational arguments with the creation of a Foundation Stage setting in Gurney Pease are now well rehearsed and would be a central focus of the information provided to all stakeholders.

### *Pupil and Staffing Issues*

23. The intention would be to carry out the necessary consultation and statutory processes immediately, with any necessary alterations to the building taking place over the summer period ahead of the schools coming together in September 2005. Again for educational and budgetary reasons a September date for the creation of the Foundation stage setting is imperative. If the proposal cannot be delivered by September 2005, then the timetable would need to step back to September 2006. As detailed, this is driven by the smooth transition for pupils at the beginning of the academic year and the balance of the remaining school budget being used to contribute to the possible redundancy payments to staff and provide funding for the transfer of nursery pupils to the Primary School.
24. All existing nursery pupils will transfer from Albert Hill to a new Foundation stage setting within Gurney Pease. This is the natural transition for many of the pupils attending Albert Hill and should create a more seamless movement between nursery and Reception year. It is anticipated, with the agreement of the governors of Gurney Pease Primary School, the majority of the existing staff of the Albert Hill Nursery School, with the exception of the Headteacher and administration personnel, would take up positions within the Primary School. As with Rise Carr, other schools would be encouraged to employ any staff facing redundancy, however there remains the potential for redundancy costs of up to £25,000.

### *Timetable*

25. The intention would be to carry out the necessary consultation and statutory processes immediately, with any necessary alterations to the building taking place over the summer period ahead of the schools coming together in September 2005. For educational and budgetary reasons, a September date for the creation of the foundation stage setting is imperative. If the proposal cannot be delivered by September 2005, then the timetable would need to step back to September 2006.

### *Premises*

26. A feasibility study shows that the current buildings at Gurney Pease have 20% surplus capacity. This will allow modifications to be undertaken to the school to convert some of this surplus accommodation into a Foundation stage setting. A detailed estimated cost breakdown using benchmark data from the work carried out at Dodmire Infant School plus additional needs at Gurney Pease puts the cost of building work at some £200,000. This works would be funded from the budget savings made at Albert Hill Nursery and use of the Authority's 2005/06 Modernisation Capital funding.
27. A final factor to consider is the future use of the vacated Albert Hill Nursery building. Currently Development & Environment are investigating alternative uses for the building/site which has some development potential. Any alternative use will be subject to both Council and planning approval. In the short term, to prevent potential vandalism, the school building may need to be 'boarded up' and ongoing security arranged.

### Corporation Road

#### *Consultation and Statutory Process*

28. Although only a limited number (8.1%) surplus at present, this is anticipated to rise to 11.53% by 2007. As with Rise Carr, the capacity at this school has reduced by 100 places without physically reducing the building capacity. This gives physical capacity including these surplus places of 29.76% now and 32.38% in 2007. (See figure 2 for capacity in Northern area).
29. The proposal would see the demolition of the infant area of the existing school and re-instatement of the demolished area as a multi use games area (MUGA), with some refurbishment of the remainder of the school. The current school also has an identified need of £214,000 on condition related works. These, along with refurbishment, demolition and re-instatement works would cost in the region of £350,000. This proposal would build an appropriate size school and deal with the existing premises and site issues whilst retaining a school for a distinctive part of town.
30. This proposal will see the reduction in size of Corporation Road Primary School to a 210 place school. The admission number set for a school does not require any statutory notices or referral to the School Organisation Committee. The physical size or capacity of the building is used to set the school's admission number. To allow the school to reduce in size, part of the existing building will need to be demolished. This will also allow the creation of on site play provision through the creation of a grassed pitch or Multi Use

Games Area (MUGA).

### *Pupils and Staffing*

31. Corporation Road currently has physical capacity for 315 pupils (reduced from 420 following re-designation of areas within the school). The school currently has only 263 on roll, taking in just 24 pupils in September 2004, with a further 10 anticipated to join in January 2005. Forecasts for the 2005/06 intake indicate only 22 places will be filled. As a result, it is felt that the building works to reduce the capacity of the school could be undertaken without the need to relocate any existing pupils from the school. The removal of one key stage block will still leave enough physical teaching space for all the existing pupils in the school (270 at September 2005) and as such there will be no requirement to transfer existing pupils to other schools. As numbers work down to the anticipated 210 (7 years of 30 places), the additional two classrooms can be re-designated for alternative use, including potential wrap-around care, or other non-education use and therefore not form part of the physical capacity assessment.
32. The staffing position is dictated more by the falling pupil numbers than any direct action to reduce the physical capacity of the school. Irrespective of any action taken to reduce the size of the school, the school are going to find it impossible to continue to employ all the existing staff from their annual budget. The falling pupils numbers are currently creating severe financial problems for the school and intensive support from the Authority's finance staff is currently in place.

### *Methodology and Timetable*

33. This is slightly simpler than the previous proposals as statutory proposals are not required. In effect, a meeting will need to be held with governors to approve the proposal to reduce the physical capacity of the building and the respective building alterations. Once approved, the admission levels would reduce, this cannot come into force however until September 2006. This would not prevent building works being carried out in the Summer of 2005 although more realistically, because of the funding required, these may need to be spread across two financial years 05/06 and 06/07.

### *Premises*

34. The key to this proposal is the ability to fund the works to demolish part of the existing buildings, refurbish the remainder and re-instate playing fields / MUGA within the site. An outline feasibility study places the cost of these works at £350,000. Currently £100,000 has been identified to undertake urgent works to the school. £125,000 per year from modernisation funding could also be utilised to deliver the changes.
35. The preferred timing would see the announcement of the reduction in capacity at Corporation Road coincide with the proposal to close Rise Carr. This would ensure that pupils displaced from Rise Carr do not seek to obtain places at Corporation Road only to be affected by later changes at their new school. Whilst the school will reduce in size naturally over time, when the change in capacity / admissions is approved, the Authority can move to reassure staff and minimise any unnecessary stress on staff, parents and pupils at these schools.

## **Legal Implications**

36. This report has been considered by the Borough Solicitor for legal implications in accordance with the Council's approved procedures. There are no issues which the Borough Solicitor considers need to be brought to the specific attention of Members, other than those highlighted in the report.

## **Section 17 of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998**

37. The contents of this report have been considered in the context of the requirements placed on the Council by Section 17 of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998, namely, the duty on the Council to exercise its functions with due regard to the likely effect of the exercise of those functions on, and the need to do all that it reasonably can to prevent, crime and disorder in its area. It is not considered that the contents of this report have any such effect.

## **Council Policy Framework**

38. The issues contained within this report do not represent change to Council policy or the Council's policy framework

## **Decision Deadline**

39. For the purpose of the 'call-in' procedure this represents an urgent matter, due to the timing of consultation and proposed implementation.

## **Key Decisions**

40. Represents a key decision as it affects more than one ward.

## **Recommendation**

41. Cabinet is recommended to agree to:-
- (a) The closure of Rise Carr Primary School subject to the completion of statutory procedures;
  - (b) the amalgamation of Albert Hill Nursery with Gurney Pease Primary School subject to the completion and statutory procedures; and
  - (c) reduce the size of Corporation Rd Primary School and, after building alterations to develop a Multi Use Games Area on site; and

## **Reasons**

42. The recommendations are supported by the following reasons :-
- (a) To improve the efficiency of primary education in Darlington.
  - (b) To improve effectiveness of the use of scarce financial resources.



- (c) To develop educational provision by enhancing facilities at Gurney Pease and Corporation Road.

**Geoffrey Pennington**  
**Director of Education**

**Background Papers**

LLSC Report – Strategic Review of Primary Education Policy Review Group – June 2004

Paul Campbell: Extension 2813