
**FUTURE OF SADBERGE PRIMARY SCHOOL – VARIATION TO PREVIOUSLY
ANNOUNCED CLOSURE DATE**

Responsible Cabinet Member(s) – Councillor S Harker

Responsible Director(s) - Geoff Pennington, Director of Education

Purpose of Report

1. To inform members of the intention to request that, following consultation with the governors, staff and parents of Sadberge CE (Controlled) Primary School, the School Organisation Committee vary the proposed date of closure of the Sadberge Primary School from June 2005 to 31 August 2004.

Information and Analysis

2. On 9 December 2003, Cabinet received a report confirming the School Organisation Committee's decision to close Sadberge CE (Controlled) Primary School as part of a proposal to create a new 'rural East Darlington' School at Middleton St George, confirming the closure of the school from 4 June 2005.
3. Since that decision was taken a number of circumstances have arisen which now require the Authority to review the original planned closure date. The key issues which have arisen concern a delay to the proposed opening of the new Rural East Darlington School at Middleton St George, a dramatic fall in the number of pupils currently attending Sadberge CE (Controlled) Primary School and the potential loss of a key member of the teaching staff from the end of the Summer term (July 2004).

Delayed Building Programme

4. The Diocesan architect responsible for building the new Rural East Darlington School has advised the Authority that the anticipated date for completion of the new school has been delayed. The school is now expected to be complete by early August 2005 with children moving into the school from September 2005. This would see the children currently attending Sadberge Primary School having to move into the temporary accommodation at the current Middleton St George Primary School in early June 2005. The Authority and Sadberge school are concerned that as this will not be the planned 'coming together' of both schools into new accommodation, rather the children of Sadberge school going into already established class groups at Middleton St George, the smooth amalgamation of the pupils could be undermined.

Falling Pupils Numbers

5. The school roll has declined markedly over recent times from a high in 1996 of 105 to a level of 50 at the time the closure was announced. Since then a further 36% pupils have left with only 32 children now in school. In addition to the six Year 6 pupils due to move to secondary education, the parents of a further 10 children have indicated they will be moving to an alternative school from September 2004, leaving a potential pupil population of between 16 –20 at best. This has resulted in the school anticipating a deficit budget in excess of £48,000 for 2004-05.
6. There is genuine concern about the effect the declining pupil numbers will have on the delivery of education for those pupils that remain in school. This factor more than any other has driven the Authority to consider the early closure of the school.

Potential Staff Transfer

7. To support the transition of pupils from the existing Sadberge and Middleton St George Schools into the new school, it was hoped that all existing staff at both schools would be offered posts in the new school. This has not proved possible, but it is possible that one of the two teaching staff at Sadberge will take up a post at the new school. A vacancy has arisen at Middleton St George which the Governors have invited a member of Sadberge's staff to apply under a 'ring fenced' arrangement. The vacancy must, however, be filled from September 2004, which would mean the respective teacher leaving Sadberge from the end of the summer term 2004. This has further raised concerns about the school's ability to continue to deliver the high standard of education currently available to the pupils remaining at the school from September 2004.

Consultation

8. Officers have spoken to the Governors and to all individual staff members of Sadberge Primary School about the potential variation of closure date. In addition, a meeting has also been held with the Headteacher and vice chair of Governors of Middleton St George Primary. A preference exercise to identify the preferred choice of school for all existing Sadberge Primary School pupils has also been undertaken. It is possible to offer places for all children currently attending Sadberge CE (Controlled) Primary School at the existing Middleton St George from September 2004. Where parents have expressed an alternative school choice, officers are currently trying to secure a place for the child in the school of their choice. If this is not possible, parents will be informed of all alternative school places within Darlington primary schools which will include Middleton St George.
9. At their meeting of 19th May 2004 the School Organisation Committee were advised of the potential variation of the date of school closure. A decision was made to amend the date of closure to 31 August 2004, subject to the Authority obtaining the support of the Governing Body of Sadberge Primary School.
10. A meeting will be held with the Governors of Sadberge CE (Controlled) Primary School on Wednesday 26th May 2004 to secure their support for a variation of the date of closure to 31 August 2004. Verbal feedback will be given to Cabinet.

Outcome of Consultation

11. Consultation has taken place with the governing body and staff of the school, which will be extended to parents and further discussion will take place with the governing body.

Legal Implications

12. 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

13. 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

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

Decision Deadline

15. For the purpose of the 'call-in' procedure this does not represent an urgent matter.

Key Decisions

16. This is not a key decision as the report is for information only. The decision rests with the school Organisation Committee.

Recommendation

17. It is recommended that Cabinet Members note the School Organisation Committee's decision to amend the date of closure of Sadberge School from June 2005 to 31 August 2004, subject to receiving support from Sadberge Governing Body.

Reasons

18. The recommendations are supported by the following reasons :-
 - (a) The delay in building programme means that moving pupils during school term would undermine the smooth transition of pupils from Sadberge CE (controlled) Primary School, and the forming of a new school community.

- (b) The falling pupil numbers, anticipated budget deficit and potential loss of a key member of staff will undermine the ability of the school to continue to deliver the present high quality of education to the pupils remaining in school from September 2004, as well as placing remaining staff and management under significant additional pressure.

Geoffrey Pennington
Director of Education

Background Papers

Statutory Notices published on 12th September 2003
SOC report 6 November 2003
Cabinet Paper 4 November 2003
SOC report 19 May 2004

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