



Report No: **74/2011** Public Agenda Item: **Yes**

Title: **Review of Primary School Places in Brixham: Chestnut Primary School and St Margaret Clitherow Catholic Primary School**

Wards Affected: **Berry Head with Furzeham, Churston with Galampton and St Marys with Summercombe Wards**

To: **Cabinet** On: **22 March 2011**

Key Decision: **Yes – Ref. X42/2010**

Change to Budget: **No** Change to Policy Framework: **No**

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1. What we are trying to achieve and the impact on our customers

1.1 Provide a first-class education for Torbay's young people through effective management of school places and school organisation.

2. Recommendation(s) for decision

2.1 That the Mayor, on behalf of the council, concludes the consultation into future options for Primary education in Brixham by closing Chestnut Primary School at the end of the summer 2011 term.

2.2 That all primary schools in Brixham work together and with the Council to secure excellent alternative education provision for those pupils affected by the closure of Chestnut Primary school

2.3 That the People Commissioner carry out a study in the potential future uses for the site of Chestnut Primary School and report back at the end of September 2011.

3. Key points and reasons for recommendations

3.1 The recommendations have been informed by wide consultation held jointly by the Council and the Catholic Diocese.

3.2 The consultation developed out of a series of meetings between the Council, headteachers and chairs of governors of all Brixham schools and the Dioceses. These meetings were prompted by the Council's concern over the significant

level of surplus places in Brixham primary schools and how this was impacting adversely on school leadership and management, financial stability and pupil attainment. There are currently over 270 empty school places amounting to nearly 20% of all available spaces. When school rolls fall, there is less per pupil funding available and, generally, schools find it difficult to reduce costs at the same speed as resources diminish. This means that schools have to make compromises such as combining year groups or using teachers out of specialism in order to avoid deficit budgets. Such actions can impact negatively on pupil attainment.

- 3.3 The Council worked with schools in Brixham and the Dioceses to develop specific options for change and bring forward a public consultation. The rationale for these options for change was outlined in a consultation document, which is included as Appendix 1 and a report on the response to consultation is to be found in Appendix 2.
- 3.4 The response to public consultation revealed that there was significant public support for retaining Chestnut Primary School. Equally, most respondents were realistic and acknowledged that the school roll had fallen in recent years, creating real difficulties for school leaders.
- 3.5 The recommendation is based on professional advice that Chestnut Primary school cannot continue in its current form. The school currently has 104 surplus school places and only 3 families identified Chestnut as their first choice school for the class of September 2010 and 7 for September 2011. The school roll will fall further in September 2011 and the school needs to undergo some important changes including an internal re-organisation from 4 class bases to 3. In addition, the headteacher is to retire at the end of the school year
- 3.6 There are clear risks surrounding a continuation of Chestnut Primary. Numbers on roll are low and declining and applications for places remain alarmingly low. The pupil roll is predicted to be approximately 60 pupils in 2011-2012, with a budget only able to support a very constrained 3 class structure, with all children in mixed age classes. The KS2 class would have to support children aged 8-11 with a high percentage of pupils with special educational needs. The School Improvement Partner reports that the school is at risk of being placed in an Ofsted category due to low attainment at the end of KS2 in 2010 with a low percentage of pupils attaining Level 4+ in both English and Mathematics. Levels of attainment at the end of Key Stage 1 remain well below the National Average. As a small school, Chestnut will face challenges in ensuring that its pupils receive a broad and balanced curriculum. With the impending retirement of the headteacher, and the current staffing situation, the school may struggle to provide evidence of a capacity to improve
- 3.7 The most credible alternative to a closure of Chestnut Primary school would be a hard federation with another school. The impending changes in staffing at Chestnut mean that this federation option would resemble a complex “fresh start” option carrying significant risk. However, this course of action will not reduce the number of surplus places.
- 3.8 The recommendations directly address the issue of surplus places in Brixham, which is currently acute, by the removal of 164 school places.

- 3.9 The latest birth figures (2008-09) for Brixham became available recently. They reveal a significant increase on previous years and at 172 births was the highest since 1999-2000. The average of the intervening 8 years is 138 births. It is too soon to know whether the 2008-09 is the start of an upward trend or simply a “blip”. Whilst this raises questions about whether current surplus school places should be removed through a school closure, the current school organisation cannot sustain the effects of a large number of surplus places during a long period of gradual recovery without a risk to pupil outcomes. This is because school budgets are so dominated by per capita funding formula, those schools with a high number of surplus places will struggle to afford the range and numbers of staff required to deliver good pupil outcomes. The deleterious implications for pupil outcomes should not be underestimated in these circumstances. Action needs to be taken to rectify the surplus in the short term.
- 3.10 One option presented in the consultation was to invite the Catholic Diocese to relocate St Margaret Clitherow Primary School to the Chestnut site, if the Council decided to close Chestnut Primary School. The recommendation is to give further consideration to this and other options for the Chestnut site and report to Cabinet at a later date about the full range of options. The Chestnut site is an important community facility within the higher Brixham community and the school site has potential for developing additional community services such as community play and a community garden. It might also be possible to use spare school accommodation to develop specialist resources for the benefit of the wider community of schools. Some of these ideas need to be explored alongside the potential for the relocation of St Margaret Clitherow Primary School.
- 3.11 Carrying out the recommendation to close the school will require the Council to publish statutory Notices setting out a formal closure proposal. The Council must then allow a period of 6 weeks for Representations. At the end of the period for Representations, the Mayor must then take a formal decision on behalf of the Council whether to implement the Notice of closure. This decision must be taken within two months of the end of period for Representation. It is likely that the Mayor will be invited take this final decision in June or July 2011.

For more detailed information on this proposal please refer to the supporting information attached.

**Dr Carol Tozer
People Commissioner**

Supporting information to Report 74/2011

A1. Introduction and history

- A1.1 The current school organisation in Brixham was established in 2005 after a re-organisation that replaced a mix of primary, infant and junior school arrangements so that there were 6 all through primary schools.
- A1.2 This re-organisation also removed 72 places at a time when the town had 172 surplus places. Since then, pupil numbers have fallen below the totals forecasted and the number of surplus places has increased to over 270.
- A1.3 The Council became concerned over this deeper than expected fall in roll and in 2008 began exploring the options for making changes to school organisation so that there is a better match between supply and demand for school places.
- A1.4 The Council acted to initiate a dialogue over possible changes when some of the difficulties associated with falling rolls began to manifest. These included: financial uncertainty (including potential deficits) for schools, internal school re-organisations, variable pupil attainment, staff redundancies and a very uneven pattern of pupil enrolments.
- A1.5 The question of school organisation has been explored in depth between Council officers, headteachers and chairs of school governing bodies of Brixham schools. Several meetings took place at which the Council, Headteachers and Chairs of Governors identified potential solutions. The Council and schools jointly commissioned independent, expert research into possible future options. The independent research was captured in the "Owen Report". This report provided the basis from which the Council developed a detailed options paper for a wider public consultation with interested parties. The Owen Report is included as Appendix 3.
- A1.6 One of the key questions at the heart of a review of school organisation is whether the existing pattern of 6 primary schools in Brixham provides too many school places and whether reducing the number of schools would enable the finite resources available for school funding to be used more efficiently and effectively to the benefit of all pupils.
- A1.7 The series of meetings between Council officers, Headteachers and Chairs of Governors revealed an enthusiasm among schools in Brixham to support each other in order to mitigate some of the effects of falling rolls, but there was also a clear call for the Council to take action to adjust the supply of places.
- A1.8 Consequently, Council officers developed a consultation paper featuring what they considered to be the best options for change. The consultation paper is attached (Appendix 1) and contains a full explanation of the options and the rationale.
- A1.9 A wide, public consultation was held between 26 November and 7 January 2011 and centred around three options

Option One: Status Quo – no change to school organisation

Option Two: Closure of Chestnut Primary School

Option Three: Closure of Chestnut Primary School and the relocation of St Margaret Clitherow Catholic Primary school to the Chestnut site.

The consultation also allowed for other options to emerge during the consultation.

A.10 A report on the consultation is attached (Appendix 2) and each of the options has attracted some support, though the option that attracted most numerical support were those featuring a continuation of Chestnut Primary School.

A2. Risk assessment of preferred option

A2.1 Outline of significant key risks

A2.1.1 The key risks of the recommendation are:

A2.1.2 There is an inherent risk with service proposals based on population forecasts. The increase in births in 2008-09 may prove to be more than a “blip” and the number of pupils needing primary school places may increase at a higher than forecasted rate. However, even with an accelerated recovery in the birth rate, it would still be several years before surplus places reduce to a sensible level. The recommendations make clear that it is not viable to maintain a school at the Chestnut site at present, but the long term future of the site can be a matter for further consideration.

A2.1.3 The recommendations will require a transition to another school for all pupils currently attending Chestnut and it is widely recognised that pupil transitions can affect progress. This risk will be mitigated through the careful planning for transition and all of the Brixham primary schools have agreed to work together to organise an effective and smooth transition. The Council will oversee the arrangements for transition for pupils with Special Educational Needs.

A2.2 Remaining risks

A2.2.1 None

(Note: A full risk assessment of the proposals is available from the report author.)

A3. Other Options

A3.1 The Council consulted on three options and invited respondents to suggest other options. The rationale behind the Options is explained in the Consultation Paper (Appendix 1).

A3.2 Option One was to make no change to school organisation.

A3.3 Option Two was the “stand alone” closure of Chestnut.

A3.4 Option Three was the option to close Chestnut Primary school and invite the Catholic Diocese to relocate St Margaret Clitherow to the Chestnut site and to

expand the school to 210 places.

A3.5 Option Four was “any other option emerging during consultation”. Some respondents made suggestions that changes to the leadership, management and organisation of Chestnut would allow it to continue and have presented these suggestions under Option Four “Any Other Option”. These suggestions included setting up a federation with another school and suggested that the net should include schools in Devon such as Kingswear Primary School. There were also suggestions made to maintain six schools by reducing the capacity at other schools, Eden Park Primary in particular.

A3.6 The risks of maintaining Chestnut have been explored earlier in the report. Certainly, attempting a simple continuation of the school carries a high risk of failure. The only credible option for a continuation would be through a hard federation with another school and leadership under an Executive Headteacher. However, it may prove difficult to set up federated governance and leadership arrangements that are effective and sustainable over the longer term. The costs of supporting the fresh start and ongoing federation may be higher than anticipated and may restrict the capacity for the Council to support other schools which may experience difficulty. At an earlier stage, and before the Council decided to bring forward a consultation on changes to school organisation, Chestnut Primary School was not successful in brokering a hard federation with any other Brixham school. Establishing a federation between Chestnut and another school would not have any effect on the number of surplus places in Brixham and in itself is no guarantee of increased pupil enrolments at the school.

A4. Summary of resource implications

A4.1 Whatever course of action is followed, there will be resource implications. The recommendations will require resources to be allocated to support staff redundancies and pupil transitions. It is fair to say, however, that even if no change were made to school organisation, Chestnut would face a contraction and the Council might have to assist with the cost of staff redundancies. The Council would also have to make special arrangements to support Chestnut as a vulnerable school. An alternative option such as setting up a federation would also draw on resources to broker the arrangement and secure minimum levels of funding during a period of establishment.

A4.2 On balance the costs of a managed closure are easier to predict and manage compared to the rather more unpredictable costs of ongoing support for a vulnerable school. Children’s Services has finite resources to support schools and concentrating a significant proportion of the available resource on one school will reduce the capacity of the Council to support other schools.

A4.2 In general terms, the current level of surplus school places does not represent the most efficient use of resources.

A5. What impact will there be on equalities, environmental sustainability and crime and disorder?

A5.1 The recommendation will not have any significant effect on access for disabled pupils since alternative schools have broadly comparable levels of physical

access to that of Chestnut Primary School.

A5.2 The recommended action reduces the number of community school places but retains a good mix of diversity of provision between community, Catholic and Church of England primary schools in Brixham.

A6. Consultation and Customer Focus

A6.1 The options for change were explored extensively with headteachers and chairs of governors in Brixham in order to form proposals that were brought forward to a public consultation. A report on the public consultation is included in (Appendix 2)

A7. Are there any implications for other Business Units?

A7.1 The implementation of the recommendations will require the support of the Council's Human Resources team.

Appendices

Appendix 1 Consultation Document "Primary School Places in Brixham: A consultation on possible changes".

Appendix 2 Report on public consultation.

Appendix 3 The "Owen Report" into options for school provision in Brixham

Documents available in members' rooms

None

Background Papers:

The following documents/files were used to compile this report:

File of all responses to consultation