

**Statutory proposal to close The Henry Prince CE (C)  
First School, Mayfield on 31 August 2019**

**Director's Commentary**

1. Government regulations are clear that the county council cannot permit a school to operate a deficit budget without a realistic prospect that it can be repaid.
2. Pupil numbers at The Henry Prince CE (C) First School have continued to fall and the school's substantial deficit budget is worsening. The only way to significantly reduce expenditure is to make cuts to staffing, which governors could not support as this would harm the quality of education and welfare for its pupils.
3. At its meeting on 12 March 2019, the governing body considered all the responses to its statutory consultation, including that from the parish council, which all made clear the desire to retain a school in the village. The responses did not, however, provide a substantial basis for a viable plan that would satisfy the county council and government regulations.
4. To have a realistic prospect of recovering the deficit, pupil numbers were expected to increase every year: to almost 50 by September 2019 (and to 70 by 2024). However, due to the uncertainty, many parents have taken the difficult decision to move their children and only around a total of 10 to 15 pupils are expected in September 2019. This is a grave position as a viable budget cannot be set.
5. Government guidance means that cabinet should adopt a presumption against the closure of rural schools. However, the school is financially and educationally unviable and there are sufficient school places across the area. Whilst the loss of The Henry Prince school would affect the local community, I consider that the case for closure is strong and in the best interests of educational provision in the area.

**Representation from Mayfield Parish Council**

6. The governing body of The Henry Prince has had regard to the legislation and statutory guidance in respect of its consultation and publication of the proposal. I am satisfied that governors have considered the potential impact of the closure of a rural school. The statutory proposal is in Appendix B and Mayfield Parish Council's response, in which several concerns are raised, is in Appendix C.
7. During the earlier consultations conducted by the governing body, parents and the local community suggested the different reasons why parents chose other schools, including working and social links in Ashbourne, the popularity of Queen Elizabeth's Grammar School, Ashbourne Academy (QEGS), wide choice of other schools in Staffordshire and Derbyshire, views on the three-tier system and that The Henry Prince should become a primary school, that it should feed into QEGS and support wraparound care. Whilst some parents who contacted the school but chose an alternative had volunteered their reasons, a more systematic approach would have given governors a fuller understanding. (NB schools do not have

access to the contact details of parents who are offered a Reception place at a different school because their personal data is protected by the county council.)

8. Governors responded to the community feedback and implemented a clear plan of actions and a sub-committee managed the changes: with financial, technical, legal and communications advice and support given by the county council.
9. The plan was to increase pupil numbers every year and remove the deficit over time. However, when governors learned that only 29 of an expected 49 pupils would be on roll in September 2019, they were forced to consult again on the future of the school. (Now, only 10 to 15 pupils are expected in September 2019.)
10. In respect of wraparound care, governors made clear their willingness to work with any registered provider in the village but could not provide their own wraparound care due to the legal, financial and Ofsted implications for providers. Following the consultation feedback in 2017, several parents registered their interest in early years wraparound and the school arranged transport to an offsite provider at a small charge. However, the pilot was suspended due to lower than expected take-up and a cost to the school budget.
11. It is not possible to comment on the belief of a disconnect suggested by the parish council. The evidence, from Ofsted, about the school was that “the leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school, that “pupils were happy and keen to learn” and that “the great majority of parents spoke positively about the school”.
12. I am satisfied with the financial figures and projections quoted by the school, as these have all been commissioned by the county council. As with any school, figures will change over time to reflect changes to actual and budgeted income/expenditure and to actual and projected pupil numbers.
13. The revenue budget for all schools is funded by central government not the county council. The county council and Church of England diocese cannot write off the deficit balance of any school; the diocese has confirmed its position in writing.
14. Upon closure, the deficit balance for The Henry Prince would be taken from the revenue funding allocated to all of Staffordshire’s maintained schools. The county council would, however, pay the costs of closure, which would be approximately:
  - a) one-off £38,000 redundancy costs, plus £6,000 p.a. for all school staff;
  - b) one-off £750 contribution towards uniform costs (if approved by Cabinet);
  - c) up to £19,000 for home to school transport costs (based on £100 per day);
  - d) £8,000 on site security and basic maintenance (split with the diocese).

#### Rural Primary Schools

15. As a rural school, there should be a presumption against its closure and, in reaching a decision, statutory guidance requires cabinet to carefully consider relevant factors including:

Alternatives to closure:

16. Over the years, governors have engaged fully with local meetings of schools to discuss multi-academy trusts (MATs) and a schools' alliance. Governors have made nine confidential approaches to neighbouring schools to discuss ways to reduce costs and share resources, principally through federation, and one approach to use The Henry Prince building to teach some of their pupils. Despite governors' willingness to participate in a MAT, federation or alliance, no proposals have been made for the school to consider. Officers have discussed federations and MATs with the Regional Schools Commissioner and Diocesan Board, however both consider them to be unrealistic due to the school's situation.

Transport implications:

17. Free school transport for pupils would be provided from the catchment area to Dove CE (VC) First, Ryecroft CE (C) Middle and Thomas Alleyne's High. Parents would need to make travel arrangements when visiting their children's school, which, as usual, would be more difficult for those without access to transport.

Size of the school and whether it puts the children at an educational disadvantage:

18. I consider the closure to be in the best interests of education. With such low pupil numbers, it is not possible for The Henry Prince to set a balanced budget without detriment to the education and welfare of its pupils. Dove First, the proposed catchment school, was judged good by Ofsted in 2011 and moved to a new building in September 2016. It is a growing school with 96 pupils on roll (January 2019), a larger budget and greater resources and breadth of curriculum.

Overall and long term impact on local people and the community:

19. The school's impact on village life has waned as pupil numbers have halved and if the school closed the parish council and parish church would gain added importance. Nevertheless, the loss of the village school will be felt by the whole community and, in particular, by the children and families who would form links around their new schools. The schools' assessment of the impact is in Appendix B whilst the parish council's response, on pages 4 and 5 of Appendix C, elaborates on Mayfield's strategic village status in the Local Plan and the risks of less of investment and growth in local housing and employment and of Mayfield becoming a "dormitory" village. (NB The status of settlements would only be reassessed when East Staffordshire Borough Council undertakes a review of its Local Plan, which would include engagement with parish councils, There may be changes to the criteria for settlement status that may or may not affect Mayfield.)

Wider school organisation/capacity of good schools to accommodate displaced pupils:

20. I am satisfied that there is sufficient capacity in neighbouring schools that are judged good or better by Ofsted. The county council leaders in Staffordshire and Derbyshire have exchanged letters and are satisfied with the availability of school places if The Henry Prince closed. In response to planned new housing in Ashbourne, Derbyshire County Council has confirmed the current expansion of St Oswald's CE Primary School, around 1½ miles away, and preparations for a further scheme at Ashbourne Hilltop Primary, if required to meet demand.

**Helen Riley, Deputy Chief Executive and Director for Families and Communities**