

# Holy Cross CE Primary School Closure Consultation



Consultation document for pupils, parents and carers, staff, governors, and other stakeholders

## East Sussex County Council is proposing to close Holy Cross CE Primary School on 31 December 2023

### PART ONE

#### Introduction

East Sussex County Council (the local authority) has a statutory duty to ensure there are sufficient school places to meet demand and is committed to working in close partnership with schools, academy trusts, dioceses, and key partners to ensure that the supply of school places across East Sussex is in the right location, is of sufficient size, is viable and of good quality.

We know that schools can face challenges in meeting pupils' needs, particularly where pupil numbers are falling, and that in some cases, changes to the pattern of school organisation in an area can help secure the viability of schools, improve opportunities, and raise standards.

On 22 May 2023 the Lead Member for Education and Inclusion, Special Educational Needs and Disability gave approval for a consultation to take place on a proposal to close Holy Cross CE Primary School with effect from 31 December 2023.

This consultation document is for pupils, parents and carers, staff, members of the Interim Executive Board, the local school community, and other stakeholders. We welcome your views on the proposal. The local authority will consider all the views put forward during the consultation period before a decision is taken on whether to proceed with the statutory process to close the school.

## PART TWO

### Background to the proposal

Holy Cross CE Primary School is a Voluntary Aided (VA) school located in Uckfield. It has a Published Admission Number (PAN) of 30 and capacity for 210 pupils.

In recent years, the school has faced many challenges relating to leadership, retention of staff, quality of provision and low pupil numbers which, despite significant support from both the local authority and the Diocese of Chichester (the diocese), it has not been able to overcome. As a result, the school is considered extremely vulnerable. The challenges are set out in more detail below.

### Pupil numbers

The school has experienced a reduction in its popularity in the local community for some years. This is illustrated in Table 1 which shows the number of first preferences received by the school in the last seven years against its PAN of 30.

Table 1

Holy Cross CE Primary School	Year R first preferences						
	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23
Yr R first preferences	6	9	11	8	10	11	7

Source: Admissions data

This reduction in popularity has led to falling pupil numbers going back over a decade. Table 2 illustrates the level of pupil number decline in the last ten years, a fall of 62 pupils, or 50%.

Table 2

Holy Cross CE Primary School	Primary capacity and primary total number on roll									
	2013/14	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23
Primary capacity	210	210	210	210	210	210	210	210	210	210
Primary total NOR	124	126	117	106	110	105	84	77	76	62
Surplus places	86	84	93	104	100	105	126	133	134	148
Surplus places %	41%	40%	44%	50%	48%	50%	60%	63%	64%	70%

Source: January school censuses

In recent months the school has lost further pupils, linked to the leadership challenges the school has faced and the high turnover of teaching staff. At the time of writing, pupil numbers had fallen to 24, meaning there are 186 surplus places in the school (89% of capacity). Only seven first preference applications were received by the school for a place in Reception in September 2023. This reduced to two following withdrawals from five families. Two places were allocated on National Offer Day; given the uncertain future faced by the school, the families were also offered places at alternative schools should they wish to accept them instead.

### Demand for places in Uckfield and the surrounding area

Births in Uckfield have fallen significantly in recent years, from 189 in-area births in 2011/12 to 137 in 2020/21. This has resulted in low pupil numbers in the town, with historically popular schools carrying surplus places.

At the January 2023 school census, there were 1,053 children on roll across the five primary schools in Uckfield, with surplus capacity standing at 16%. Table 3 illustrates this.

Table 3

Uckfield primary schools	Primary capacity and primary total number on roll							
	Year R	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4	Year 5	Year 6	Total
Year group capacity	180	180	180	180	180	180	180	1260
Year group NOR	138	146	159	157	160	134	159	1053
Surplus places	42	34	21	23	20	46	21	207
Surplus places %	23%	19%	12%	13%	11%	26%	12%	16%

Source: January 2023 school census

Uckfield schools: Harlands Primary School, Holy Cross CE Primary School, Manor Primary School, Rocks Park Primary School, St Philip's Catholic Primary School

At the same time, there was 14% surplus capacity in the rural primary schools surrounding Uckfield, as can be seen in Table 4.

Table 4

Rural primary schools near Uckfield	Primary capacity and primary total number on roll							
	Year R	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4	Year 5	Year 6	Total
Year group capacity	90	90	90	90	90	90	90	630
Year group NOR	59	72	82	83	94	76	80	546
Surplus places	31	18	8	7	0	14	10	88
Surplus places %	34%	20%	9%	8%	0%	16%	11%	14%

Source: January 2023 school census

Surrounding rural schools: Bonners CE Primary School, Buxted CE Primary School, Fletching CE Primary School, Framfield CE Primary School, Little Horsted CE Primary School

Pupil forecasts in the local authority's [School Organisation Plan 2022 to 2026](#) indicate that intakes to Reception in Uckfield schools will remain low in the forthcoming years, with surplus capacity in the town expected to reach 21% by 2025/26.

## Quality of education

The school has struggled to secure good outcomes for pupils over time, this is reflected in the grades received in Ofsted Inspections, described below.

- 2006 - Full Inspection - Satisfactory
- 2009 - Full Inspection - Satisfactory
- 2013 - Full Inspection - Requires Improvement
- 2015 - Full Inspection - Requires Improvement
- 2017 - Full Inspection - Good
- 2022 - Ofsted completed a 'Section 8' or ungraded inspection having previously judged the school to be Good during the graded or full inspection in 2017. The Section 8 inspection found that *'There has been no change to this school's overall judgement of good as a result of this initial (section 8) inspection. However, the evidence gathered suggests that the inspection grade might not be as high if a full inspection were carried out now. The next inspection will therefore be a full (section 5) inspection'*.

As a result of the falling pupil numbers, the school has had to reorganise its class structure since the beginning of the 2022/23 academic year. Having started the year with three classes, there are now only two classes, for Reception to Year 2 and Years 3 to 6. This, together with the significant turnover of teaching staff has impacted on the quality and consistency of education. This is a major concern to both the diocese and the local authority which has provided significant resources to support the school in terms of additional financial resources and officer capacity, particularly around leadership, additional support for teaching, safeguarding and support for pupils with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND).

## School leadership

In recent years the school has experienced several changes of leadership and, therefore, a lack of stability in this area. The last substantive headteacher left on 31 December 2021. At that point, the then governing board approached the local authority for support with interim leadership. An interim leader was deployed to the school, full time, from January 2022. A number of different and temporary leadership arrangements were subsequently put in place at the school between November 2022 and February 2023. Additional leadership capacity is currently being provided to ensure sufficient capacity is in place to support the school and the vulnerable families throughout this turbulent time. Due to the falling roll at the school and the increasing pressure on the budget, the school cannot now afford a substantive full-time headteacher.

The local authority issued a warning notice to the governing board in February 2023 pursuant to s. 60 (2) b) of the Education and Inspections Act 2006 (as amended) because '*there has been a long term, serious breakdown in the way the school is managed or governed which is prejudicing, or likely to prejudice, such standards of performance*'. In responding to the warning notice, the governing board concluded that the right course of action was for the local authority to apply to the Department for Education (DfE) to appoint an Interim Executive Board (IEB) to replace the governing board. Governors took this decision having explored all the options available to secure the sustainability of the school and to ensure that appropriate support was in place to oversee the next steps for the school. The local authority applied to the DfE in February 2023 for an IEB, which was approved by the DfE's Regional Director.

## Interim Executive Board

In March 2023, the IEB met to review the due diligence undertaken by the previous governing board and consider the current situation of the school. Taking into account these findings, the subsequent further drop in pupil numbers, the challenges around recruitment and the quality of provision, the IEB agreed that the school is no longer viable and cannot meet the needs of its children and should therefore close.

On 21 March 2023, the IEB wrote to the Secretary of State for Education asking that the local authority be directed to close the school on 31 August 2023. The DfE's Regional Director responded to the IEB on 30 March 2023 stating:

*'The evidence you have presented clearly indicates the belief of the Interim Executive Board, East Sussex County Council and The Diocese of Chichester that closure of the school is in the best interests of the children who attend the school and the wider community. Your report highlights concerns about leadership and the quality of education which have been exacerbated by rapidly falling pupil numbers. The low number of pupils in the school is unlikely to recover and as a result there is little likelihood that a Multi Academy Trust would be willing to support the school.'*

However, the Regional Director did not agree to the IEB's request to issue a direction to close the school as the DfE stated it was for the local authority to take forward a statutory closure process if it considers the school to be unviable. On 26 April 2023, the IEB considered the Regional Director's response and wrote to both the local authority and the diocese requesting that the local authority should follow a statutory process to close the school.

### **Alternative options to closure**

The local authority and the diocese have supported the school to try to identify a long term solution for the school without success. The low pupil numbers and the resulting significant impact this has on its budget means that the school is not an attractive proposition for school partners. This can be evidenced by some of the options we have explored:

- Brokering a school improvement partnership with the Diocese of Chichester Academy Trust (DCAT) with a view to the school joining the multi academy trust. This proved unsuccessful as DCAT concluded that the school was not viable.
- Supporting the school to explore partnership with a local church school. This again proved unsuccessful as the proposed partner school decided that there were too many challenges, including financial viability, to partner with the school.
- Supporting the school to explore joining another local federation. This again proved unsuccessful as the proposed federation similarly decided that there were too many challenges, including financial viability, to partner with the school.
- The diocese has supported the governing board to explore academy trust options with all existing Diocese of Chichester academy trusts, however, all the trusts expressed concern about the school's financial viability and subsequent impact on their own trusts. The falling numbers on roll and the impact this has on the school's budget has meant that the school is simply not attractive to academy trusts or other school partners.

At the current time all alternative options to closure have therefore been considered unless the consultation raises any other option. Unfortunately, the local authority and the diocese believe there are no other viable options available to the school.

### **Admissions and transport arrangements**

Should Holy Cross CE Primary School close on 31 December 2023, parents and carers of children at the school would be able to express a preference for a place at an alternative school. Parents and carers would be asked to complete an admissions application form and to name up to three schools they would prefer their child/ren to attend. Parents and carers would be offered a school place either at one of their preferred schools named on the application form or, if this is not possible, at the nearest school to the child's home where a place is available. We would try to meet parents and carers preferences wherever possible but cannot guarantee to do so. The allocation of places would be made in line with the admissions policy as set out in the school admissions booklet which is available on the East Sussex website at:

<https://www.eastsussex.gov.uk/educationandlearning/schools/admissions/>

Free home to school transport would only be provided for eligible pupils who meet the criteria set out in the link below.

<https://www.eastsussex.gov.uk/educationandlearning/schools/transport/>

For information about which schools have spare places and whether your child/ren would qualify for free home to school transport please contact the admissions and transport team on 0300 330 9472.

## **PART THREE**

### **Education and Inspections Act 2006 (as amended) and the School Organisation (Establishment and Discontinuance of Schools) Regulations 2013**

In accordance with Section 15 of the Education and Inspections Act 2006 (as amended) and the School Organisation (Establishment and Discontinuance of Schools) Regulations 2013, there is a defined statutory process which local authorities must follow when proposing to close a maintained school. There are five stages to the statutory process:

#### **Consultation**

The publication of this consultation document marks a period of consultation during which the views of interested parties are sought and which will be considered by the local authority.

The local authority is consulting with pupils, parents and carers, staff, members of the IEB, other local schools and trade unions. We are also consulting with a wide range of other groups and organisations including early years providers, the district and town councils, the local MP and the Church of England and Catholic dioceses.

The consultation period runs from 9 June to 21 July 2023. Following the consultation period, a report on the outcome of the consultation will be considered by the local authority's Lead Member for Education, Inclusion and Special Educational Needs and Disability at a decision making meeting on 11 September 2023. The Lead Member will decide whether to proceed with the proposal.

#### **Publication**

If approval is given to proceed with the proposal, the local authority would publish a statutory proposal relating to the proposed closure. This would likely happen in September 2023.

#### **Representation**

Publication of a statutory proposal would trigger a period of representation which must last for a period of four weeks. During this period, any person or organisation may object to or comment on the proposal by sending their representations to the local authority.

#### **Decision**

The local authority must make a decision on the proposal within two months of the end of the representation period. The Lead Member would consider any responses received during the representation period before making a final decision on the proposal at a meeting likely to be held in November 2023.

#### **Implementation**

If the proposal is approved, Holy Cross CE Primary School would close on 31 December 2023.

## PART FOUR

### How you can give your views

The consultation period runs from 9 June to 21 July 2023.

You can give your views by:

- Completing the online survey on the local authority's [consultation hub](#)
- Emailing the local authority at: [school.consultations@eastsussex.gov.uk](mailto:school.consultations@eastsussex.gov.uk)
- Attending a meeting for parents and carers at the school on Wednesday 21 June 2023 from 6pm to 7pm.

All comments must be received by **21 July 2023**, or they cannot be considered.

If you need this information in a different format or language, or you would like help to complete the survey please contact us at [school.consultations@eastsussex.gov.uk](mailto:school.consultations@eastsussex.gov.uk)

**Please submit only one response per person to this consultation**

This consultation forms stage one of the process required when a school closure is proposed. The information provided in this document is intended to be sufficient for people to form a view on the proposal. The local authority will consider views and concerns raised during the consultation period before making a decision on whether to proceed with the proposal.

We will not be able to acknowledge written responses or enter into correspondence with interested parties during or after the consultation period.



# Holy Cross CE Primary School Closure Consultation



Our proposal is to close Holy Cross CE Primary School on 31 December 2023.

The local authority would welcome your views on the proposal. The consultation period finishes on 21 July 2023.

**1. Do you support the proposal to close Holy Cross CE Primary School on 31 December 2023?**

Yes

No

Undecided

**2. If Holy Cross CE Primary School was to close, how would this directly impact on you and your family?**

**3. Please let us know if you have any alternative suggestions on how we should address the significant challenges the school faces, as set out in the document.**

**4. Which of the following best describes you?**

- Pupil at Holy Cross CE Primary School
- Parent/carer of a child at Holy Cross CE Primary School
- Member of staff at Holy Cross CE Primary School
- Member of the IEB at Holy Cross CE Primary School
- Parent/carer of a child at a local school
- Member of staff at a local school
- Governor at a local school
- Other (please say)

