

Members of the Kirklees Cabinet (the council's main decision making body) met again on May 29th to consider future options for Almondbury Community School.

The council is proposing to:

- Change the age range of the school from ages 3-16 to ages 3-11, closing the secondary phase. Closure would take place over a period of time and it is proposed that pupils would be able to remain on the roll of Almondbury Community School (ACS) for the academic year to July 2020. When secondary pupils needed to change schools, their transitions would be carefully planned with parents and carers so that disruption was kept to a minimum.
- At present, a total of approximately 300 pupils attend the secondary phase (which covers Year 7 to Year 11) and this means half of the available places are not taken. This number of pupils could be accommodated in the future at other schools if adjustments were made and a small number of extra places created at King James's School.
- It is also proposed to reduce the primary phase to 30 children per year. Primary places (up to and including Year 6) are under-subscribed so the number would gradually reduce to 210 across the school. Children who already attend primary school at ACS would not be affected because they could remain until the end of Year 6. There would still be enough places across local schools to meet demand for places.

Our absolute priority in bringing forward these proposals is to help children and young people have the best start in life. We want all children to enjoy a broad curriculum in a setting which is secure and sustainable for the long term. It is widely recognised that this has a major impact on achieving good outcomes which, in turn, increase future opportunities for young people.

Almondbury Community School faces major challenges with its breadth of curriculum and standards of education. In a recent Ofsted inspection, it was judged to be 'inadequate' and requiring 'special measures'. Low pupil numbers at both primary and secondary level have also placed the school in a position where it is very difficult to be financially viable. This restricts the curriculum, meaning some students are unable to pursue certain subjects and career paths.

A vast number of factors were taken into account before the proposals were put forward to close the secondary phase of ACS and retain a primary school on the site. Cabinet members have decided to move to the next stage in the decision-making process, which is to publish statutory proposals in June. This will provide another chance to express your views.

Below, we have outlined some of the key points and questions that have been raised about these proposals, along with our responses. Another report will be considered by Cabinet soon.

**My child enjoys attending ACS and we are happy that they are at an all-through school. Why are you proposing to close the secondary phase?**

All-through schools have many advantages, but the low pupil numbers across ACS have placed it in an extremely difficult financial position. It also faces a number of challenges with standards of education. If the proposals are eventually approved, all children in the secondary phase will be able to access a place in a nearby school. We will work very closely with affected families and take account of their circumstances so that each child is able to enjoy a high standard of care and education at their new school.

We know that people feel strongly about these possible changes. It's also very important for secondary schools to offer the widest possible curriculum and give young people a good level of

choice in what they study. This can have a major impact on young people achieving their desired outcomes, enhancing their opportunities in life.

**If you close the secondary phase, there won't be a high school in the local area.**

It is accepted nationally that, for most young people, up to three miles is viewed as a reasonable distance to travel to secondary school. There would be at least one high school within this distance for all families in the current ACS catchment area. For example, King James's is around 0.6 miles from the ACS site. Netherhall Learning Campus High School and Newsome High School are both also within three miles. There would continue to be a primary school on the ACS site, serving local families.

**Why don't you convert the school into an academy and give it time to improve?**

The council doesn't decide on academy orders – this is done by the Regional Schools Commissioner. However, it is national policy that all schools which require 'special measures' must become an academy instead of being maintained by the local authority. The Regional Schools Commissioner has now issued an academy order for ACS.

The Regional Schools Commissioner has been given evidence that ACS is viable, both financially and educationally, as a primary school. They have informed us they will be selecting a suitable Multi Academy Trust 'sponsor' to operate the school in future. Their letter also states: *"The Secretary of State has the power to revoke this academy order. This would only happen in exceptional circumstances, predominantly where, following due diligence, a school is judged to be financially unviable. Where this is the case, the expectation is that the local authority will take steps to close the school"*.

In the meantime, leadership arrangements at ACS have been strengthened and this has increased stability across the school.

**What about the impact on other schools if they have to take in extra pupils?**

The proposals include the expansion of King James's School by 30 places per year group over time. We know this would need a financial investment in the facilities and we would be committed to spending the money. Other high schools mentioned in the proposals are Netherhall Learning Campus High School and Newsome High School. Careful transition arrangements would be put in place to ensure there is no negative impact on standards at other schools. We are working in partnership with schools in the area and all share the same priority of supporting children and young people to fulfil their potential.

**Why was All Hallows School allowed to widen its age range? This had a detrimental effect on pupil numbers at ACS.**

The final decision about All Hallows was not in the council's hands. We did not support it because of the likely detrimental impact on neighbouring schools, including ACS, in terms of increasing the number of places available. The council did not approve those proposals but, following an appeal, the Schools Adjudicator overturned the council's decision. The change is just one of several factors which have led to ACS being in a very difficult position.

**Closing the secondary phase of ACS would impact on children's education and a move elsewhere would unsettle them, especially children with special educational needs (SEN).**

We want all children and young people to have the best start in life. Anybody moving school would be helped through a carefully planned transition to reduce disruption as much as possible. As part of the recent consultation, one-to-one meetings were offered to all families who have children at the high school or have been allocated a place there from September this year. We will continue working closely with those families.

We would aim for transitions to involve groups of children so that friendship and wider support groups can be retained. For those with SEN, their needs will be a central part of the transition arrangements and they will receive specific support. We continue to strongly support children with SEN across Kirklees.

**There is a great deal of uncertainty for children, including those who are due to start Year 7 in September.**

We are dealing with the proposals as quickly as possible so that this issue is resolved - we absolutely appreciate that people need certainty. All families whose children were offered a place in ACS Year 7 from September have been invited to a one-to-one meeting, so that we can discuss potential options and fully understand their circumstances.

An admission of Year 7 pupils is planned for ACS in 2019. If any parent/carers wanted to look for a different alternative, we would explore that with them. All pupils who do start Year 7 at ACS would be able to remain on the roll of ACS for the academic year to July 2020. During that time, their transition to a different school would be carefully planned.

**What about the impact on staff at ACS if these proposals go ahead?**

We would support their wellbeing and work alongside staff, trade unions and other schools to look at how to access other opportunities. If the proposals are approved, other schools in the area will be increasing their pupil numbers and will need additional staff.

**What would happen to buildings on the ACS site that are no longer needed, and what would happen to the swimming pool?**

The future of school buildings will be considered after a final decision is made on the proposals. However we recognise that the site, including the pool facility, is important to the community.

**There is a possibility of significant house building taking place in the local area. Wouldn't that mean more school places are needed in future?**

The available figures show a declining child population in Kirkheaton, Lepton and Grange Moor. New homes would be built over a number of years and are likely to even out the child population, rather than creating more demand for places than currently exists.

**Why do you want to make the primary phase smaller by reducing it to 30 pupils per year group?**

Just like the secondary phase at ACS, the primary phase is under-subscribed. This can lead to financial issues and a problem with long-term viability. We are looking to achieve pupil numbers that are more in line with demand – and therefore secure the future of primary education on site. There would still be enough primary places in the area and the current pupils at ACS would not be affected as they can remain there to the end of Year 6.

**Cabinet have now decided to move ahead to the next stage in the proposals and to publish legal notices. Where are they published and how can I express my views?**

The statutory proposals are part of a legal process and statutory notices will be published on the council website and in the local press. They will include details of how to contact the council if you would like to comment on the proposals.