

Proposal to Amalgamate Hope CE Primary School, Worthen CE Primary School and St Mary's CE Primary School Westbury Consultation Document

Introduction

Shropshire Council is seeking the views of parents/carers, pupils, staff, governors and other interested parties on the proposal to amalgamate Hope CE Primary School, Worthen CE Primary School and St Mary's CE Primary School Westbury in the academic year 2017/18, consolidating provision onto the current Worthen CE Primary School site, resulting in the closure of the sites at Hope and Westbury.

Shropshire Council made the decision to consult on this proposal on 14 September 2016, following a decision on 6 July 2016 of the governing body of the Hope Worthen Westbury Trinity - A Federation of CE Primary Schools, to pursue this route to securing good and better education provision for the pupils in their three schools. Please note that the federation does not include, or have any association with, Trinity CE Primary School in Ford.

The Council is inviting responses within the consultation period to help Councillors make a full and informed decision regarding the future of the school. It is important to recognise that at this stage in the process no decisions have been taken and the responses to the consultation will be fully considered. This document sets out the key facts of the proposal and the ways in which you can express your views. There will also be meetings with senior Council officers at which the proposal will be explained in more detail and you will be able to attend and ask questions.

This document cannot set out all the facts which could be relevant. During the consultation period other information will be collated and used to inform any decision. As part of the consultation the Council welcomes your views on what additional information would be useful. All the information in the document is understood to be correct at the time of publication but if you do have questions or comments, or would like clarification on the process, please let us know.

The results of the consultation, including notes of the meetings and all written submissions, will be set out for Cabinet members on 21 December 2016 when they will consider whether to take the proposal on to the next stage. It is important to remember that the purpose of the consultation is to inform Councillors.

Description of proposal

The Council is consulting on a proposal to amalgamate Hope CE Primary School, Worthen CE Primary School and St Mary's CE Primary School Westbury, consolidating provision onto the current Worthen CE Primary School site in the academic year 2017/18, which will result in the closure of the sites at Hope and Westbury.

The Hope Worthen Westbury federation was established in May 2016 to address a range of challenges facing the three schools. These included difficulties in recruiting and retaining effective leadership and teaching staff, managing the impact of falling pupil numbers in each of the schools, maintaining and improving educational standards, and securing the long term sustainability of education.

St Mary's CE Primary School Westbury and Worthen CE Primary School received 'Requires Improvement' judgements from Ofsted inspections in February 2014 and November 2015 respectively. The current judgement of the headteacher and the local authority is that an Ofsted re-inspection is likely to confirm that both schools will still require improvement. While Hope CE Primary School was judged by Ofsted in October 2013 to be 'Good', the rapid decline in pupil numbers, the consequential impact on the school's budget and difficulties in maintaining appropriate staffing levels mean that the school is vulnerable to a less favourable Ofsted inspection outcome.

Shropshire Council has therefore decided, based on the recommendation of the governing body of the Hope Worthen Westbury federation on 6 July 2016, to formally consult on the proposal to amalgamate Hope CE Primary School, Worthen CE Primary School and St Mary's CE Primary School Westbury in the academic year 2017/18, which will require the closure of the sites at Hope and Westbury and the enlargement of the current site at Worthen to accommodate the pupils from the three schools.

Background to the proposal

The consultation was approved on 14 September 2016 at a Shropshire Council Cabinet meeting. The report presented at the meeting is available on the Shropshire Council website at www.shropshire.gov.uk. click on 'Council and democracy' and then 'Cabinet and lead councillors' and then click through to the agenda and papers for the 14 September 2016 meeting. Alternatively click on the link [Council report 14 September 2016](#) (item 8 on the agenda).

In the Department for Education statutory guidance for opening and closing maintained schools, the proposal is an amalgamation, comprising of the closure of one school (or more) and the enlargement of an existing school to accommodate displaced pupils.

The statutory guidance states that there is no prescribed timescale for implementation following any final decision by Cabinet to close a maintained school. While the target date is September 2017, there will need to be further discussions with the key stakeholders to confirm the actual date for implementation, with account taken of any requirements relating to, for example, the statutory consultation and determination of admissions arrangements, dissolution of the current federation and any other necessary permissions. Subject to the above, the intention is that the implementation takes place in the academic year 2017/18, at the earliest possible date.

Why has this proposal been brought forward?

The Hope Worthen Westbury Trinity– A Federation of CE Primary Schools was established in May 2016, bringing together three schools under the leadership of a single governing body and an acting headteacher. The three schools are Hope CE Primary School, Worthen CE Primary School and St Mary’s CE Primary School Westbury. In July 2016 the federation appointed a permanent headteacher.

While the title of the federation includes the word ‘Trinity’, this relates to the coming together of three schools and has nothing to do with Trinity CE Primary School in Ford, which has no formal association with the federation.

All three schools have faced substantial challenges in recent years, including the recruitment and retention of headteachers for each school and other teaching staff, Ofsted inspection judgements that are not yet good for two of the schools, falling pupil numbers and the associated pressures this has had on the schools’ budgets.

Worthen and Westbury both currently have ‘Requires Improvement’ judgements from Ofsted, while Hope was judged as ‘Good’ at its last inspection. All three schools remain vulnerable to less favourable inspection judgements, as outcomes for pupils can be more volatile in small schools with small cohorts and the capacity to improve is more limited than in larger schools. Without positive action by the leadership of the federation to change, it is anticipated that numbers will continue to fall. In addition, and in certain circumstances, Ofsted inspection judgements that are less than good can lead to intervention from the Department for Education. This has two possible outcomes: academisation via sponsorship by a multi-academy trust or school closure.

The three schools have collectively lost 27 pupils between January 2016 and the beginning of the autumn summer term in September 2016, down from 114 to 87. The fall in pupil numbers is in part due to the cohort sizes in the individual schools being so small, with parents citing this as their main reason for removing children. With pupil numbers being the key basis on which schools receive their annual funding, this means that revenue is falling and budgets are and will become increasingly difficult to balance.

The governing body of the federation has a responsibility for, and a strong commitment to, securing and sustaining good or better outcomes for all their pupils. It is their view that this cannot be achieved with the current organisational structures and so governors have been considering an alternative arrangement, based on consolidating provision onto a single site.

This is reflected in the federation’s vision for the longer term future of education in their community:

‘We will actively explore the benefits of bringing the children together on one site. As pupil numbers are predicted to remain low at all three schools well into the future and therefore funding for our schools continues to be greatly reduced, we will investigate whether the children will receive a higher quality of education, care and social interaction in one school.’

From the start of the autumn term in September 2016, pupils of school age from all three schools have been taught on the Worthen site, whilst pre-schools have remained open at Hope and Westbury. This has had a number of advantages already, with pupils having the opportunity to learn and socialise in bigger groups of children of their own age. Children are no longer taught in whole key stage classes, but in classes spanning no more than two year groups. Staff have had the opportunity to plan and collaborate together, offering more opportunities for continuing professional development. The division of roles and responsibilities across a larger team of staff has created more capacity for teachers to ensure quality first education. New arrangements such as transport have worked smoothly.

Criteria

The Council has endorsed criteria for school organisation which link with the proposal as follows:

- **Quality of education**

Worthen CE Primary School and St Mary's CE Primary School Westbury both received judgements of 'Requires Improvement' from Ofsted in February 2014 and November 2015 respectively, while Hope CE Primary School received a judgement of 'Good' at its last inspection in October 2013.

Key priorities at Westbury included:

- Ensuring teaching is good by making sure that:
 - pupils are not given work that is too easy or too hard
 - teachers improve older pupils solving of mathematical problems
- Raising expectations for older pupils attitudes towards learning
- Improving leadership by making sure that:
 - the impact of support for pupils who have additional needs is checked rigorously
 - in mathematics, work is consistently hard enough for pupils.

Key priorities at Worthen included:

- Improving the quality of teaching and raising achievement, particularly in writing and mathematics by ensuring that:
 - all teachers expectations of what children can and should achieve are sufficiently high, especially in Years 3 and 4
 - marking in mathematics provides pupils with clear guidance on how they can improve their work
 - skills in spelling, punctuation and grammar are accurately taught and are applied in all pieces of writing
 - sufficiently challenging pieces of work are set for more able pupils, particularly in Key Stage 1 and Years 3 and 4
- Improving leadership and management by:
 - ensuring monitoring and evaluation undertaken by leaders within school is used to set clear targets for improvements in teaching and are accurately linked to the national teachers standards

- establishing a more consistent system of practice in assessing pupils' writing and providing opportunities for teachers to compare and confirm their assessments with staff from this and other schools
- Improving governors' understanding of the effectiveness of the school so that they can provide appropriate support and challenge.

While many of these key priorities have already been addressed, smaller schools are vulnerable to less favourable inspection judgements. The outcomes for pupils can be very volatile, in part due to small cohorts. It can also be difficult to recruit and retain highly effective staff, including headteachers.

The school governors and headteacher are confident that the amalgamation will offer continuing opportunities to improve standards. All of the schools are currently receiving a high or medium level of challenge and support from the local authority via the school performance monitoring arrangements for maintained schools.

The local authority's view is that the rationalisation of the provision on to a single site will provide a range of additional benefits:

- improved curriculum that is more appropriate to the age of the children as they will be in classes of only two year groups rather than a whole key stage
- opportunity to improve educational outcomes through more targeted teaching in smaller classes/groups and a better range of subject specialism
- wider opportunities for personal and social development, including through broader friendship groups, as there are more children in the school
- opportunity to distribute leadership and management, as well as subject and aspect roles and responsibilities, benefiting children's learning and staff in terms of continuing professional development and a more even distribution of workload
- provision of a wider range of specialist teaching as a larger school workforce opens access to different specialisms, for example, music, modern foreign languages, physical education and sport.

- **Use of resources**

Efficient Use of Buildings including Building and Site Features

The table below summarises the key data related to the current capacities of the schools, numbers on roll as at January 2016 school census, the numbers reported by the headteacher as at the beginning of the autumn term and the percentage surplus places based on these latest pupil numbers.

	Capacity	Numbers on Roll (Jan 16)	Numbers on Roll (Sep 16)	Surplus Places (Sep 16)
Hope Church of England Primary School	56	35	17	69.6%
St Mary's Church of England Primary School Westbury	84	33	32	61.9%
Worthen Church of England Primary School	77	46	38	50.6%

Governors have analysed information provided by the local authority for each of the individual sites in terms of ownership, capacity, site provision and potential for expansion

The Worthen site was chosen because it can accommodate the 87 children with no immediate building work and it means the shortest journey times for pupils from Westbury and Hope. However, this is acknowledged as being a temporary arrangement, while discussions take place between the local authority and the Diocese about securing the resources to complete the necessary capital works in the event that the amalgamation is approved.

Revenue effects

Continuing to run schools that, in both Ofsted and local authority assessment terms, are not providing a good standard of education for their pupils does not provide good value for money. The majority of school revenue funding is pupil-led which means that the funding for the pupils resulting from the closure of the Hope and Westbury sites will be retained by the remaining school at Worthen or follow any pupils transferring to other Shropshire schools. The consolidation of provision at Worthen will make the single school more financially viable and sustainable than the three separate schools.

The closure of two sites and consolidation on a single site is technically an amalgamation. The current school funding formula rules allow for a lump sum protection where schools amalgamate. This means that, based on an amalgamation in, for example, January 2018, the three lumps sums will be retained in the financial year 2017-18, 85% of the combined three lump sums will be retained in the financial 2018-19 and a single lump sum will apply from the financial year 2019-20 onwards. This will provide some essential stability in revenue funding terms in the immediate period following amalgamation.

The redistribution of income, which will largely be retained within the remaining school in Worthen, means that there is no direct saving to the local authority or to the overall Shropshire schools' budget.

Capital requirements

The three school buildings are owned by the Diocese of Hereford, while the school land at Hope is owned by Shropshire Council and at Westbury is leased from the Westbury Playing Fields Trustees. Capital works will be required on the Worthen site in the event that a decision is made to amalgamate. Local authority officers will be undertaking a feasibility study in the autumn term on any potential required expansion works on the Worthen site in the event that the closures go ahead.

The funding of any potential capital works would have to be determined and confirmed prior to the Cabinet meeting in December 2016 and the publication of the notice for closure proposals (see timetable later in this document). The disposal of school land and buildings and the use of any resultant capital receipts are subject to statutory guidelines, in particular through Section 77 of the Schools Standards and Framework Act 1998 and Schedule 1 to the Academies Act.

Diocesan officers have been actively involved and supportive, working collaboratively with the governing body and local authority. Their continued involvement, particularly in respect of identifying and securing funding for any capital works, will be an essential and key requirement in progressing this proposal.

- **Access**

Worthen School is situated on a busy main road. The school is well set back from the road and there are separate gates for pedestrians and vehicles. Parents expressed concerns about the openness of the site and the proximity of the busy road and as a result, the school erected a fence over the summer holidays to secure the children's play spaces.

The car park is small, but has proved sufficient since the start of the autumn term for the transport to meet children safely, off the main road. This will, however, be carefully monitored.

Alternative schools and impact on the catchment area

The expectation is that the pupils of Hope CE Primary School and St Mary's CE Primary School Westbury will transfer to Worthen CE Primary School. To provide community cohesion for the federation schools, and to support their vision of sustainability despite falling pupil numbers, it is proposed that the three catchment areas will merge to establish a united catchment area served by a single-site school at Worthen. As Worthen School is located approximately in the centre of the combined area, this minimises the potential journey time for those residents located at the edge of the combined catchment area. Transport will be provided to those residents living within the combined designated catchment area and in excess of 2 miles (by the shortest pedestrian route) from Worthen School. This is in keeping with Shropshire Council's School Transport Policy.

In accordance with the School Admissions Code, a separate formal consultation on proposed changes to the designated catchment area would need to commence on or before 19 December 2016 to be completed in 6 weeks by 31 January 2017. Changes would then be formally approved by Shropshire Council's Cabinet before 1 March 2017 as part of the annual determination of admission arrangements.

How would this proposal impact on school admissions?

Parents of children who will be of Reception age in September 2017 are able to make applications for Hope CE Primary School and St Mary's CE Primary School Westbury in the normal way before the closing date of 15 January 2017. If the decision is taken to close these two schools, applicants would be invited to amend their preferences for Hope CE Primary School and St Mary's CE Primary School Westbury to Worthen CE Primary School or any other school. In this event, all applicants who named either Hope CE Primary School or St Mary's CE Primary School Westbury would be contacted after the closing date of 15 January 2017, to request an alternative nomination or their preferences would be amended to Worthen CE Primary School. Allocations of school places will take place on 18 April 2017 and would take account of school preferences amended in such exceptional circumstances.

Children already on roll at Hope CE Primary School and St Mary's CE Primary School Westbury would be able to continue at the school until the end of the 2016/17 academic year. In early September 2016, parents of Year 6 children will receive information on application for transfer to secondary school for September 2017. Their applications will be processed as part of the normal admissions round and notifications of the allocated secondary schools will be made on 1 March 2017.

What would happen to the early years provision?

The closure of Hope CE Primary School and St Mary's CE Primary School Westbury would have an impact on local early years provision.

Hope CE Primary School and St. Mary's CE Primary School Westbury both have pre-schools as part of their provision, while Worthen Pre-school is independently operated by a parent managed charitable group and runs from the village hall, next to the school. Worthen CE Primary School and the Pre-school enjoy close ties and the Pre-school come to the school for lunch every day. They have expressed an interest in becoming part of the school's provision once space allows.

Continued affordable and accessible early years provision is seen as being very important to the local community and the future success of the amalgamation. Numerous discussions have been held with the staff and committee at Worthen Pre-school about the possibility of them coming under the leadership and management of the school, and this would seem to be an ideal opportunity to progress those discussions and consider one single early years provision for the whole of the community run by the school.

The intention, subject to confirmation of costs and budget, would be to create a new, purpose built nursery facility for children aged 2 to 4 years on the Worthen CE Primary School site and for the three existing early years settings to merge into one new provision run by the school. The new facility could offer a wider and more flexible range of childcare than that which is currently available with the potential to open for longer hours and more days of the year than at present. With the provision being run by the school there would also be a smoother and more effective transition for pre-school children to the early years foundation stage.

The local authority does not have a statutory duty to provide transport for children to access early years provision. The school, with support from the local authority, would need to work together with the local community to ensure that all parents have the opportunity to access any proposed new provision, for example, by making the most of any school transport which will be in place for the school age children.

What would the proposal mean for the staff of the school?

If the decision is taken to close the schools at Hope and Westbury, the Council would work with the staff, governing body and trades unions to secure the ongoing employment of the current workforce, which for the majority will be at Worthen. Staff will have their own meeting during the consultation period at which they will be provided with additional information and will have the opportunity to ask further questions. Staff will be provided with personal support in the event that a decision is taken to close the schools.

What would happen to the school buildings?

If, at the end of the consultation process, the schools close, the Council would declare the school building and grounds surplus to requirements. As indicated earlier school buildings at Hope and Westbury are owned by the Diocese of Hereford, while the school land at Hope is owned by Shropshire Council and the land at Westbury leased from the Westbury Playing Fields Trustees.

It will be for the Diocese and Council to consider future use of the buildings and land – subject where necessary to Secretary of State approval - though both parties recognise the need to realise the maximum possible capital receipts from their disposal in order to fund the required expansion works at the Worthen site. In the event that the buildings and land are disposed of, the future use would depend on the plans of the new owner(s).

What home to school transport arrangements would be made?

If the schools close, pupils who live within the existing Hope CE Primary School and St Mary's CE Primary School Westbury catchment areas and attend the schools (at the time of closure), and transfer to Worthen CE Primary School, as directed by the local authority at the end of the summer term 2017, would be eligible for free home to school transport dependent on the distance criteria. In future years other pupils would be assessed for free transport eligibility in line with the policy at the time. Where pupils do not qualify for free school transport, the Council encourages parents to use shared transport where this is practical.

Community impact and environmental appraisal

Consideration of the impact on the community if the schools close is contained within the section on Rurality below. It is understood that there may be some increased carbon emissions from increased vehicular travel if the school were to close. This might, in part, be offset by the loss of any environmentally detrimental effect that the daily running of the school might produce, such as emissions from heating and lighting, although this itself would be dependent upon the sites' use under new ownership.

If the proposal was implemented, any revised transport arrangements for pupils in the closing schools may lead to an increase in traffic and carbon emissions in the area but the proposal would lessen the congestion outside the site of the schools at key times of the day.

Rurality

Hope CE Primary School and St Mary's CE Primary School Westbury are designated by the Department for Education as rural schools and therefore any case for closure has to be strong and a proposal in the best interests of education in the area.

Shropshire Council has considered the likely effects on the communities of Hope and Westbury in the light of experience gained from school closures which have taken place in Shropshire and elsewhere. If the schools were to close, the communities might become less attractive to some families, but it would not necessarily have an effect on most potential residents. It might change the balance of the type of potential residents without affecting their numbers.

There are a number of settlements in the surrounding area which currently do not have schools but remain viable. Some of these are already part of the community of other neighbouring schools. Schools would naturally seek to remain a focal point of not just their immediate settlement, but also the wider community as a whole. The headteacher and governors of the Hope Worthen Westbury federation have made clear their intentions to retain close relationships with the two communities of Hope and Westbury through a range of measures including involving pupils with village fetes and celebrations, church services and remembrance day events, for example. There is currently no community use of the school facilities in the three schools by local groups.

Other activities already take place in the communities, using the village halls in each of the villages, all of which could continue to be focal points of community activity if the schools were to close.

Any transport costs resulting from the proposed school closure to the next nearest school directed by the local authority would be met as prescribed within the Council's home to school transport policy.

Non-faith school places

All three schools are 'Church of England' schools and enjoy close ties with the Diocese of Hereford. Governors are, however, aware of their responsibility to serve the whole community, including those of different faiths and those with no faith, so inclusivity is a key part of the schools' vision.

Academisation

The Government policy, as articulated in the Education White Paper – *Education Excellence Everywhere* – is for all maintained schools to either become an academy by 2020, or have an Academy Order in place to convert by 2022. While there has been a subsequent step back from forcing schools to become academies, at the time of writing the policy objective remains. The governing body of the federation are aware of the direction of travel in terms of the academisation agenda, but are focussing in the immediate term is on the interim arrangements for the 2016/17 academic year and, subject to Cabinet approval, the amalgamation of the schools.

Secondary transfer

Children on roll at Hope CE Primary School and St Mary's CE Primary School Westbury transfer to Mary Webb and Bishop's Castle secondary schools at the end of Year 6. The schools are known as linked primary schools. Over the past decade, pupils from Westbury and Worthen have tended to transfer to Mary Webb School & Science College, and children from Hope have tended to transfer to The Community College in Bishop's Castle. However, this is not always the case and, in one particular year, for a small cohort of six children there were five different secondary school destinations from the same primary school. It is usually the home address that determines the preference of secondary school and this will continue without impediment if the three primary schools were to amalgamate. There is sufficient capacity at both Mary Webb School & Science College and The Community College in Bishop's Castle to accommodate all in the Year 6 cohort at either school.

Next steps

No decision to close the school has been taken at this stage of the consultation process. The outcome of the consultation process is intended to provide members of the Council's Cabinet with the information they need to decide whether or not to take this proposal on to the next stage, which would be the publication of notice of closure proposals. Cabinet will take that decision based on the information in a report prepared by officers following the closure of this round of consultation. The report will include notes of meetings and all consultation responses. The timetable for next steps is set out below:

Thursday 22 September - - 6 week statutory consultation
Wednesday 2 November 2016

Wednesday 21 December 2016 - Cabinet decision on whether or not to
publish closure proposals

If decision is taken to proceed with publication of notices the timetable will proceed as follows:

Thursday 12 January 2017		Publication of notice of closure proposal
Thursday 12 January - Wednesday 8 February 2017	-	4 week statutory representation period
Wednesday 1 March 2017	-	Cabinet decision on proposal to close Hope CE Primary School and St Mary's CE Primary School in the academic year 2017/18.

Making your views known

The Council wants to hear your views. You can submit your response by:

Email	HWWConsultation@shropshire.gov.uk
Website	http://new.shropshire.gov.uk/get-involved/
Telephone	Customer Service Centre 0345 678 9077
Mail	Hope Worthen Westbury Consultation Learning & Skills Group Shirehall Abbey Foregate Shrewsbury SY2 6ND

The consultation period will end at midnight on Wednesday 2 November 2016.

Meetings for staff, governors and parents/carers and other interested members of the community have been arranged as follows:

- Staff meeting at Worthen CE Primary School – 4.00 pm, Tuesday 11 October 2016
- Governing body meeting at Worthen CE Primary School – 5.30 pm, Tuesday 11 October 2016
- Community meetings, Thursday 13 October 2016:
 - Hope CE Primary School – 4.00 pm
 - Worthen CE Primary School – 5.30 pm
 - St Mary's CE Primary School, Westbury – 7.00 pm