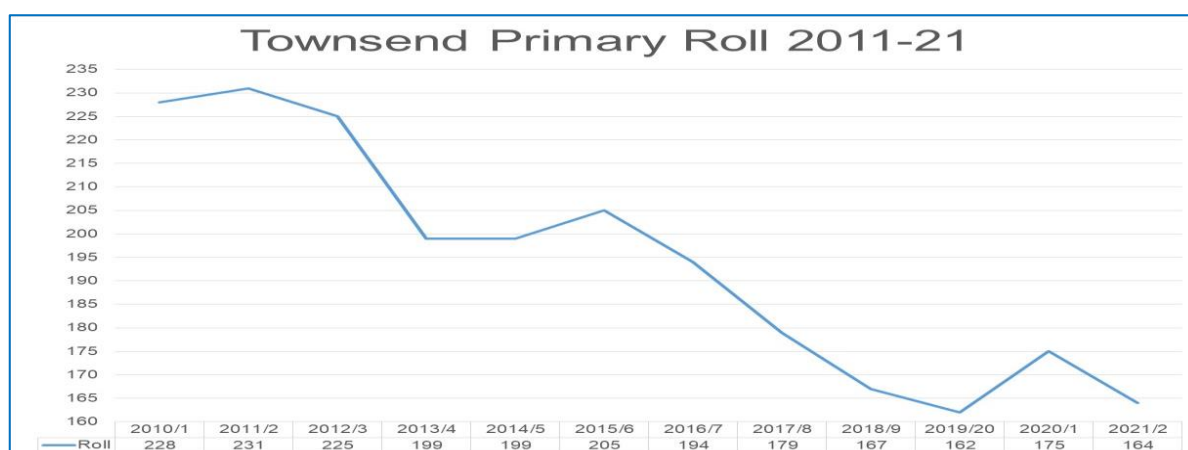


General

Q1. Why is the council proposing to close Townsend Primary School?

A. Over the past few years, Townsend has seen a steady decline in the number of children attending the school. The school has capacity for 210 children but for the start of the next academic year 2021/22, the school was expecting only 164 children on roll. The number of children in the locality has reduced dramatically (by over 25% in the last 5 years) and births in the area around the school have fallen as well - by 10% since 2016; this means there are potentially fewer prospective pupils to attend the school in future years.



Schools are funded through the number of children on the roll of the school, so the 46 spaces that are vacant is creating a funding gap that is growing each year. As the number of children in the area have reduced dramatically, there is little prospect of the rolls growing again to such a degree where the school becomes viable educationally, organisationally and financially.

The total funding gap from falling pupil numbers at Townsend Primary is currently anticipated to be over £650,000 this financial year and even with significant reductions in staff numbers, the governing body and the local authority do not think it would be able to achieve a balanced budget either this year or over the next two years. The impact of this is now felt in the school's capacity to adequately staff and secure resources to ensure a high quality of education for all children attending the school.

Q2. What other options were considered before the decision was made to propose closing the school?

A. A number of options were considered alongside their relative risks and benefits. These included

- *A restructure to reduce staff numbers*
- *A potential merger or amalgamation with other local schools*
- *A delayed closure until September 2023*

The local authority believe that the type of new staffing model that Townsend School would need to implement from September 2022 to achieve savings would not enable children to continue receiving the high quality education they deserve and need.

A potential merger with another local school is unlikely because of the size of budget deficit the school is carrying; this deficit would have to be taken on by any school Townsend would potentially merge with.

Delaying the closure until September 2023 would rely on a reduced staffing structure from September 2022, which would affect the quality of education that could be delivered. Staff and families could also choose to leave before the closing date, adding further financial pressure on the school, lowering morale resulting in a very negative experience for the remaining staff and children.

Q3. When are you proposing to close the school?

A. The proposal is to formally close the school by the 31st August 2022, effectively from the end of the summer term.

Q4. How big is the deficit?

A. In order to break even, the school needs a plan to reduce its expenditure by a minimum of £200,000 annually. It also needs an achievable long-term plan to repay the accumulated deficit of £650,000 within a reasonable timeframe. As the number of children at the school falls further, this will become increasingly difficult, because the fewer pupils a school has, the less funding it receives. Even with significant reductions in staff numbers, we would not be able to achieve a balanced budget in 2022/23, and would just add to an already considerable debt, in relation to the school's annual income.

Q5. Can the school not find savings on non-staff expenses such as cleaning or catering?

A. Over 85% of the school's budget is staffing costs; the only area where Townsend School can now deliver the required savings is on staffing costs. The falling number of children at the school means that the school's debt is increasing each year.

Even with significant reductions in staff numbers, the school would not be able to achieve a balanced budget in 2022/23. Townsend would not be able to deliver the high quality education that our children deserve and need if the school were cut the budget further.

Q6. Have you considered mergers with other schools?

A. Townsend Primary considered a merger with Victory Primary School, as the nearest community school with a similar character, but this was ultimately not pursued as there were insurmountable challenges relating to space, buildings and staffing.

Q7. Where will the children displaced by the school go to?

The local authority place planners have confirmed that within 0.6 miles, there are nine other primary schools, all within Southwark, with varying numbers of available places across all year groups sufficient to absorb the children presently at the school. On that basis, the local authority are of the view that there are sufficient places within 0.6 miles to accommodate the pupils who have applied for a reception place or who would be displaced were the school to close (the existing Years R to 5 at the school), subject to parental preference made through an admissions process. Parents will also have the option of applying to schools that are further away as we know that some families travel from outside the immediate area so that their children can attend Townsend.

Staff**Q8. What other options were considered before the decision was made to propose closing the school?**

A. There are a limited number of options in terms due to the falling rolls and, as a consequence, the increasing deficit. The LA and the governing body have looked at a range of options including mergers but the large deficit the school would carry makes this option unfeasible.

Other options that were considered were making further reductions to achieve a balanced budget, which would mean further staff cuts, which we felt, would not be realistic. We did consider a September 2023 closure but felt that the risk was too great and many staff and children would choose to leave and the position for remaining staff and children would not be a positive one because of further financial pressures and low morale.

The consultation process now underway is an opportunity for everyone including staff to share their views on the closure proposal and suggest any alternative proposals.

Q9. Were staff consulted about the proposed closure?

A. The leadership team at Townsend have been closely involved in assessing the limited number of viable options. Their view is that the proposed closure would be in the best interests of children and staff at the school. The proposal has been shared with staff and trade unions since the decision to consult was taken in November 2021, and will now be discussed with staff through this statutory consultation, and their views will be considered as part of the process going forward.

Staff (and their trade union representatives) will be invited to share their views on the closure proposal and suggest any alternative proposals. It is important that staff take this opportunity to input into the proposals.

Q10. Would staff be offered alternative roles at schools in Southwark?

A. The first preferred option would be for school staff to find alternative employment in other schools. The school are working with Southwark Schools HR to effect this should it be necessary and to ensure that all staff - presently employed by the school are considered for vacancies that arise within Southwark schools prior to September 2022.

To minimise the potential number of redundancies staff will be supported to seek suitable alternative employment, should they so wish. Southwark Schools HR will work with the school to facilitate staff being able to seek alternative roles and where possible, alternatives to redundancy will be offered.

Q11. Would voluntary redundancies be offered to staff?

A. A redundancy process would need to be enacted for any staff who are unable to find suitable alternative employment within Southwark. Staff would be able to request voluntary redundancy at any stage of the formal staff consultation process, as an alternative to compulsory redundancy.

Q12. How would staff who are in the middle of training/qualifying continue their training/qualification?

A. We would work with the Council's Human Resources leads to look at each individual circumstance and ensure that staff in the middle of training were supported to find alternative employment

Q13. Would staff working on a one-to-one basis with children with special needs be able to transfer with that child to a new school?

A. We would want to do whatever we can to reduce anxiety and ensure a smooth transition for every child with support from the local authority. We would work with parents and carers on a one to one basis to ensure they have the widest possible choice of schools appropriate to their child's needs and education.

Parents

Q14. Were parents and carers told of the financial situation and the falling rolls were a major cause for concern?

A. Parents were informed as soon as the school became aware of the fall in rolls and the Governing Body had the chance to discuss this and the implications for the school.

As staff costs make up over 85% of the school's costs, there were limited options to consider and relatively little that parents could do to solve these issues. The situation has become more acute in recent weeks because of the low number of applications for reception places and the need to deliver a balanced budget for 2022/23. The information has only just become available to us, and additionally, we did not want to cause unnecessary anxiety for families at this difficult time until the governing body and the LA had identified the best options for their children and their education.

The consultation process now underway and is an opportunity for everyone including parents and carers to share their views on the closure proposal.

Q15. Were parents consulted before the decision was made to propose a closure?

A. Yes – the meetings in November 2021 were designed to inform the LA and the school as to the views of parents prior to a statutory consultation. No formal decision has been made to close the school and the consultation process now underway is an opportunity for everyone, including parents and carers to share their views on the closure proposal.

Q16. Would parents be able to choose or express a preference for a new school for their children?

A. This is an extremely important part of the process. The school, and a Southwark Council Admissions Officer, dedicated to Townsend, would work with families and local schools alongside this consultation process to support families to secure a provisional offer of an appropriate, alternative school place for their child from September 2022 taking account of each family's preferences and circumstances. This process would begin at the end of the statutory consultation process in March 2022.

Whilst it cannot be guaranteed that every family would receive the school they prefer, a fair and transparent, admissions process that is coordinated by the local authority for all children at Townsend would be put in place from March 2022 onwards with offers made for September 2022. Full details and a coordination timetable for this process will be available separately.

Q17. If a decision to close the school has not already been taken why is the Council putting an admissions process in place enabling families to apply to other schools?

While a decision to close the school has not been taken, it is possible that at the end of the consultation process the Council will decide to close the school. Due to the required length of the phases of the consultation process, any final decision taken by the Council cannot be taken until July 2022, which would only be around 6 weeks before schools were due to re-open in September 2022.

It would be unreasonable for the Council to not offer assistance to families looking to move schools until mid-July, so it is putting an admissions process into effect for those families who wish to access it from March 2022.

Q18. Would parents be supported to look at options for schools outside of Southwark, such as Lambeth?

A. If a parent would like to transfer to a school within Lambeth or indeed another local authority area, Southwark's admissions team will support them through the process and confirm whether spaces are available. However, the local authority arrangement to defer admission of children to September will only apply to schools in Southwark so children would need to take up the offer of a place immediately. The coordinated process will only apply to Southwark schools.

Q19. Would families with siblings in the school be prioritised for places at schools that can accommodate all siblings?

A. Where possible, we would endeavour to accommodate siblings in the same school, but this of course, would depend on the choices of the parent(s), the admissions policy of the school, and the available spaces at the school concerned.

Because one sibling gets a place, the other in a different (full) year group would not automatically be admitted unless or until there is a vacancy. Siblings would go to the top of the waiting list for places in that year group, but it would be impossible to predict when/if a place would come up for them. It may be that we could accommodate all pupils in one school, but this may not be the first preference for all the siblings concerned.

Parents/carers in this case would then be able to make a decision based upon information provided to them.

Q20. Can you guarantee that teachers will not leave before the end of this school year should the school proceed to closure?

A. Townsend School have a committed staff who will want to remain until the end of the year and make sure that children are secure in where they are going on to next.

Whilst we cannot guarantee that teachers will not leave, we aim to ensure they will have alternative employment opportunities in place to ensure they will remain with Townsend until the end of the summer term. We understand staff will be looking for other employment but we would expect that for most, new employment would begin in September 2022.

Q21. What would happen to the buildings if the school closes?

A. The buildings and land they occupy belong to Southwark Council. The Council position is that any empty school building will be re-purposed for community or educational provision.

Q&As

Q22. Would I qualify for additional transport costs if I have to travel a long distance because Townsend has closed?

A. We would expect to offer pupils a place within walking distance of the existing schools.

Q23. I want my child to go to a smaller school; Townsend provides this environment and I would like the same.

A. There are nine schools within 0.6 miles of Townsend are a mixture of 30 (1FE) and 60 (2FE) place schools, so a smaller school may be available if this is your preference.