



## Annex C: Stage 1 Consultation Report

### First Stage Consultation Process

1.1 The first stage consultation process on the future of Mary Towerton School commenced on 28<sup>th</sup> February 2023 and concluded on Sunday 2<sup>nd</sup> April 2023. In line with statutory requirements the consultation letter (see APPENDIX 2) was sent to the following consultees and also promoted via a dedicated webpage and survey on Your Voice Bucks:

Consultees
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cabinet Member for Education and Children’s Services</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Deputy Cabinet Member for Education and Children’s Services</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Local Councillors</li> </ul> <p><b>West Wycombe</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Marcus Angell (Con)</li> <li>• Darren Hayday (Ind)</li> <li>• Orsolya Hayday (Ind)</li> </ul> <p><b>Ridgeway West</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Shade Adoh (Con)</li> <li>• Robert Carrington (Con)</li> <li>• Carl Etholen (Con)</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Parents/Carers</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pupils at the School</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• School Staff</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Local MP – Rob Butler MP</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teaching associations and Unions</li> </ul>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Northampton Roman Catholic Diocese and Oxford Diocesan Board of Education</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Parish Councils:</li> <li>• Stokenchurch PC</li> <li>• Radnage PC</li> <li>• Piddington and Wheeler PC</li> <li>• Wycombe Town Committee</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Local Schools</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Buckinghamshire Council Officers</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Local Residents</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Local Community Centre</li> </ul>

1.2 Local councillors from the West Wycombe and Ridgeway West Wards were invited to a briefing session on Monday 27<sup>th</sup> February 2023 the day ahead of the consultation going live such that they were aware of the forthcoming consultation and could respond to constituents' questions should they be approached. In addition to Cllr Cranmer, Cabinet Member for Education and Children's Services, the following Councillors were able to attend the briefing:

**West Wycombe Cllrs:**

- Orsolya Hayday (Ind)

**Ridgeway West Cllrs (Stokenchurch):**

- Shade Adoh (Con)
- Robert Carrington (Con)
- Carl Etholen (Con)

1.3 All Councillors present at the meeting understood the reason behind the proposed consultation and the challenges facing the school.

1.4 A meeting was also held with the staff at the school on Monday 27<sup>th</sup> February to inform them of the consultation and to also inform them that there would be a separate statutory redundancy consultation commencing with staff from 8<sup>th</sup> March 2023 to 12<sup>th</sup> April 2023.

1.5 A meeting was held on Thursday 2<sup>nd</sup> March 2023 with the head teachers from all local schools, The Director of Education from the Oxford Diocese (four of the eight local schools are Voluntary Aided CofE Schools) and a representative from the Great Learners Trust who sponsor West Wycombe Primary School to talk through the consultation; the rationale behind it; and, to answer any specific questions arising.

1.6 Two public meetings were held at the school on Tuesday 14<sup>th</sup> March at 2.30pm and 7pm which were attended by 42 people (across the two sessions) attendees included staff,

parents/carers, local residents, representatives from other local schools and governors from Mary Towerton School. The meetings included a formal presentation by Gareth Drawmer, Head of Achievement & Learning, followed by the opportunity for attendees to ask questions about the proposal to help inform their consultation response.

### First Stage Consultation Outcome

1.7 The Council received 51 responses to the consultation proposal. 44 of these came in via the Your Voice consultation page and 7 came directly to the email consultation mailbox.

1.8 In summary of the 51 who responded 21 (41%) were in agreement with the proposal to close the school from 31<sup>st</sup> August 2023; 24 (47%) did not agree; and, 6 (12%) didn't know or didn't say:

Agree/Disagree Proposal	Responses received via Your Voice	Responses received via Consultation Mailbox	Total
Agree with proposal to close	18	3	21
Disagree with proposal to close	21	3	24
Don't Know/didn't say	5	1	6
	<b>44</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>51</b>

1.9 Of the 51 responses received 45 (88%) said that they understood why the proposal had been made to consult on closure of the school. 3 (6%) said that they didn't understand the proposal and 3 (6%) that they didn't know.

1.10 In terms of the respondents to the consultation, the split in terms of agreeing/disagreeing with the proposal can be seen in Table 1 below. Respondents were asked to state who they were responding to the consultation as. Respondents could select multiple options and therefore the total for 'who' is greater than the number of responses (51). For example, a respondent could be a parent, trustee and live near the school. Table 2 below shows how responses were broken down by each capacity.

TABLE 1			
	Your voice	Mailbox	Total
<b>Agree/Disagree Proposal</b>			
Yes	18	3	21
No	21	3	24
Don't Know/didn't say	5	1	6
	<b>44</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>51</b>
<b>Understood reason for the proposal</b>			
Yes	39	6	45
No	3		3

Don't know/didn't say	2	1	3
	<b>44</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>51</b>
<b>Who - Respondents could select multiple options and therefore the total for 'who' is greater than the number of responses (51).</b>			
Buckinghamshire Council Employee	1	1	2
Staff Member at Mary Towerton School	2		2
Governor at Mary Towerton School	1		1
Parent at Mary Towerton School	7		7
Local Resident/live near MT - (may also be parent/staff etc so some duplication)	25	5	30
MP/Cllr	1	1	2
Work at another local school	3		3
Ex parent of Mary Towerton School	5		5
Ex member of staff Mary Towerton School	1		1
Other LA	1		1
Represent community group	2		2
			<b>56</b>

**TABLE 2:**  
**Question: Do you agree with the proposal?**

<b>Staff/Governor</b>	<b>Number</b>
Yes	0
No	3
Don't know/didn't say	0
<b>Parent</b>	
Yes	3
No	4
Don't know/didn't say	0
<b>Ex Parent</b>	
Yes	3
No	2
Don't know/didn't say	0
<b>Elected Member/MP</b>	
Yes	0
No	0
Didn't know/didn't say	2
<b>Local Resident (of whom some are also recorded as staff, parents, ex staff, ex parents etc)</b>	
Yes	11
No	17
Don't know/didn't say	3
<b>Other (BC Employee/Rep of Community Group/work at another school/other LA)</b>	
Yes	5
No	1

- 1.11 From the table above it can be noted that the majority of those objecting to the proposal are local residents who don't have a direct relationship with the school but were concerned about what would happen to the site if the school closed. The parents who responded to the consultation and who are directly impacted by this decision were evenly split regarding the proposal with 3 being in support and 4 against.
- 1.12 For a school closure the overall response was relatively low but reflective of the number of people directly affected by the proposal. The consultation was promoted to all those who would be directly affected as well as local residents, councillors and other schools. The proposal also received press coverage in the Bucks Free Press and Bucks Live. The response rate would appear to reflect that there was no mass objection to the proposal and that those that responded did understand the rationale behind the proposal.
- 1.13 Having looked at response rates for similar consultations undertaken by other local authorities it can be seen that the fact that Buckinghamshire received a pretty even split between those for and against the proposal is quite unusual. For example, when Surrey CC consulted on a proposal to close Ripley CE School in 2018 (a one form entry school with an inadequate Ofsted and at the time of the proposal 28 pupils on roll) they received 256 responses to their consultation of which 98% of respondees were against the proposal. Despite this significant objection to the proposal Surrey CC still proceeded with the proposal to close based on the fact that they could not find a MAT to take on the school, numbers were too low to make it viable and the quality of educational outcomes was low. The school closed on 31<sup>st</sup> August 2018.
- 1.14 Similarly, when Hertfordshire took forward a proposal to close Wareside CE school in 2021 (a 56 place primary school which had 18 pupils on roll at the point the initial consultation was undertaken and was graded Good by Ofsted) they received 112 responses of which 97% were against the proposal and a petition against the proposal was also submitted. Despite the objection and the Governing Board not being supportive of closure Hertfordshire still progressed with the closure owing to the fact that there were low and falling pupil numbers impacting on the School's financial viability and consequent ability to sustain a high quality education for pupils. The school closed on 31<sup>st</sup> August 2022.
- 1.15 It is clear therefore that other LAs have closed schools where there has been a much higher response rate and objection to a closure proposal for schools in a similar or better situation to that being experienced at The Mary Towerton School.
- 1.16 Of the respondents who disagreed with the proposal and made further comments, the main concerns/issues raised were:

**Comments Submitted by parents/ex parents/staff/governor against the proposal::**

- *Children who live within the village will no longer be able to walk to school.*

- *Small rural schools should be supported more, not less. It's far more healthy in so many ways for a child to be able to walk to/from school, be in a small class size, have woods behind the school that can be utilised for learning and so many other things.*
- *We should be encouraging the younger generation to ditch the car and use their feet, not the other way round. More and more services and provisions are being taken away from hamlets and villages, this is not an environmentally sound trend!*  
**Response: as at February 2023 only 5 children lived in the Mary Towerton catchment area and attended the school. The number of children in the school's catchment area is very low therefore the school would rely on children coming in from out of catchment which in turn will increase traffic impact and the impact on the environment.**

• **How has the Council tried to support the school to improve its Ofsted rating?**

- **Response: The LA has been working closely with the range of interim leaders, including the governors, that have been in place over the past few years. The school has been categorised as an Intervention school which ensures that targeted support can be provided for the school. A Side by Side Leadership Champion (an experienced Headteacher) has been working closely with the school to support improvements and regular targeted practitioner support has been put in place with the most recent support having a focus on SEND.**
- **In addition to this the LA has made a significant financial contribution towards leadership costs over time.**
- *The Mary Towerton School was assessed by Ofsted in Oct 2019, they should have returned within 24 months, so by Oct 2021 at the latest. Ofsted were operating again post Covid from Spring 2021 and schools with Requires Improvement should have been prioritised. But Ofsted still have not returned. It is now 3.5 years later. Of course new families will not choose a Requires Improvement school. The Council could have had conversations with Ofsted a long time ago, to return for assessment ASAP especially witnessing the number of staff and the low new pupil numbers. It would have been better to put the school into Special Measures and to give it the help it really needed. Also tougher action should have been taken on families who refused to put their children (who clearly needed the extra help) into Pupil Referral Units, which was then at the sacrifice of every other child's safety and educational needs present at Mary Towerton school*
- **Response: The Mary Towerton School was assessed by Ofsted in Oct 2019, they should have returned within 24 months, so by Oct 2021 at the latest. However, due to the pandemic, Ofsted inspections were suspended which meant that inspections were delayed across the country. Ofsted have yet to return to Mary Towerton School, the school therefore continues to hold a requires improvement**

judgement which impacts on parents choosing to send their children to the school. The LA is not in a position to request an inspection.

- *There is definitely a place in high Wycombe for a small village school. Not every school needs to be large. School such as this cater to the children who may be overwhelmed in larger schools, or require more help or otherwise may be lost in a larger school.* **Response: should the proposal to close Mary Towerton School progress, there are still several rural schools in the area: Radnage; Ibstone; Cadmore End, West Wycombe and Frieth such that parents will continue to have the choice of selecting a small school or a larger school, depending upon which they feel would be more appropriate for their child.**
- *The council have failed to investigate or explain the extortionate number of pupils that have left the school over the last few years, and their reasons for doing so.* **Response: Many schools experience pupil turn over and it occurs for a number of reasons in addition to dissatisfaction with the school attended. A 'requires improvement' judgement by Ofsted often triggers pupil movement. We recognise there has been movement out of Mary Towerton over time but this is in common with other schools many of whom have a greater turn over of pupils. Where there is a surplus of vacant places in an area pupil mobility is not restricted by the lack of a place to move to.**
- *This consultation lacked any publicity. I twice asked the school to add the consultation details to their website. I was initially made aware of the consultation by another parent, as I do not use social media and despite checking the school website, nothing had been posted. (comment submitted by an Ex Parent)*
- **Response: The consultation was advertised in line with statutory expectations (see 2.23 above), the consultation was posted on the School's website: [Consultation on the future of The Mary Towerton Primary School - The Mary Towerton School](#). The consultation was publicly available on the Your Voice Bucks consultation site and was advertised via direct letters to parents/carers of children at the school and school staff. Printed copies of the consultation were distributed to residents along both sides of Water End Road, down to the Old School House and along the Wycombe Road, up to and including the Community Centre. The Bucks Free Press [published an article on the consultation](#), including a link to the public consultation page as did Buckinghamshire Live [Mary Towerton Primary School in Studley Green near High Wycombe could close - Buckinghamshire Live](#) . In addition, local members and the North West Chilterns Community Board Manager were briefed of the launch of the consultation.**

**Comments submitted by local residents against the proposal:**

- *If the school closes what will happen to the site? Will houses be built on the site? There is a concern that this will open the flood gates to building properties where*



*the school it. This is concerning. What are the plans for the school grounds if it is closed?* **Response:** it was made clear in the consultation document and in the public meetings that the Council wishes to keep **the building for educational use possibly for provision for vulnerable children.** There are no plans to dispose of the site. As the site sits in an area of Outstanding Natural Beauty and Green Belt, development opportunities would be very limited.

- **Class sizes at other local schools will have to increase to accommodate the children from Mary Towerton.** **Response:** Children will be placed at other local schools that have spaces. The admission number at reception entry will not change at any school as a result of this proposal.
- *The school has a high traveller community that attend. If the school closes and those people go to another school it will have a knock-on effect and impact other schools in the area.* **Response:** We recognise the demography of the current school composition and for any affected or vulnerable groups support has been put in place and where those children will be moving to other schools specialist support will be put in place to ensure that they integrate as seamlessly as possible.
- **Rural schools are important, with housing proposed in the area you will need additional places:** **Response:** There is only small-scale housing allocated in this area within the Wycombe Local Plan (i.e. no sites of more than 100 homes) so demand is unlikely to significantly increase over the planning period to 2033. There is currently c.24% surplus capacity (c.330 surplus places as at Feb 2023) in the area which can more than accommodate the projected pupil numbers from new housing.
- *Consideration should be given to recognising and protecting the unique offering that MT and other small schools provide, not least because they are by their very nature an attractive option for the many parents whose children have a level of special educational needs that lends them to flourishing in a small, nurturing, family-like environment, not overwhelmed by the size of larger primary schools, yet still firmly included within mainstream education.* **Response:** Should the proposal to close Mary Towerton School progress, there are still several small rural schools in the area: Radnage; Ibstone; Cadmore End, West Wycombe and Frieth such that parents will continue to have the choice of selecting a small school or a larger school all of whom are able to support vulnerable pupils and those who have special educational needs.

1.17 Of the respondents who agree with the proposal and made further comments, the main comments raised were:

- *What will the Council do with the land?* **Response:** it was made clear in the consultation document and in the public meetings that the Council wishes to keep **the building for educational use.** There are no plans to dispose of the site. As the



**site sits in an area of Outstanding Natural Beauty and Green Belt, development opportunities would be very limited.**

- *We used to attend and took our children out in July 2022. Unfortunately the school was not the same as it was when we first joined in September 2019 and had gone downhill rapidly.*
- *The school has become too small and I feel that even if the children were getting better tuition they are still lacking the fundamental skills of building relationships with each other and being able to choose their friends, at present it is a case of children playing with each other as there is no one else to play with.*
- *While a local school/setting is always preferable, I think that a school that is under utilised or subscribed as this one appears to be would seem to be a waste.*
- *As an ex-parent, we have recently taken our child out of the school because of the poor quality leadership and curriculum. Parents are continuing to leave the school due to the poor quality of provision. It feels very unlikely that this can be turned around without different leadership and governance, and given how unlikely this is it seems that children's needs would be better met by attending any one of a number of other local good schools, instead of the LA pouring funding into propping up a failing school. **Response: Please see response in 2.13 above in relation to the support that the Council has provided to the school following the Ofsted judgement in 2019.***
- *33 pupils in total is not sufficient to keep the school open. The land could be used for housing instead of grabbing green belt land.*
- *Too few a numbers funds would be better placed to help other schools.*
- *There are too many school places in the local area putting a strain on budgets and undermining all schools' abilities to deliver a great education for children.*
- *It would be lovely to see the site still used as an educational site moving forward, knowing how many children desperately need SEN schools, perhaps the site may be used to provide a specialist provision?*

1.18 One elected representative for Buckinghamshire submitted a response. The respondent selected the "don't know" option in response to whether or not the school should close. They made the following comment in their response:

- *"It would be a shame to see it go after it had a large extension recently but obviously if there aren't enough children to make it viable then it completely makes sense to close it. I think it should remain as an educational establishment and not be used for housing or similar. Maybe a special needs school."*

1.19 Steve Baker MP submitted a written response to the consultation as follows:

- *I am sorry the Mary Towerton School is under the threat of closure and would like to contribute to the consultation on its future. I know my colleague, Rob Butler MP, whose constituency covers this area, will also be contributing to the consultation.*
- *We know there is an ever-increasing demand for expert support for children with additional needs. This has been identified by the Secretary of State for Education in her recent Green Paper 'Special Education Needs and Disabilities and Alternative Provision Improvement Plan: Right Support, Right Place, Right Time and I know the Government intends to deliver a generational change for a more inclusive system. There is a large local demand for good SEND support with many Wycombe constituents contacting me asking for my help to ensure their child with special education needs receives the support they require to fulfil their academic potential and personal self-worth.*
- *The Government's proposals for a new national SEND and alternative provision system intends to deliver timely, high-quality services and support in mainstream settings, alongside swift access to more local state specialist settings, where required. The Government is approving a tranche of applications from local authorities to open new special free schools in their area and will shortly launch competitions to seek high-quality proposer groups to run these schools.*
- *I would like to suggest the Mary Towerton School to remains open to all local children but it is at the vanguard of providing specialist SEND provision for children with autism from across the greater Wycombe area who would benefit from a school environment suited to their needs. I would suggest St Andrew's School in Chinnor is used as a model which has wonderful provision for children with SEND who are educated in a special Base within a mainstream setting. This would be an innovative approach and a unique offer for local children and I urge the Governors and Local Authority to take this course to see the school remain open.*

1.20 **In response to the proposal by Steve Baker MP, officers have looked into the model that is in place at St Andrew's School in Chinnor. The school is a two form entry (420 place) primary school which has a Communication and Interaction Resource Base. The School currently has 416 pupils on roll with 9 pupils in the Base (2022/23 Prospectus). Each child within the Base is attached to a mainstream class for integration with adult support and the child participates in activities as appropriate. In addition, the School has an Ofsted Outstanding rating from 2013.**

1.21 **Buckinghamshire has 15 primary schools and 8 secondary schools who provide additional resource provision for students with a range of different needs. The additional resource provision at existing Buckinghamshire schools is organised in the similar way to that at St Andrew's in Chinnor. To add additional resource provision at the Mary Towerton school would not be sustainable given the current circumstance that the school finds itself in with very low pupil numbers. If provision were added at the school the number of pupils in the**

base could potentially outnumber the number of pupils in the rest of the school which could result in the school almost by default providing only SEND provision whilst not being a designated SEND school. Therefore, adding Additional Resource Provision would not address the fundamental issue of the lack of pupils within the main school, nor would it provide a balanced educational environment for any pupils in the base.

1.22 In addition to the responses that came through via the public consultation link on the Council's Your Voice webpage and the responses that came in via Email/post, the School also undertook a piece of work with the pupils at the school to seek the pupils' voice on the proposal. The following feedback from pupils was submitted on their behalf by the School:

- *I feel sad*
- *The school should be available to everyone*
- *I wish we had more children at the school*
- *I feel like I am in another dimension*
- *We should have put up posters to get some more children to join Mary Towerton*
- *We should have more children so we can make more friends so we are not lonely*
- *I feel a bit sad because Mary Towerton might be closing because it is a wonderful school*
- *I think it will probably close because if Oak class go there won't be enough people*
- *Although we are a small school we are mighty, we try our best and have fun and learn lots, I want to stay here.*
- *I am sad because it is the only school I have ever been to.*
- *It should not close because it is a brilliant school*
- *Mary Towerton is a nice school*
- *I don't want the school to close because I don't want to leave*
- *I feel very sad because this was the only ever school I have been to and I wanted to stay until Year6*
- *This is my life school*
- *I have been here since I was 4 years old*
- *There is not enough children and it is very sad*
- *I am not too worried because I will be leaving at the end of the year because I am in Year6*
- *I don't think anyone has considered what the students think or want*
- *Why has nobody asked us what we think before now*
- *I feel that we have been let down by all the adults*

1.23 **The responses from the pupils show that the pupils who are attending the school are happy there and that they would like the school to remain open. However, despite the young age of the respondents the responses do demonstrate that the pupils understand that the proposal is being made because there are not enough pupils in the school.**

1.24 One of the key aims of the consultation on the future of the school was to encourage external parties to put forward any alternative proposals to the Local Authority that could result in the LA and the Governing Board being able to explore other avenues to support the school in remaining open. During the consultation no Multi Academy Trusts (MAT) came forward to offer support to the school and no other alternative proposals were brought to

the Local Authority for consideration (other than the suggestion made by Steve Baker MP). The Deputy Director of Education for the Oxford Diocese who support a number of local schools in the West Wycombe area was in attendance at the meeting that was held with local schools and confirmed that the Diocese would not challenge this decision as it was evident that there were not sufficient children across the area to sustain all the local schools.

- 1.25 Having analysed the consultation responses received on the proposal to close the school, it is apparent that the views of respondents are fairly evenly split between those who support (41%) and those who oppose (47%) the closure proposal. Of those who responded 88% confirmed that they understood the reason why the proposal was being consulted upon. The number of responses was relatively low (despite being publicised through a variety of channels in line with statutory guidance) particularly when compared to the similar consultations undertaken by other local authorities. Having undertaken a comparison of the consultation outcome against similar proposals by other LAs it is clear that whilst other LAs received a better response rate, they also received a significantly higher number of objections to their proposals. However, despite the high objection rate, other LAs progressed with their closure proposals where it was felt to be in the best interest of the pupils and schools.
- 1.26 In view of the fact that no alternative proposals to closure were submitted from external organisations such as MATs or other local schools and, owing to the falling demand for places at the school which is impacting on the School's financial viability and consequent ability to sustain a high-quality education for pupils, it is recommended that a Statutory Notice is published proposing that the school closes on 31<sup>st</sup> August 2023 and a four-week representation period be commenced.
- 1.27 The final decision on the proposal will be taken by the Leader of the Council in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Education and Children's Services following the conclusion of the four-week representation period.
- 1.28 In taking forward this proposal Buckinghamshire Council has complied with all applicable statutory requirements in accordance with section 15 of the Education and Inspections Act. The Council has complied with the DfE's published guidance (Opening and closing maintained schools Statutory guidance for proposers and decision makers: January 2023).

CONFIDENTIAL

