



# Westcott CE School: Stage 1 Consultation Report

## 1. First Stage Consultation Process

1.1. The first stage consultation process on the future of Westcott CE School commenced on Wednesday 31<sup>st</sup> January 2024 and concluded on Wednesday 13<sup>th</sup> March 2024. In line with statutory requirements the consultation letter (see Appendix 1) was sent to the following consultees and also promoted via a dedicated webpage and survey on Your Voice Bucks:

Consultees
• Leader of the Council
• Cabinet Member for Education and Children's Services
• Deputy Cabinet Member for Education and Children's Services
• Local MP – Rob Butler MP / Greg Smith MP
• Local Councillors: Cllr Mick Caffrey; Cllr Paul Irwin; Cllr Ashley Waite
• Parish Councils: Westcott; Waddesdon; Stone; Quainton; Ashendon
• Parents/Carers
• Pupils at the School
• School Staff
• Teaching associations and Unions
• Northampton Roman Catholic Diocese and Oxford Diocesan Board of Education
• Local Schools
• Buckinghamshire Council Officers
• Local Residents

1.2. Local councillors from the Stone and Waddesdon Wards and the local MPs were invited to a briefing session on Tuesday 30<sup>th</sup> January 2024 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. Everyone that attended the meeting understood the reason behind the proposed consultation and the challenges facing the school.

- 1.3. A meeting was also held with the staff at the school on Tuesday 30<sup>th</sup> January 2024 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> February 2024 to 14<sup>th</sup> March 2024.
- 1.4. A meeting was held on Monday 5<sup>th</sup> February 2024 with the head teachers from all local schools to talk through the consultation; the rationale behind it; and, to answer any specific questions arising.
- 1.5. Two public meetings were held at the school on Thursday 8<sup>th</sup> February 2024 at 2.30pm and 6.30pm which were attended by a total of 21 people (across the two sessions – excludes Diocesan representative and LA officers). Attendees included staff, parents/carers, local residents, representatives from other local schools and governors from Westcott CE 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. The Director of the Oxford Diocesan Board of Education was also in attendance at the meetings.

## **2. First Stage Consultation Outcome**

- 2.1. The Council received 70 responses to the consultation proposal. 61 of these came in via the Your Voice consultation page and 9 came directly to the email consultation mailbox.
- 2.2. In summary of the 70 who responded 17 (24%) were in agreement with the proposal to close the school from 31<sup>st</sup> August 2024; 52 (74%) did not agree; and 1 (2%) didn't know or didn't say:

Agree/Disagree with Proposal	Responses received via Your Voice	Responses received via Consultation Mailbox	Total
Agree with proposal to close	15	2	17
Disagree with proposal to close	45	7	52
Don't Know/didn't say	1	0	1
Total	61	9	70

- 2.3. Of the 70 responses received 54 (77%) said that they understood why the proposal had been made to consult on closure of the school. 11 (16%) said that they didn't understand the proposal and 5 (7%) that they didn't know or didn't say.

Understand Reason for the Proposal	Total
Yes	54
No	11
Don't know/didn't say	5
Total	70

The main reasons given why some felt it difficult to understand the proposal was reflected in the response from the Westcott Parish Council:

***The School has been allowed to decline by the responsible overseeing authorities following the removal of the incumbent Head Teacher in the Autumn term of 2021. The School has had nine interim Head Teachers, 'Inadequate' OfSTED inspection (June 2022) and failed due diligence by a Multi Academy Trust (July 2023). Despite all this, in September 2023, the most recent Governors' Newsletter, published on the School website states, "The school has shown major progress over the last 18 months or so. We continue to be supported by colleagues from both Oxford Diocese and Buckinghamshire Council. A School Improvement Plan is being formalised so that everyone will be clear about our goals for this year...a monitoring visit from Ofsted last term, reported very encouraging progress. We expect to have another visit this term, which will be an opportunity to demonstrate how the school continues to improve."***

LA Response: Issues with workforce and the OFSTED inspection are, of course linked, however this consultation is working from the current position. The fact that the substantive headteacher has been on a long period of leave has meant that we have been unable to plan effectively with the school as to long term leadership. The reason for the incumbent Headteacher's leave is a private and confidential matter between the employee and employer. Due to the uncertain nature of the situation, along with the challenges of finding leaders who are able to commit to an open-ended contract, there have been more changes in leadership than anyone would want. Due to falling pupil numbers and the need to combine classes several staff members had to be made redundant. However, despite these challenges the governors, ODBE and Local Authority has ensured that there has been a continuity of leadership. Indeed, during Ofsted's visit in May 2023 they did comment that Governors understand their roles and responsibilities and that they are motivated to improve the school and provide challenge and support. Ofsted further noted that the arrangements for safeguarding are now effective and they noted that the school had rightly prioritised ensuring that everyone understands how to safeguard pupils. In particular, Ofsted noted that the school were utilising every opportunity for support and that support from a trust, the diocese and the local authority was enabling the head teacher to develop the school. As a result of this the school has refined English and mathematics plans effectively and that they were continuing to use support effectively to make improvements to the wider curriculum. The school was fully staffed at the start of the 2023/24 academic year.

Despite all the efforts, the Secretary of State has a duty to make an academy order in respect of any school judged as Inadequate by Ofsted, to enable it to become an academy and receive additional support from a sponsor to ensure its long-term sustainability. The Regional Department for Education (DfE) Directors, acting on behalf of the Secretary of State, are responsible for identifying the most suitable academy trust and brokering the new relationship between that academy trust and the maintained school. However, as stated in the consultation document, whilst a MAT was initially identified, after working with the school and reviewing its current and future position, the MAT decided it wasn't viable to take them into their MAT and withdrew as a potential sponsor. Discussions with other MATs have indicated that other MATs would take the same view.

2.4. In terms of the respondents to the consultation, the split in terms of agreeing/disagreeing with the proposal can be seen in the table 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' (90) is greater than the number of responses (70). For example, a respondent could be a parent, trustee and live near the school.

Agree/Disagree with Proposal by Stakeholder	Yes	No	Total
Parent at Westcott CE School	4	10	14
Local Resident/live near Westcott CE (may also be parent/staff etc so some duplication)	6	37	43
Staff/Governor at Westcott CE School	2	1	3
Elected Member/Parish Council	0	2	2
Work at another local school	1	1	2
Buckinghamshire Council Employee	1	1	2
Represent/own a business/community group	2	8	10
Other (of which 6 are former parents)	3	10	14*
Total	19	70	90

\*One person did not say whether they were for or against proposal

- 2.5. From the table above it can be noted that the majority of those objecting to the proposal (i.e. 53%) are residents in the Westcott catchment (37 responses from the 475 residential properties in the catchment) who are concerned about the impact of losing the school in the village and what will happen to the site if the school closes. Of the 14 parents who responded to the consultation and who are directly impacted by this decision, 10 (71%) were against the proposal with 4 (29%) being in support. The response rate from parents represents just under half of the families who had children at the school during the consultation which is 34.
- 2.6. For a school closure, 52 objections (of which 10 were from parents) is relatively low and of those who responded 77% stated that they understood the rationale behind the proposal even if they didn't agree with it. The number of responses is reflective of the relatively small 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, elected members and other schools. The proposal also received press coverage in the Bucks Free Press.
- 2.7. Having looked at response rates for similar consultations undertaken by other local authorities it can be seen that when Surrey County Council 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 respondents were against the proposal. Despite this significant objection to the proposal Surrey Council 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.
- 2.8. 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.

- 2.9. 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 Westcott CE School.
- 2.10. When Buckinghamshire Council consulted on the closure of The Mary Towerton School in Studley Green last year the Council received 51 responses of which 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.
- 2.11. DfE guidance states that the department expects local authorities to manage the school estate efficiently and to reduce or find alternative uses for surplus capacity (for example, increasing the provision of early education and childcare) to avoid detriment to schools' educational offer or financial position. Local Authorities across the country are having to consider closing schools due to the numbers of primary pupils falling. For instance, in addition to the above school closures in Surrey and Hertfordshire, two Church of England schools recently closed in the neighbouring county of Oxfordshire. The DfE's latest national pupil projections state that: "The population attending primary and nursery schools peaked in 2019 and the figures have been dropping since then. This is primarily due to the continued reductions in the birth numbers since 2013.... Figures have been stable for the two years since then but are expected to drop from 2024 onwards" and forecast there will be 412,000 fewer primary pupils by 2028 than there were in 2023.
- 2.12. The following paragraph considers the views of parents whose children are most directly affected by the proposal:

***Comment 1: The school is in its current state due to the continued mismanagement by the overseeing authorities - Buckinghamshire Council and Oxford Diocese. With the right leadership and management, the school could be turned around.***

Response: The LA and ODBE have 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.

There have been regular visits with the LA School Improvement Adviser including Side by Side support for various curriculum areas such as Maths and English and support during monitoring inspections. A full Health and Safety audit has been completed together with a Safeguarding audit, the results of which has been acknowledged by Ofsted. In addition, the Early Years team also regularly visit to provide support.

In addition to this the LA has made a financial contribution towards leadership costs over time. The Governors, ODBE and LA have ensured that experienced head teachers have been brought in to lead the school rather than bringing in less experienced supply teachers to lead

the school, which may have provided a cost saving, although would not have provided the expertise that it was felt was needed to be in place given the challenges the school was facing. The governing board has also been significantly strengthened with experienced governors. This has ensured that every opportunity has been taken to provide the best level of support and learning for the pupils at the school. However, despite this, the falling number of pupils within the School's catchment area has meant that pupil numbers have continued to decline which has put extreme pressure on the financial position of the school and its long term sustainability.

***Comment 2: There is a need for more primary school places in and around Aylesbury as we had to explore a wider area for in year transfer application***

Response: The number of places available in schools changes constantly throughout the year as children leave and join schools. In the local area there are more places available in the younger age groups, and forecasts suggest this trend will continue and the number of surplus places in the area will grow over time. However, we are aware that there are currently fewer alternative places available for older children (Y3 and above) due to families moving into Aylesbury town after the normal point of entry (i.e. Reception).

If a decision was made to close the school, we would invite parents to express preferences for alternative schools. If we were unable to offer a place at a parent's preferred schools, we will support parents in finding an alternative school for their children. If Westcott CE School were to close, if necessary, we would be able to use the Fair Access Protocol to place children at a suitable local school even if that school had no spare places and was considered "full".

We are also monitoring places in Aylesbury town and, if necessary, will look to provide additional bulge classes in the older year groups to accommodate the any further migration of families into Aylesbury town (which is volatile and unpredictable).

***Comment 3: Living rurally, it's already a long journey to school without having to add further distance.***

Response: Due to the falling number of births in Westcott village (c. 2 children a year based on ONS birth data over the last six years) Westcott CE School would have to rely on attracting the large majority of its children from outside the catchment area to fill places i.e. if the school were to close - as it would encourage out catchment children to attend their local school and likely lead to be a reduction in parental motor vehicle usage/travel distances. Children living in Westcott village itself (who can currently walk to school) would also become eligible for travel assistance as there is no safe walking route from their home to another school – although this is not an unusual situation in a rural authority with c. 1500 primary school pupils currently being bussed to school within Buckinghamshire.

Further, the increase in transport costs is likely to be reasonable due to the low numbers of children living in the village compared with the alternative options for reducing excessive surplus capacity in the area. Moreover, the small number of children living in the rural areas

of the Westcott catchment area (e.g. Ashendon) are already eligible for travel assistance to Westcott CE School (due to unsafe walking routes); currently, there is bus/taxi transport going to Westcott CE School serving these areas at an annual cost of c.£25K which could be used to offset any additional costs to transport these pupils to the nearest suitable school (i.e. Waddesdon Village Primary School).

- 2.13. The following paragraph considers the views of Westcott Parish Council and the one response from an elected representative for Buckinghamshire:

***Concerns were expressed regarding the leadership and management of the school.***

Response: See comments in paragraph 2.3 and paragraph 2.12 (comment 1).

***Comment 1: Loss of the school/asset to the community. Westcott Church of England School ('the School') has been at the heart of the village community for the past 150 years, offering education to children from three local villages of Westcott, Wotton Underwood and Ashendon with neighboring hamlets of Upper and Lower Pollicot. Children who live outside the catchment area have also been enrolled attracted by the School's size and ethos. The parish values the fact the school offer small classroom sizes on a quiet rural site, and a faith perspective as a Church of England 'Voluntary Aided' school. The consultation has only considered 'Community' in respect of whether the school buildings are rented out to other groups and it makes no mention of community events. The School has hosted numerous village events (e.g. May Day celebration, Easter and Christmas Fayres) which were very well supported by the local community. Until 2020 the Parents and Friends Association of the School worked together with representatives from the Cricket Club and St. Mary the Virgin Church to put on a bi-annual village fete. This community event was attended by over 1000 visitors, and the school community played a vital part in the event. The Parish Council is worried about the effect on the village as schools contribute significantly to community economic development and influence the decision of families and individuals to settle there. Also need to consider the general lack of amenities in the village.***

Response: As set out in the consultation document, while the impact on the wider community is an important consideration, the key consideration is to determine whether the proposal is in the best interests of children who are educated at the School. The loss of school provision in the village has been carefully weighed up against minimal local demand and the challenge of delivering high quality education sustainably into the future. The school is not currently used by the local community and some children living in the village travel to other local schools. The school has no hall and classrooms cannot be let out as it is not practical to let out classrooms. The Governors, ODBE and LA all acknowledge and appreciate the concerns over the loss of the school within the village and the potential impact on the local community and, whilst the buildings are not currently used by the community, nor have they been for several years, the school does serve the children of the village and surrounding areas. Loss of the School would result in children living within the village, and the local villages of Ashendon and Wotton Underwood that fall within the school's catchment area, having to travel further to secure a primary school place. However, current data indicates that there were only 3-5

births within the catchment area per year between 2017 and 2022 and even if every child took up a place at the school that would not be sufficient to make the school viable.

In terms of community provision the village does have a Cricket Club that is let out to the public, in addition there is a cafe in the Business Park. Within other local villages there is the following community provision:

- Waddesdon (c. 2 miles): has a Village Hall/Community Centre/a shop/post office/public house with accommodation/hotel/Doctor's surgery/Dentist/Vet/Hairdresser/Barbers /Café/National Trust House (Waddesdon Manor)/Football pitches/car mechanic/take away/restaurant.
- Quainton (c. 3 miles) has a Memorial Hall which was rebuilt in 2005, plus village shop/post office/pub/coffee shop
- Grendon Underwood (c. 3.5 miles) has a village hall and a shop/post office

***Comment 2: Should the School close no alternative has been confirmed as the catchment school for the children of Westcott, Wotton Underwood and Ashendon (with Pollicot). Increasing the catchment area of a neighboring school to cover the area would have to be negotiated with the governing body of the identified schools. There could also be local capacity issues further down the road.***

Response: It is only when a final decision has been taken, and only if that decision is that the school closes, that discussions can take place with neighbouring schools regarding how best to reallocate the Westcott catchment area between other local schools. Officers from the Council will review the catchment area and discuss potential solutions with local schools (including using nearest school as criteria for revising catchments). Once agreement between the LA and Schools has been reached a consultation will be launched to consult on the new catchment areas and if approved this will come into force for September 2026. This does mean that for one year September 2025 the area will have no designated catchment school although based on current trends/population data the LA would expect there to be sufficient school places at the schools nearest to Westcott (including an alternative Church of England school in Quainton) to meet all timely applications from parents living in the Westcott catchment. Parents can include up to six schools as a preference on their application. We encourage parents to make use of all six preferences and if they put down their preferences in order of distance from their home address - their child will have a better chance of securing a place at one of their nearest schools as well as ensuring they are eligible for Council funded travel assistance.

***Comment 3: Buckinghamshire Council stated that the proposed mixed development on the edge of Waddesdon Village (22/03384/AOP - Littleton Manor - 535 dwellings), would provide the replacement places required but the application is still under consultation, no decision has been made nor any conditions applied.***

Response: The Council did not state that the proposed mixed development on the edge of Waddesdon Village (22/03384/AOP - Littleton Manor - 535 dwellings) would provide replacement places to compensate for the closure of Westcott CE School. The Littleton Green



site is a speculative development and one that has not been allocated within the Aylesbury Local Plan. Waddesdon Primary School does not have the capacity to accommodate a development of this scale and Westcott School is not within safe walking distance of the development. The development proposal makes provision for a new on-site primary school to accommodate all children living on the new development in line with DfE guidance which states:

“As far as possible (and often in relation to primary schools only), new settlements and urban extensions should be expected to meet their full education requirement. Where an onsite school is required, it should be large enough to meet the need generated by the development. As a general rule, the capacity of existing primary schools not within safe walking distance does not need to be taken into account when calculating developer contributions for permanent onsite schools in new settlements and urban extensions. This promotes sustainable and healthy travel patterns for young people (Paragraph 30 – DfE guidance on Securing developer contributions for education – dated November 2019).”

***Comment 4: In 2022, the Oxford Diocesan Buckinghamshire Schools Trust (ODBST) started due diligence on the School. It was communicated to the Governing Body and parents that the MAT would take over the School in the Easter term of 2023, however, involvement continued until July 2023 at which point ODBST withdrew interest. The Governors' Newsletter, July 2023 stated, "We were very surprised and disappointed to hear that ODBST have chosen to withdraw from taking Westcott CofE into their Multi-Academy Trust. A key reason cited for this was the lack of a long-term lease on part of the school site." No other reasons have been shared as to why the school wasn't considered viable by any MAT. The parcel of land is owned by 'The Woodward Trust' and the School has a lease on it until 2032. Around 2012 The Woodward Trust were willing to sell this land to the school, but the school did not have funds available to make the purchase. The Governing Body said that they had not considered looking into compulsory purchase of the land for use by the school. Why has a lease, which has never been refused renewal in the past, played such a deciding factor in whether a MAT will take in the school?***

Response: The ODBE owns the buildings and site apart from the following:

- the land north of the school building which is in the ownership of the Woodward Trust (630sqm) includes external play areas, outbuilding (currently used for SEN) and access corridor to two classrooms.
- The 'forest school' area (490sqm) is owned by the adjacent St Mary the Virgin Church – with the lease to the school requiring access via the land owned by the Woodward Trust.

The total site area for Westcott CE School is 2560sqm compared with a DfE recommended minimum area of 5590sqm for a school of this size. The site has no parking, no formal games area and constrained facilities (i.e. school has no hall compared with the minimum DfE recommended area of 150sqm).

The Woodward Trust have indicated that they are not proposing to renew the lease in 2032 as they are looking to develop the land for housing. Whilst Councils do have powers to undertake compulsory purchases of land in order to invoke such powers there has to be a

compelling case for the purchase. In the case of Westcott CE School in light of the low pupil numbers and very low birth rate in the area it may be a challenge to argue a compelling case'. In addition, the Council receives no funding from the Government for such matters and given the very challenging budget position that all Councils are facing any education capital funding needs to be prioritised on meeting the LA's sufficiency duty (i.e. expansion of schools in areas where there is demand for additional school places). ODBST's decision to withdraw as a potential sponsor was not solely due to the lack of a long-term lease on part of the school site. Their decision was also based on the significant viability issues relating to low birth rates/pupil numbers which impacts heavily on the School budget. The responsibility to find a MAT (following the issue of a Directed Academy Order) sits with the DfE (see paragraph 2.3). To date the DfE have been unable to find an Academy Sponsor that is willing to take the school on. Alongside the work of the DfE the ODBE and LA have also sought to find a MAT to take the school on. Again, despite approaching a number of MATs/School Trusts we have been unable to find anyone willing to take the school on. In addition, no MAT, Trust or other body has come forward during the consultation process to offer any support or options to the school.

2.14. The following paragraph considers the views of the remaining stakeholders largely from local residents.

***As many residents are also parents and members of the parish council/elected representative – similar concerns were raised regarding (i) loss of the school to the community (ii) new catchment area for the area and if villagers will still retain a Church of England Primary School within the catchment (iii) need for the school if a large housing development were to be approved (iv) evidence that a MAT can't be found (v) more information on lease situation and how much of the land it affects***

Responses to the above concerns have been provided in paragraph 2.3, 2.12 and 2.13 above.

***Comment 1: What will happen to the buildings in the event that the school closes and the potential to use the building as a new community facility.***

Response: The School and land are not owned by the Council. The Oxford Diocesan Board of Education (ODBE) who own the buildings will need to consider, and plan for, the future of the building should a decision be taken to close the school. Part of the land is owned by a private Trust and we would surrender our lease in the event that the school closed. The ODBE will consider proposals for use of the building should a decision be taken to close the school. Any future uses will need to comply with Charity Act obligations upon which the school is held. There is however a clause on part of the land and buildings owned by the ODBE which could require it to revert back to the Crown if it should ever cease to be used for its intended purposes which could significantly impact future use possibilities for the site.

***Comment 2. The school's deficit was beyond the school's control and is down to the school paying a substantive head for two years plus paying for Interim leaders. The local***

***authority should write-off the deficit, appoint a new substantive head and support the school to grow again.***

Response: The school is the subject of a directive academy order as a result its inadequate OfSTED judgement. This requires that the school become an academy and receive additional support from a Multi Academy Trust (MAT) sponsor to ensure its long-term sustainability. To date, no suitable sponsor has been found that is willing to take the school on - not only due to the deficit budget situation but also due to low pupil numbers/births and a surplus of places in the local planning area as well issues with the lease on part of the school site.

All Buckinghamshire schools are funded through a national funding formula where funding is matched to the number of pupils and the characteristics of individual pupils. As a result of a fall in pupil numbers, the operating costs to deliver an effective curriculum cannot be covered by the school's budget share. The school has a current deficit budget which is projected to worsen due to the drop in admissions. There is no mechanism for Buckinghamshire Council to write off deficits for a school which continues to operate within the local authority umbrella.

The additional leadership costs have been funded through a combination of the school's reserves, school improvement grant funding and awards from the maintained schools delegated contingency fund.

***Comment 3: Could more have been done to promote the school?***

Response: A new website was set up last academic year to help to promote the school. In addition, flyers were sent out to all local Early Years settings to ensure that parents were aware of the school in advance of the primary allocation portal opening for applications.

The Local Authority will continue to place pupils at the school where they have expressed a preference or where the LA cannot meet a parent's preference and it is the nearest school with places available (which is normally the case for families that have moved into the area after the normal point of entry to an area where their local school is full).

***Comment 4: Could the school revert to an Infant School with a nursery?***

Response: There is currently no evidence to support the need for an infant school in the village. The school, as at October 2023 had only 7 pupils across all of Key Stage 1 (i.e. Reception, Year 1 and Year 2) and for admissions in September 2024 currently has only one first preference. In order to make an infant school viable the school would need to attract the large majority of its pupils from outside the village. Further, there would be no feeder school for the pupils to feed into at key stage 2, which would cause great uncertainty for parents, and it is highly unlikely that any neighbouring schools would be willing to drop their admission number to provide a feeder link at key stage 2.

The school already has a nursery class but currently only 2 pupils are attending which suggests there is not a great demand for places in the area.

***Comment 5: What is the role of the Department of Education? It is necessary to revoke the academy order before a Statutory Notice can be published?***

Response: The DfE are fully aware of the closure consultation that is being taken forward and are being kept up to date on the progress of this. The DfE have confirmed that should a decision be taken to move to the next stage of the closure process they would suspend the Academy Order and it would remain suspended until such time as a final decision has been taken. The School Governing Board, ODBE and the Local Authority are following the process as set out by, and agreed with, the DfE in relation to this proposal.

***Comment 6: What was the long term plan based upon which led to a significant sums of taxpayers', church and parents' money being spent upon the extension. Upon what basis was the building work which took place in the summer of 2023?***

Response: The ODBE has considered all options to make the school sustainable including investing in the expansion of the school from an infant school to a combined school in September 2012. Despite this investment the school has failed to attract sufficient pupils to ensure its long-term viability as the fall in the number of births within the catchment area has meant that there simply aren't sufficient pupils within the area to fill the school. The school would therefore be reliant on attracting pupils from outside of the catchment area which it has been unable to do. During the summer of 2023 some capital investment was made (using maintenance funding provided by the government, no school/PTA funds were used for any works) within the school to ensure that safeguarding and Health and Safety concerns that had been raised were addressed these works included:

- Improvement works to the early year's toilets
- New ceilings in the former school house as the existing ones were falling down
- Fire doors to meet the requirements from the health and safety audit.
- Upgrade to the fire alarm system to meet the health and safety audit

***Comment 7: Is the consultation valid if not dated/signed?***

Response: DfE statutory guidance does not require that consultation documents are signed or dated.

***Comment 8: Please provide evidence that most children come into the school from outside catchment?***

Response: The school is situated within a rural area with a number of other schools in the planning area which have historically had to rely on attracting the majority of their children from neighbouring areas to fill places (in particular Aylesbury). As at October 2023, from a capacity of 105, Westcott CE School had 17 catchment pupils on roll (6 in Year 6) and 17 pupils travelling to the school from out of catchment. ONS birth data over the last six years shows an average two children a year were born in Westcott village.

***Comment 9: When did pupils start to leave?***

Response: Westcott CE School pupil numbers started to fall from Sept 2022 when 15 pupils left the school at the end of Summer 2022 and 6 pupils started at the school in Reception. There were also a number of pupils that left the school in other year groups:

Date	Rec	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4	Year 5	Year 6	Total
Jan 2022	10	15	8	8	11	15	15	82
Jan 2023	5	5	12	7	7	11	15	62
Jan 2024	1	4	2	5	6	1	14	35

2.15. Of the respondents who agreed with the proposal and made further comments, the main comments raised were:

- *As a very small school with high staff turnover and high levels of SEN – the children have less resources compared with larger schools.*
- *The drain of LA funds to run the school when there are local schools with spaces seems pointless.*
- *Sadly yes if it no longer viable, though will be another loss to the village.*
- *School is so small with classes with a broad age range which I don't think is the best interest of pupils.*
- *The funds needed to keep a school open for so few pupils would be better spent elsewhere. The school cannot hope to provide a balanced curriculum in its current state and the low pupil numbers will be hampering their social development.*
- *Due to the small number of children at the school, most children will have issues with transferring to a secondary school as they will be used to a very small quiet school when most schools are a busy environment. I believe that the children will thrive a lot better in other local schools.*
- *For the reasons outlined in the consultation documentation. In addition, the quality of education in the school cannot improve if numbers in the local area do not increase.*
- *At this present stage the school is not fulfilling the needs of the community and children it serves.*
- *The lack of wrap around care and restricted curriculum opportunities meant that it was not attracting families.*
- *It's such a shame as it was always such a lovely school and my children were happy there.*

Response: Recruitment and retention of staff in small schools is always more challenging due to limited resources (e.g. due to volatility in pupil numbers affecting budget share, typically staff are more experienced (therefore more expensive), cost of providing cover for staff higher due to lack of available cover, difficulty in negotiating good purchasing deals for small quantities of goods/services etc) and higher staff workload (e.g. mixed aged teaching across 2-4 different age groups, pupils with higher levels of additional needs as parents believe small schools can offer a more nurturing environment, headteachers required to undertake significant teaching role etc.).

2.16. 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:

#### *Years 5 & 6*

- *My parents came to this school.*
- *I remember when there were 90 children.*
- *There are no spaces for (my sibling) to go to, and they are not being any help.*
- *There are not enough babies being born in Westcott.*
- *House prices have gone up and people can't afford to live here.*
- *One or two children went to (another school) and the rest followed.*
- *I've been to 15 schools all over the world and the most fun experience I have had is here. We have so many fun experiences like Forest School, eating outside and other opportunities. I know everyone's name here.*
- *We had lots of different teachers last year. It was really unsettling.*
- *I used to be shy and now I'm confident; that's because of the small school.*

#### *Year 3 & 4*

- *Can we go to the same school as our friends?*
- *What if there is no school close to my home?*
- *What is the are no spaces in any schools nearby?*
- *What if there are lots of children who all want one space at a school?*
- *When might the school close?*
- *What if it doesn't close but lots of children leave anyway?*

#### *Reception, Year 1 and Year 2*

- *I feel sad.*
- *If I have to go to a new school I will have no friends.*
- *I am sad that I won't see my friends again.*
- *If the school closes, will we still see you?*

Response: The pupil's responses show that the pupils who are attending the school are happy there and that they are concerned about what school they may be moved to. 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.

### **3. Recommendation**

3.1. DfE guidance states that proposers must consider the views of those affected by a proposal or who have an interest in it. The decision-maker should not however simply take account of the numbers of people expressing a particular view. Instead, they should give the greatest weight to responses from those stakeholders likely to be most directly affected by a proposal

– especially parents of children at the affected school. It was noted that at the two public meetings only two parents in total attended the sessions. The main theme of the objections submitted by parents was that the school should remain open by improving the leadership and management of the school.

- 3.2. 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 Governing Board, ODBE or Local Authority for consideration.
- 3.3. The Governing Board, ODBE and LA fully understand the emotions that lie behind all the comments that have been received and are grateful to everyone who took the time to respond to the consultation. Having given very careful consideration to the comments received and having fully reviewed the current position at the school in terms of declining pupil numbers (and associated issues) it is with regret that it is believed it is in the best interests of the school to proceed to the next stage of the consultation process and to publish a statutory notice on the closure of the school.
- 3.4. The school site is very small for a combined school and this limits the opportunities available to the older children. Some respondents suggested that the school should revert to being an infant school with a nursery but reverting to an infant school is not a sustainable option. There is currently no feeder school that pupils would be able to feed into at key stage 2, which would cause great uncertainty for parents, and it is highly unlikely that any neighbouring schools would be willing to drop their admission number to provide a feeder link at key stage 2. There is also no evidence that there is enough demand in the area to sustain an infant school and the number of infant children at the school is currently very low. Were the school unable to renew the lease on the land it currently uses, the school site would be too small for even an infant school to operate effectively.
- 3.5. Having analysed the consultation responses received on the proposal to close the school, it is apparent that whilst there is greater opposition (74%) to the proposal than support (24%) no alternative proposals have been forthcoming and it is the view of the Governing Board, ODBE and Buckinghamshire Council that the school remains unviable. 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.
- 3.6. 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 2024 and a four-week representation period be commenced. In order for the statutory notice to be published the DfE will need to suspend the Directed Academy Order and therefore the timing of the publication of the notice will be dependent upon a response from the DfE. It should be noted that this could impact on the proposed timeframe.

- 3.7. 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.
- 3.8. 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).