



Westcott CE School: Formal Representation Period Consultation Report

1. Formal Representation Consultation Period

1.1. The second stage consultation process, (the publication of the Statutory Proposal and commencement of the formal representation period), which proposed the closure of Westcott CE School from 31st August 2024, commenced on Wednesday 8th May 2024 and concluded on Tuesday 5th June 2024. In line with statutory requirements a Statutory Notice was published in the Bucks Herald on Wednesday 8th May 2024 ([Notice near HP18 0PH | Public Notice Portal](#)). In addition, a 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 MPs – 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 23rd April 2024 ahead of the consultation going live such that they were updated on the outcome of the first stage of the consultation and the proposal to move forward to the Statutory Stage. Everyone that attended the meeting understood the position following the first stage consultation and the rationale for progressing to the publication of a Statutory Notice proposing closure.

1.3. A meeting was held with the staff at the school on Tuesday 7th May 2024 to inform them of the outcome of the consultation and to inform them that a Statutory Notice proposing closure would be published on 8th May 2024.

2. Formal Representation Period Consultation Outcome

2.1. The Council received 5 representations during the statutory notice period. 4 of these came in via the Your Voice consultation page and 1 came directly to the email consultation mailbox.

2.2. In summary, of the 5 who responded, 2 (40%) were in agreement with the proposal to close the school from 31st August 2024; 2 (40%) did not agree; and 1 (20%) 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	2		2
Disagree with proposal to close	2		2
Don't Know/didn't say		1	1
Total	4	1	5

2.3. Of the respondents to the statutory notice, 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 statutory notice as. Respondents could select multiple options and therefore the total for 'who' (6) is greater than the number of responses (5). For example, a respondent could be a parent, represent a community group and live near the school.

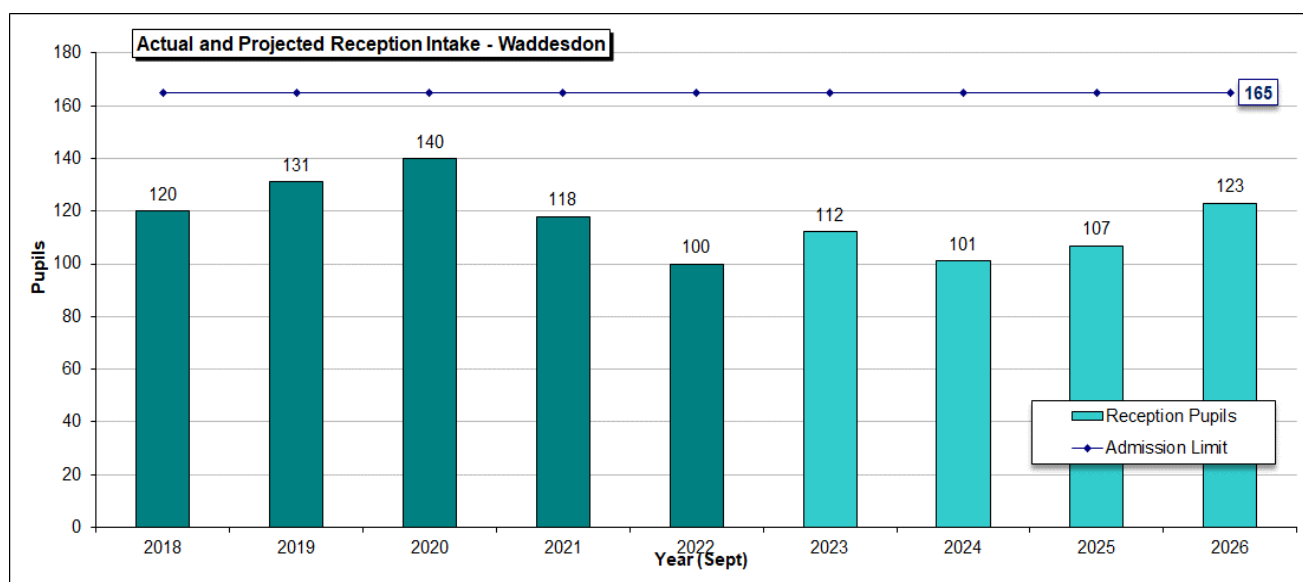
Agree/Disagree with Proposal by Stakeholder	Yes	No	Didn't say	Total
Parent at Westcott CE School				
Local Resident/live near Westcott CE				
Staff/Governor at Westcott CE School	1			1
Elected Member/Parish Council				
Work at another local school				
Buckinghamshire Council Employee	1	1		2
Represent/own a business/community group		1		1
Other (former parent/pupil)		1	1	2
Total	2	3	1	6

- 2.4. From the tables above it can be noted that the overall response rate was very low and is perhaps reflective of the fact that those consulted during the formal representation period felt that they had made their comments as part of the Stage One consultation and did not therefore feel that they needed to repeat them. Of those who responded in the formal representation stage, two were Buckinghamshire Council employees of whom one was against the proposal and one was in support. One was a former parent at the school and one was a former pupil. One respondent confirmed that they were a governor at the school and that they were in support of the proposal. No respondents identified themselves as being a staff member or parents/carers of pupils currently at the school.
- 2.5. Having looked at response rates for a similar statutory proposal undertaken by Hertfordshire to close Wareside CE school in 2022 their Cabinet Report states that they received no objections to their statutory proposal. It doesn't state if they received any responses in support. The School closed on 31st August 2022.
- 2.6. In contrast when Surrey CC consulted on a proposal to close Ripley CE School in 2018 they received 256 responses to their statutory proposal of which 98% of respondents 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 31st August 2018.
- 2.7. It is clear therefore that other LAs have closed schools where there has been either no response during the formal representation period or a much higher response rate and objection to a closure proposal.
- 2.8. When Buckinghamshire Council consulted on the closure of The Mary Towerton School in Studley Green last year the Council received 51 responses to the first stage consultation of which 21 (41%) were in agreement with the proposal to close the school from 31st August 2023; 24 (47%) did not agree; and, 6 (12%) didn't know or didn't say. The Council received 10 responses during the formal representation period following the publication of the statutory notice. Of the ten people who responded 4 (40%) were in agreement with the proposal to close the school and 6 (60%) did not agree. The proposal to close the school on 31st August 2023 was subsequently taken by the Leader of the Council.
- 2.9. 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.

2.10. The following comments were made by those who responded to the statutory notice:

2.11. **Comment 1: The actual school buildings and the setting are wonderful and I truly believe Westcott School could be the most superb learning experience for children in the area. There is massive expansion in the area so I really can't see how there cannot be demand for the school. There has been so much investment in Westcott School and I thoroughly believe it should stay open and become the excellent school it could be, with proper leadership. It would be a crime to close it rather than reform it.**

2.12. Response: as set out in the consultation documents the latest projections below for the Waddesdon planning area show that there is no significant change in the pre-school population for the foreseeable future and that therefore schools will need to rely on families from Aylesbury to fill places.



2.13. Projections forecast that there will be approximately 42-64 surplus intake places over the next three years (i.e. 25-40%). Approximately 500 homes have been allocated in the planning area within the Aylesbury Local Plan, however, most have already been approved/completed and have been incorporated within the projections above so there is little prospect that demand will significantly rise over the planning period to 2033. Based on the demographic data and current trends the closure of Westcott CE School could help to reduce the significant levels of surplus capacity in the area and increase the viability of other good schools in the area.

2.14. **Comment 2: I think it would make an excellent hub to additionally support children who could benefit from a small hub/ quiet school environment. It could be used to support children who cannot attend either mainstream or local special school eg those who would benefit from EOTAS packages to support and recover from primary school trauma etc. Also a potential support for EHE children who have EHCP's who could benefit from a small personal budget/tutor support whether primary or secondary age.**

2.15. 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. 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.

- 2.16. ***Comment 3: I agree with the proposal to close Westcott Church of England School just after the conclusion of the 2023-2024 Academic Year because all the Year 6 Boys and Girls will move to Secondary Schools ready for the 2024-2025 Academic Year***
- 2.17. ***Comment 4: Respondent requested that the Council and all those involved in this proposal consider the lessons learnt from the challenges experienced at Westcott CE School to try to prevent the likelihood of such a collapse happening again at any other school. The respondent felt that there had been a delay in grasping the issues as soon as they became apparent and implementing a "rescue plan".***
- 2.18. Response: The LA and ODBE have worked closely with the interim leaders, including the governors, to put in place a package of support as soon as issues became apparent. The school was categorised as an Intervention School during the 2021/22 academic year which ensured that targeted support was provided for the school. A Side by Side Leadership Champion (an experienced headteacher) was appointed to work closely with the school to support improvements and regular targeted practitioner support was put in place with the most recent support having a focus on SEND.
- 2.19. 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 was completed together with a Safeguarding audit, the results of which were acknowledged by Ofsted. In addition, the Early Years team also regularly visit the School to provide support.
- 2.20. In addition to this the LA made a financial contribution towards leadership costs over time. The Governors, ODBE and LA have ensured that experienced headteachers 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, but 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 was also significantly strengthened with experienced governors. This ensured that every opportunity was 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 and the availability of places at good schools in the 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.
- 2.21. Whilst the Council, ODBE and the School Governors fully understand the points raised by the respondent a decision to propose the closure of a school is not taken lightly and is only proposed when no viable alternative options can be found and in the case of Westcott CE School this followed a lengthy period of time during which a significant package of additional support and intervention had been put in place.

2.22. Regrettably, given the falling birth rates affecting a number of areas across the County, it is not possible, even with lessons learnt from the situation at Westcott CE School and the recent closure of Mary Towerton School, for the Council to be able to prevent the possibility of other small schools facing similar issues in the future. When a school experiences very low pupil numbers over a period of time the financial implications mean it is incredibly difficult to maintain a good standard of education at the school and offer children the opportunities available to pupils at larger schools. The Council constantly monitors the performance, financial position and pupil numbers at all schools, with a particular focus on small schools in areas where pupil numbers are falling, to ensure that additional resource is deployed to support the schools where required. The Council has recognised the thematic learning from the situation at Westcott CE School and will utilise that learning in planning school improvement activity in the future.

2.23. **Feedback from elected members:**

Local Councillors and MPs were consulted on the proposal and whilst no formal responses were submitted during the formal representation stage, Local councillors from the Stone and Waddesdon Wards and the local MPs were invited to a briefing session on Tuesday 23rd April 2024 ahead of the consultation going live such that they were updated on the outcome of the first stage of the consultation and the proposal to move forward to the Statutory Stage. Everyone that attended the meeting understood the position following the first stage consultation and the rationale for progressing to the publication of a Statutory Notice proposing closure.

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. There were no responses from parents of children currently attending the school during the formal representation period. The main theme of the objections submitted by parents during the first consultation stage 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, ODBE and the Governing Board being able to explore other avenues to support the school in remaining open. In order for Westcott CE School to be sustainable, it needed to join with a larger organisation to build both operational and financial resilience and address small school issues (e.g. succession planning, headteacher workload, quality of teachers, recruitment & retention, fluctuating intakes). Unfortunately, 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 during both consultation stages 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 pupils, parents and the school to recommend to the Leader of the Council that the school close from 31st August 2024.
- 3.4. 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).