



## **Statutory proposal for the closure of The Mary Towerton School, Studley Green, High Wycombe**

### **Contact details**

Proposal, published by Buckinghamshire Council, The Gateway, Gatehouse Road, Aylesbury, Buckinghamshire HP19 8FF, to discontinue:

The Mary Towerton School (“the School”), Studley Green, High Wycombe HP14 3XN on 31 August 2023.

The Mary Towerton School is a 4-11 primary school situated in Studley Green, High Wycombe.

### **Implementation**

It is proposed to close the School on 31 August 2023.

### **Reason for closure**

The main factors leading to the closure proposal are low and falling pupil numbers impacting on the School’s financial viability and consequent ability to sustain a high-quality education for pupils.

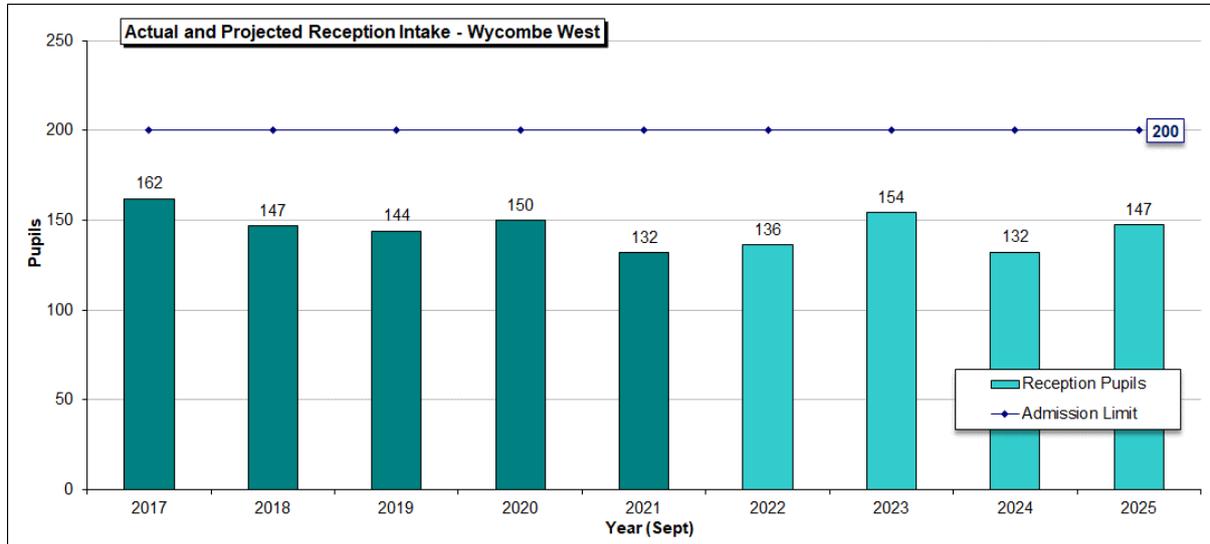
Mary Towerton Primary School is a small, rural primary school for children aged 4-11. The school has a published admission number of 14 with a capacity for 98 pupils. The school has been under-subscribed for a number of years and pupil numbers fall significantly short of the school’s published admission number. The school, as at September 2022, had only 33 pupils on roll with only 8 pupils across all of Key Stage 1 (i.e. Reception, Year 1 and Year 2). For September 2023, no first preferences had been expressed for a place at The Mary Towerton Primary School.

Schools are mainly funded by an amount of money for each child attending the school. Low pupil numbers make it challenging for schools to operate within budget. Managing a school and maintaining high-quality provision with quality teaching and learning can be difficult on a low budget.

Continued low pupil numbers mean the School will be unable to sustain a balanced budget and while it may be possible to identify some cost savings through efficiency,

the School would not be able to achieve the scale of saving necessary without also cutting back even further on staff, which would be unacceptable in terms of the impact on education quality.

The projections below for the Wycombe West planning area forecast significant surplus places for the foreseeable future i.e. approximately 50 surplus intake places (25%) over the next 3 years.



The school heavily relies on attracting children from outside the area, in particular High Wycombe, due to its small catchment population. The popularity of the school has declined rapidly since the Ofsted Inspection. As a result of this, together with falling births in High Wycombe, the school’s intake has dropped considerably and has been losing pupils in other year groups.

Wycombe West is in an area of Outstanding Natural Beauty with large parts in the Green Belt. There is therefore only small-scale housing allocated in this area within the Wycombe Local Plan (i.e. no sites of more than 100 homes) so little prospect that demand will significantly rise over the planning period to 2033. Government expectations are that Local Authorities manage the school estate efficiently and reduce excess surplus capacity to avoid the detriment to schools’ educational offer or financial position.

### Pupil numbers and admissions

The School’s age range is 4-11 years, and provision is available for boys and girls. There were 33 pupils on roll at the School as of the beginning of the autumn term in September 2022. The table below shows the fall in the school’s intake since September 2019 (i.e. only 1 child admitted in September 22 and the school has no first preferences for September 23) and the loss of pupils in-year (cohorts that have experienced the biggest losses have been highlighted). Despite running mixed age classes (includes teaching across three-year groups) class sizes at MTS remain unviable i.e. Year R/1/2 class (8 pupils), Year 3/4 class (14 pupils) and Year 5/6 class (11 pupils) (Autumn 2022).

Mary Towerton Pupils Numbers								
	R	1	2	3	4	5	6	Total
Sep-18	8	12	10	8	9			47
Sep-19	14	8	11	8	9	9		59
Sep-20	3	14	4	10	5	8	9	53
Sep-21	6	3	11	6	8	4	7	45
Sep-22	1	5	2	8	6	7	4	33

Numbers as at 17 April 2023

Nursery	Reception	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4	Year 5	Year 6	Total
n/a	0	3	1	1	4	2	4	15

Between Mid-January 2023 and the end of term (31/3/23) 14 pupils have left the school and started at other local schools. A further 3 children have alternate school offers but were still on roll on the last day of term and 5 further applications to other schools are in progress. It is expected that the maximum number of pupils that will be on roll at the school after Easter will be 12 but this may drop further in the summer term as the remaining allocation decisions are processed.

### Displaced pupils

Should The Mary Towerton School close on 31 August 2023, parents and carers would be able to express a preference for a place at an alternative school. Buckinghamshire Council will manage this process and due to the high level of surplus places in the area would expect to be able to place all families at a local school. Parents and carers would be asked to complete an in-year admissions application form and to name up to three schools they would prefer their child/ren to attend. Buckinghamshire Council would try to meet parent and carers' preferences wherever possible but cannot guarantee to do so as it would depend upon vacancies at that time.

We will have particular focus on those vulnerable pupils with an Education Health and Care Plan (EHCP). Any pupils that currently receive SEN support at the school, can expect the same levels of support in the school they transfer to and staff at The Mary Towerton School will work to support the transition to their new school as would always be the case for any pupils receiving any support.

The school has a number of pupils from the Gypsy Roman Traveller (GRT) Community. The Council's GRT Liaison Officer has worked closely with all the families affected by this proposal and has ensured that the families are fully supported throughout this process.

### Presumption against the closure of rural schools

In bringing forward this proposal, the Council has taken account of the Government's guidance on the presumption against the closure of rural schools. The guidance does not preclude closure but does require proposers to demonstrate that they have considered all

available alternatives to closure and the impact it will have on the local community and other schools.

The Mary Towerton School is designated as a small rural school under the Designation of Rural Primary Schools (England) Order and so, in line with that guidance, officers have included consideration of:

- educational offer at the school
- alternatives to closure including, federation with another local school, conversion to academy status and joining a multi-academy trust
- transport implications i.e., the availability, and likely cost of transport to other schools and sustainability issues
- the size of the School and whether it puts the children at an educational disadvantage e.g., in terms of breadth of curriculum or resources available
- the overall and long-term impact on the local community of the closure of the village school and of the loss of the building as a community facility
- wider school organisation and capacity of good schools in the area to accommodate displaced pupils

Consideration of these points is summarised below:

- **educational offer.**

The school heavily relies on attracting children from outside the area, in particular High Wycombe, due to its small catchment population. The popularity of the school has declined rapidly since the Ofsted Inspection in 2019. As a result of this, together with falling births in the High Wycombe and West Wycombe areas, the school's intake has dropped considerably and it has been losing pupils in other year groups. There are small cohorts in each year group, from December 2022 the school had to operate with three mixed age classes – Reception/Year 1/Year 2; Years 3/4; Years 5/6). The Local Authority and the Governing Board believe the school to be unviable and unable to guarantee the quality of education for the pupils that they would wish.

- **alternatives to closure including: federation with another local school; conversion to academy status and joining a multi-academy trust (MAT).**

The Local Authority has explored alternative options to closure which have included the opportunity for the school joining a Multi-Academy Trust (MAT) or federating with other schools. Although joining a MAT or federation could offer benefits in terms of economies of scale, collaboration across schools, shared learning and resources etc., the Council considers it unlikely that a trust would, through its due diligence, consider the school viable into the future. Despite discussions with a number of Multi Academy Trusts and other Schools, no Multi Academy Trusts or Schools came forward during the consultation stage to offer support to the school.

- **transport implications i.e. the availability, and likely cost of transport to other schools and sustainability issues.**

A number of pupils within Studley Green already travel out of the area for their education and pupils are travelling to The Mary Towerton School from areas that have

schools which have surplus capacity. If pupils were to attend these schools it would have a reduction in overall vehicle journeys.

All children would be automatically entitled to free home to school transport if they attend their nearest available school subject to qualifying distance:

- two miles for children under eight years of age;
- three miles for children aged over eight; or
- where the route to the school is not safe to walk accompanied by a responsible adult.

However, due to the low number of children living in the Mary Towerton School catchment area and the high degree of surplus places in the area, we would not expect there to be a significant increase in motor vehicle usage/travel distances as a result of closure. The school has historically had to rely on attracting the large majority of its children to travel in from neighbouring towns to fill places.

- **the size of the school and whether it puts the children at an educational disadvantage e.g. in terms of breadth of curriculum or resources available.**

Numbers at the school have been impacted by surplus in the local area. As a result of low pupil numbers, from September 2022 the school operated three classes across multiple year groups which makes curriculum planning and delivery challenging. Despite the best efforts of staff, there is inevitably a risk that the educational experience of each pupil is therefore not as good as it might be in another context. The school was recognised by Ofsted as Requiring Improvement in its inspection in October 2019. Since then, the school has not been successful in appointing a substantive head teacher and currently has an interim Head Teacher in post. In addition, the school has faced high teacher turnover and many pupils have left the school. Schools are mainly funded by an amount of money for each child attending the school, as a result, delivery of a full and balanced curriculum at The Mary Towerton Primary School is difficult with such a small and decreasing number of children and staff. With falling rolls adding significant financial pressures, improving the quality of education and pupil outcomes is likely to continue to be extremely challenging for the school.

- **the overall and long-term impact on the local community of the closure of the village school and of the loss of the building as a community facility.**

It is recognised that, even though local demand is low, the closure of the school in Studley Green will result in the loss of school provision in the village. This has been carefully weighed up against minimal local demand and the sustainability of delivering quality education and financial viability into the future.

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. Studley Green has a well maintained/used community centre including youth club, leisure/adult learning, church groups, playing fields, children's play areas and ample parking. The school is currently not being utilised by the local community outside of school hours and there have not been significant school events in the current or previous academic years.

A decision on the future use and purpose of the buildings will not be formally taken until a final decision on the closure is made.

- **wider school organisation and capacity of good schools in the area to accommodate displaced pupils.**

There is only small-scale housing allocated in the West Wycombe planning 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 any children displaced through the closure of the school and projected pupil numbers from future housing.

It is considered that the closure of the school will reduce overall surplus across the wider area and could strengthen numbers and viability of other schools and create a better foundation for quality education. All other schools in the planning area have an Ofsted 'Good' report or higher.

### **Outcome of the Consultation Stage**

The decision to consult on the closure of the School was taken by Buckinghamshire Council's Corporate Management Team in February 2023. A consultation letter was sent to all parents/carers of children on roll at the School, governors and staff at the School as well as to all schools in the local area, and other statutory consultees. Copies of the consultation letter were also sent to the following stakeholders:

- Local residents;
- Local MP, Councillors, Parish Councils and the Wycombe Town Committee Trade Union representatives;
- Church Diocese representatives;
- Parent Governor representatives;
- Local schools in the School's Liaison Group;
- Headteacher Forums;
- Selected officers working for Buckinghamshire Council

Public consultation on this proposal started on 28<sup>th</sup> February 2023 and ended 2<sup>nd</sup> April 2023. Two public meetings were held at the School on the Tuesday 14<sup>th</sup> March 2023 at 2.30pm and 7pm which were attended by a total of 42 members of the public across the two sessions.

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.

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>

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.

### **Proposal**

Officers at Buckinghamshire Council and the Governing Board of The Mary Towerton School have considered section 15(4) of the Education and Inspections Act 2006 and the School Organisation Regulations 2013, together with the responses received during the consultation stage, and do not believe there are any factors which support the school remaining open.

Based on these factors and despite the best efforts of governors, staff and the support of the local authority, the Council is publishing this statutory proposal for closure of The Mary Towerton School effective from 31 August 2023.

### **Procedure for making representations (objections and comments)**

Within four weeks of the date of publication of this proposal, any person may agree, object to, or make comments on the proposal online via the Buckinghamshire Council consultation website: [buckinghamshire.gov.uk/mary-towerton-statutory-notice](https://www.buckinghamshire.gov.uk/mary-towerton-statutory-notice).

Alternatively, representations can be made by email to:  
[themarytowertonconsultation@buckinghamshire.gov.uk](mailto:themarytowertonconsultation@buckinghamshire.gov.uk)

or by post to:

The School Commissioning Team  
 Buckinghamshire Council  
 1<sup>st</sup> Floor  
 Walton Street Office  
 Aylesbury  
 Buckinghamshire, HP20 1UZ

**The closing date for comments is midnight on Friday 26 May 2023.**