



Summary of Comments made in the First Stage Consultation to close Westcott CE School

This document gives an overview of the responses received to the first stage consultation to close Westcott CE School. It considers the most common concerns raised. It also includes the Council's responses to those comments.

Comment: 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 headteacher 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.

Comment: 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.

LA 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 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, 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: 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.

LA Response: The school was 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. The DfE revoked the

academy order on the basis that the school would not be viable as an academy on the 30 April 2024, so allowing a statutory notice to be published proposing the closure of the school.

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: 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

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

LA 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 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).

Comment: Westcott Church of England 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 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 (e.g. May Day celebration, Christmas Fayres, bi-annual village fete) which the school were involved with. There is a general lack of amenities in the village.

LA 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 and both a primary and secondary school.
- Quainton (c. 3 miles) has a Memorial Hall which was rebuilt in 2005, plus village shop/post office/pub/coffee shop and a primary school.
- Grendon Underwood (c. 3.5 miles) has a village hall and a shop/post office and a primary school.

Comment: Should the School close no alternative has been confirmed as the catchment school for the children of Westcott, Wotton Underwood and Ashendon (with Pollicot). Would the area still be in catchment for a Church of England school? Increasing the catchment area of a

neighbouring school to cover the area would have to be negotiated with the governing body of the identified schools.

LA 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: 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.

LA 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).”

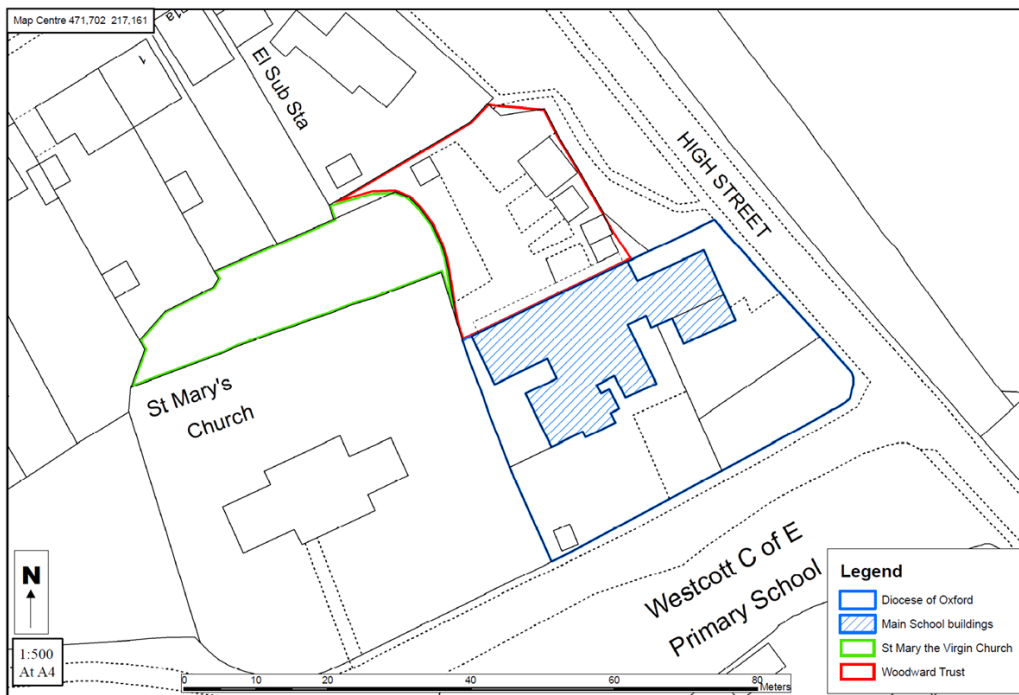
Comment: In 2022, the Oxford Diocesan Buckinghamshire Schools Trust (ODBST) started due diligence on the School. It was communicated to the Governing Body and parents that the MAT would take over the School in the Easter term of 2023, however, involvement continued until July 2023 at which point ODBST 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?

LA 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 confirmed that they are not proposing to renew the lease in 2032. Without this land, the school will be left with very limited outdoor space after 2032 and a new access route will need to be agreed to access the land owned by the church. 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 Directive Academy Order) sits with the DfE. 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 support the school. 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. The DfE have now revoked the academy order on the basis that the school would not be viable as an academy to allow a statutory notice to be published proposing the closure of the school.

Comment: What will happen to the buildings in the event that the school closes? Is there the potential to use the building as a new community facility?

LA 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: Could more have been done to promote the school?

LA 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.

During the decision making stages, 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: Could the school revert to an Infant School with a nursery?

LA 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 receiver 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 Reception 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: What is the role of the Department of Education? Is it necessary to revoke the academy order before a Statutory Notice can be published?

LA 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. On 30th April 2024 the DfE revoked the academy order on the basis that the school would not be viable as an academy to allow a statutory notice to be published proposing the closure of the school. 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: 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?

LA Response: The ODBE 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: Is the consultation valid if not dated/signed?

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

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

LA 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: When did pupils start to leave?

LA 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