



Statutory Notice to close Westcott Church of England School

Contact Details

Notice, published by the Governing Board of Westcott Church of England (CE) School, to discontinue:

Westcott CE School (“the School”), High Street, Westcott, Aylesbury, HP18 0PH on 31 August 2024.

The School caters for pupils aged 4-11 and is a Voluntary Aided School supported by the Oxford Diocesan Board for Education (ODBE).

Implementation

It is proposed to close the School on 31 August 2024.

Officers at Buckinghamshire Council (the Council), ODBE and the Governing Board of Westcott CE 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, it is with deep regret that the Governing Board of Westcott CE School, with the support of the ODBE and the Council, is publishing this statutory notice to close Westcott CE School.

Procedure for making representations (objections and comments)

Within four weeks of the date of publication of this notice, any person may agree, object to, or make comments on the proposal online via the Council consultation website:

buckinghamshire.gov.uk/westcott-ce-school-statutory-notice.

Alternatively, representations can be made by email to:

westcottceconsultation@buckinghamshire.gov.uk

or by post to: The School Commissioning Team, Buckinghamshire Council, 1st Floor, Walton Street Office, Aylesbury, Buckinghamshire, HP20 1UZ.

The closing date for submitting any representations is 11:59pm on 4th June 2024.

The Leader of the Council in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Education & Children’s Services will consider all representations before making the final decision on the proposal to close.

Reasons for Closure

The reasons that give rise to the proposal to close Westcott CE School include:

- Low current/projected pupil numbers and a surplus of places in the local area; Falling number of births in Westcott village (c. 2 children a year based on birth figures over the last six years)
- The school has been under a directive Academy Order (following Ofsted judging the school to be inadequate in June 2022), unfortunately it has not been possible to secure a Multi Academy Trust sponsor to take over the school. On the 30th April 2024 the DfE revoked the academy order on the basis that the school would not be viable as an academy, so allowing a statutory notice to be published proposing the closure of the school.
- Increasing deficit budget situation meaning that the school is not financially viable.
- The lease on part of the school site ends in 2032 and the landowner has confirmed that they do not intend to extend the lease beyond its expiry date.

Westcott CE School is classed by the DfE as a rural school for which there is a presumption against the closure. While this does not mean that a rural school will never close, the case for closure should be strong and the proposal clearly in the best interests of educational provision in the area. Proposers must show that they have carefully considered the following factors:

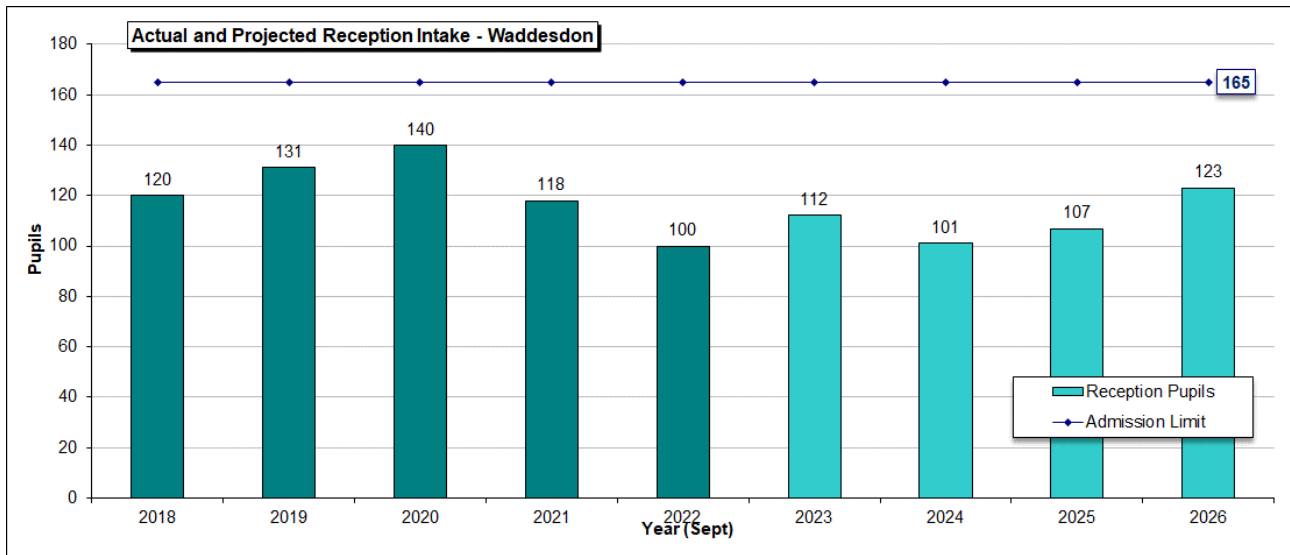
- demand for the school and availability of places across the wider area
- educational offer at the school
- transport and admissions implications
- the impact on the community
- alternatives to closure including joining a MAT

The Governing Board of Westcott CE School have considered all these factors, which are explored in more detail below, and despite the best efforts of governors, staff and the support of the ODBE and the LA, the Governing Board have decided to initiate the statutory process for closure.

(i) Demand for Westcott CE School and availability of places across the wider area

Westcott CE School is a small, rural primary school for children aged 4-11 and has an admission number of 15 with a capacity for 105 pupils. The school heavily relies on attracting children from outside the area, in particular Aylesbury Town, due to its small catchment population. The school, as at January 2024, had only 33 pupils on roll (i.e. 69% surplus capacity); 14 of the pupils are in Year 6 and due to leave the school at the end of the school year and there are only 7 pupils across all of Key Stage 1 (i.e. Reception, Year 1 and Year 2). The School was only allocated one pupil for admission into Reception in September 2024.

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.



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.

The school has a nursery to encourage more families to the school. The nursery children are taught together with Reception pupils to make the class more viable – although the nursery is also struggling to attract children and has only two pupils in attendance (as at January 2024).

(ii) Educational Offer

Ofsted’s inspection in June 2022 and May 2023 recognised the school as “inadequate”. Since then the school has had high teacher turnover and many pupils have left the school. The school is currently having to operate with three mixed age classes (i.e. one class for Nursery, Reception, Year 1 and Year 2; one for Years 3-4 and one for Years 5-6). Due to falling budget share linked to falling pupil numbers, the school may need to reduce to two classes by 2024/25. 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 in terms of breadth of curriculum and resources available.

(iii) Impact on the Community

It is recognised that the closure of the school in Westcott 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. The School itself is on a small site with constrained facilities and is not used by external

organisations. There is a local cricket club in the village which is hired out for small functions and meetings.

The ODBE owns the school buildings and site apart from (i) the forest school area which is leased to the school by the church and (ii) the land to the north of the school building which is owned by the Woodward Trust, the lease to which expires in 2032. The Woodward Trust have confirmed that they are not willing to extend the lease which will be a challenge to resolve. 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. A decision on the future use of the site owned by the ODBE has not yet been taken and will not be taken by the ODBE until a final decision on the closure is made. The ODBE have confirmed however that they 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 and would need to demonstrate that they are viable. 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 educational purposes which could significantly impact future use possibilities for the site.

(iv) Alternatives to Closure

The school was recognised by Ofsted as being Inadequate in its inspection in June 2022. As a result, the school was the subject of a directive Academy Order i.e. the DfE have told the school they must become an Academy and join a MAT; the school needs 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 etc). 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. On the 30th April 2024 the DfE revoked the academy order on the basis that the school would not be viable as an academy, so allowing a statutory notice to be published proposing the closure of the school.

In September 2012, the ODBE invested in the expansion of Westcott CE School from an 4-7 infant school to a 4-11 combined school in response to parental choice and to try and make the school more sustainable. Despite this investment the school has failed to attract sufficient pupils to ensure its long term viability.

(v) Admissions and transport implications

Should Westcott School close on 31 August 2024, parents and carers would be able to express a preference for a place at an alternative school. The Council will manage this process and the Council and the school will work together to manage the transition of the pupils. Parents and carers would be asked to complete an in-year admissions application form and to name up to 3 schools they would prefer their child/ren to attend. The 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) and ensuring that the right levels of support continue to be in place for those pupils who require it.

The Council's Admission Officers would be available to support families in completing in-year applications for school places for start in September 2024. The earliest window to complete an in-year admissions application form for a September start is from 7th May to 3rd June 2024. All applications would be considered together not on a first-come, first served basis. Applications can be made and places held before the final decision whether to close the school or not is made.

All statutory aged children would be automatically entitled to free home to school transport if they attend their nearest available school and meet the following criteria:

- children who live beyond the statutory walking distance (up to 2 miles if below the age of 8 or up to 3 miles if aged between 8 and 16);
- children from low income families;
- children whose walking route to school is unsafe;
- children with Special Educational Needs (SEN), a disability or a mobility difficulty.

As a result of placing displaced children, there is likely to be a short-term increase in transport costs. Longer term, children living in Westcott village itself (who can currently walk to school) would become eligible for travel assistance as there is no safe walking route from their home to another school. However, any increase in home to school transport costs is likely to be reasonable (i) due to the falling number of births in Westcott village (c. 2 children a year based on birth figures over the last six years and assuming all choose to attend their nearest suitable school) and (ii) when compared with the alternative options for reducing excessive surplus capacity in the area. Further, there is existing bus/taxi transport going to Westcott CE School serving the school's wider catchment area (due to unsafe walking routes) which could be used to offset any additional costs to transport these pupils to the nearest suitable school after Westcott CE School.

School places available at other schools within the area can be viewed in the link below on the Council website:

www.buckinghamshire.gov.uk/schools-and-learning/schools-index/school-admissions/change-schools-in-year/check-for-vacancies/

or by contacting the Council by completing a school admission contact form:

www.buckinghamshire.gov.uk/schools-and-learning/schools-index/school-admissions/contact-school-admissions/

Outcome of the Consultation Stage

After discussions with the Council and ODBE, the Governing Board of Westcott CE School took the decision in November 2023 to consult on the closure of the School. The Governing Board asked the Council to support them with the consultation process. In line with statutory requirements the consultation letter was sent to the following consultees and also promoted via a dedicated webpage and survey on Your Voice Bucks:

- 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

Public consultation on this proposal started on 31st January 2024 and ended 13th March 2024. Two public meetings were held at the School on the Thursday 8th February 2024 at 2.30pm and 6.30pm which were attended by a total of 21 people (across the two sessions – excluding the ODBE representative and LA officers).

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.

In summary of the 70 who responded 17 (24%) agreed with the proposal to close the school; 52 (74%) did not agree; and 1 (2%) 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	15	2	17
Disagree with proposal to close	45	7	52
Don't Know/Say	1	0	1
Total	61	9	70

Of the 70 responses received 54 (77%) said that they understood why the proposal had been made to consult on closure of the school (even if they didn’t necessarily agree with it). 11 (16%) said that they didn’t understand the proposal and 5 (7%) that they didn’t know. The main comments made by those people who responded are outlined and responded to in the accompanying summary document.