

WILTSHIRE COUNCIL

CABINET

14 JUNE 2011

Subject: Proposed Closure of Grafton Primary School

Cabinet member: Councillor Lionel Grundy – Children’s Services

Key Decision: YES

Executive Summary

This report sets out the background to, and results of, the statutory consultation proposing the closure of Grafton Primary School undertaken between 21 April and 2 June 2011.

In February and March 2011 consultation on the proposed closure was undertaken with the school, parents, governors and the local community. On 12 April 2011 the Cabinet Member for Children’s Services considered the consultation responses and approved the publication of a statutory notice to discontinue Grafton Primary School.

During the 6 week notice period interested parties were able to object and one such objection was received on 1 June 2011. As an objection has been received Cabinet is required to consider the objection along with a commentary on the objection and decide whether to proceed with the closure.

Proposal

That Cabinet considers and determines:

- (a) That the objection to the proposal to close (discontinue) Grafton Primary School is considered and noted;
- (b) That the commentary on the objection is considered and noted;
- (c) That in accordance with section 15(1) of the Education and Inspections Act the closure (discontinuation) of Grafton Primary School with effect from 31 August 2011 be agreed.

Reason for Proposal

Cabinet is required to consider the objection that has been received, the commentary on this objection and decide whether to proceed with the closure.

Carolyn Godfrey
Director for Children and Education

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Purpose of Report

1. This report sets out the background to, and results of, the statutory consultation proposing the closure of Grafton Primary School undertaken between 21 April and 2 June 2011.

Background

2. Pupil numbers at the school have been subject to fluctuation. Over the last 10 years the highest number was 35 in 2007 and the previous lowest number was 16 in 2004. In recent years the number of pupils at the school has declined and in January 2011 there were 12 pupils at the school. Numbers for September 2011 will be a maximum of 12. There are no signs of future growth in pupils, with no applications for reception places in September 2011.
3. The reducing number of pupils has led to increasing levels of concern from staff and governors, Salisbury Diocese and Wiltshire Council, about the quality of provision at the school. Although the high staff: pupil ratios mean that children receive high levels of individual attention, the key issue is that pupils do not benefit from the stimulus of other children around them. This will affect their educational and social development. The school has worked hard to mitigate this through collaborative projects with other local schools which provide pupils with opportunities to work with larger peer groups on a regular basis, and the children do make good progress from their individual starting points. However the reducing number of pupils is now felt to be adversely affecting the quality of education.
4. The Governors, Diocese and Local Authority have worked together to meet these challenges. Results of a research project carried out by Governors with Parish parents in February 2010 gave Governors clear indication of the issues which needed to be addressed in order to become a school of choice. Governors, in particular, have explored a range of possibilities since 2005, including a number of models involving federation with other schools and the development of an Early Years/Infant model in partnership with a local school

- to which pupils would transfer for KS2. However these efforts have not been successful.
5. In January 2011, the Governing Body of the school, the LA and the Diocese of Salisbury all recognised that because of the declining pupil numbers it was not possible to sustain the school. All three parties agreed that it was necessary to consult on a proposal to close the school, Appendix 1 shows the Consultation Document.
 6. A public meeting was held at the school on 17 February 2011. Notes are shown at Appendix 2.
 7. In total there were 213 consultation responses received, of these 65% agreed with the proposed closure of the school, 30% disagreed and 5% did not express an opinion. A summary of the responses can be seen in Appendix 3. Many respondents expressed regret at the proposed closure of the school but recognised that with such a small number of pupils the school was no longer viable.
 8. A key issue in this matter was to determine an alternative school to serve the current Grafton designated area. At the public meeting there was an overwhelming view (63%) that the current designated area should be reallocated as a “whole”. Less than 5% of respondents suggested that the existing designated area should be split amongst the other local schools. In addition, 77% of respondents stated a preference that the designated area should be reallocated to Great Bedwyn Church of England Primary School.
 9. It was therefore proposed that if Grafton were to close, Great Bedwyn VC Church of England Primary School should become the designated primary school for the current area served by Grafton Primary School.
 10. On 12 April 2011 the Cabinet Member for Children’s Services considered the consultation responses and approved the publication of a statutory notice to discontinue Grafton Primary School and name Great Bedwyn VC Church of England Primary School as the future designated school.
 11. The statutory notice (Appendix 4) was published on the 21 April and gave interested parties until the 2 June to object to the proposed closure. One objection was received on 1 June from a potential local resident. This can be seen in Appendix 5. The objection can be summarised as follows:
 - There has not been a robust enough analysis of why the numbers attending the school are low,
 - The impact on the Pre-school located on the school site has not been fully considered,
 - That numbers may increase if the school became a feeder school for Marlborough St John’s Secondary School.

Main Considerations for the Council

12. The decline in pupil numbers at Grafton Primary School to 12 in January 2011 means that it is not possible to continue to deliver high quality education at the school. No applications for places were received for September 2011 intake

even though there are 15 prospective reception aged children living within the school's designated area.

13. The objection made reference to an increasing birth rate generally, however this is not the case in the Grafton Parish. Health Authority Data taken from registrations at Doctors' surgeries, indicates that the number of reception aged children living in the school's designated area will drop from 15 this year to less than 10 in the next three years.
14. As detailed above the Governors have explored a variety of possibilities to increase the popularity of the school in the community, however, all attempts have been unsuccessful. The situation has been exacerbated as two adjacent schools were graded as 'Outstanding' by Ofsted. These other schools can admit a total of 38 children per year group but currently have only 13 reception age children living within their designated areas. There are clearly a large number of spaces still available for children from the Grafton parish should their parents state a preference for them. The other schools are very popular with parents and Great Bedwyn, in particular, admits a large number of pupils from the Grafton Parish.
15. Grafton Primary School and the neighbouring schools can admit between them a total of 95 pupils into each year group. At present there are only 64 reception aged children living across the area. This level of surplus places creates an environment in which parents have wide choice and Grafton Primary School has not been seen by many parents as the school of choice.
16. The Grafton parish is in the designated area for Pewsey Vale Secondary School. This does not prevent parents from expressing a preference for their child to attend Marlborough St John's Secondary. Given the circumstances above it is doubtful that changing the designated secondary school to St John's would sufficiently increase numbers on role at Grafton. It is often the case that parents who live within the designated area of Grafton and express a preference for St John's are able to secure places at the secondary school of their choice. Of the five children that transferred from Grafton to secondary school in September 2010, 3 secured places at St John's whilst 2 went to Pewsey Vale.
17. The 11 pupils still at Grafton Primary School have all been allocated places at alternative schools for September 2011. All parents were invited to state their preference for places at alternative schools. The Local Authority has been able to offer places to all applicants at their first preference school as stated on the application form.
18. The Grafton Primary School buildings are owned by the Diocese of Salisbury. Sunflowers Pre-School currently use one classroom at Grafton Primary School and wish to continue to do so. Wiltshire Council has requested that the Diocese support the Pre-School to remain on site, hence all parties are currently in discussion regarding future lease arrangements.

Environmental Impact of the Proposal

19. As a small school, energy consumption levels are low. In 2010/11 the school consumed 12,318kWhs, which equates to 6.74 tonnes of CO₂. In terms of energy spend this is approximately £985 a year at £0.08 per unit. As a result the CRC liability for the first year of the scheme is only £80.88. The CRC (carbon reduction commitment) is a Government scheme where the Council have to pay for the Carbon emission we emit. The total liability for the council is around £600,000.

Geographically speaking the impact of the closure may result in a small amount of additional travelling. The new designated school for the children is 3.6 miles away (one way), but I would suspect that some families will live closer to the new school so the impact of travel will be negligible

Risk Assessment

20. If the closure does not proceed the Council will continue to maintain a school that is not able to deliver high quality education and in which financial viability will become an increasing issue. If action is not taken now and there are further pupil reductions, or staffing issues develop, the quality of education will deteriorate further.

Financial Implications

21. If the school closes there will be some additional costs for the Council:

- transport costs to alternative schools for pupils currently at Grafton – approx £15,000 per annum in the short term. These costs will be met from within the existing home to school transport budget.
- redundancy costs – approximately £70,000. This cost would fall to the overall schools budget, funded by the Dedicated Schools Grant and would therefore not be a pressure on the local authority budget. In future years there will be savings to the overall schools budget as a result of the closure.

Legal Implications

22. School closures must be undertaken in accordance with the Education and Inspections Act 2006. This proposed closure has been dealt with in accordance with section 15(1) of this act for the discontinuation of a maintained school.

Decision Making

23. In considering proposals for discontinuing a school the Decision Maker (i.e. the Local Authority) can decide to:

- Reject the closure proposal
- Approve the closure proposal
- Approve the closure proposal with a modification e.g. the closure date
- Approve the closure proposal subject to its meeting a specific condition

Conclusion

24. Cabinet is invited to approve the closure of Grafton Primary School with effect from 31 August 2011 in accordance with section 15(1) of the Education and Inspections Act.

Carolyn Godfrey
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Background Papers

The following unpublished documents have been relied on in the preparation of this report: None

Appendices

Appendix 1 – Consultation Document

Appendix 2 – Notes of Public Meeting

Appendix 3 – Summary of Consultation Responses

Appendix 4 – Statutory Notice

Appendix 5 – Objection from Mr M. Armstrong