

REPORT TO LIONEL GRUNDY, CABINET MEMBER FOR CHILDREN'S SERVICES

CS-003-11 - Results of Consultation on Proposal to close Grafton Church of England Primary School

Purpose of Report

1. This report sets out the background to and results of consultation undertaken between February and March 2011. It recommends that the Local Authority publishes statutory proposals to formally close the school on 31 August 2011.

Background

2. In January 2011 the Governing Body of the school, the LA and the Diocese of Salisbury all recognised that because of 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.
3. A public meeting was held at the school on 17 February 2011. Notes are shown at Appendix 2. A summary of other responses is shown at Appendix 3.

Main Considerations for the Council

4. The LA has two prime considerations in this matter:
 - (i) the provision of high quality education
 - (ii) the likely effect of a school closure on the local community

The decline in pupil numbers to 12 in January 2011 means that it is not possible to continue to deliver high quality education at the school.

The likely impact of the closure of the school on the local community has been carefully considered. As the consultation document makes clear very few children from the local community have joined the school in recent years. Existing pupils will have to be transported to alternative school(s) but the impact of this is outweighed by them accessing high quality education.

The loss of the school facilities to the community has also been considered and the LA and Diocese will discuss any alternative potential uses of the school buildings and site with the local community before any decisions on this are made. Part of the building is currently used by Sunflowers Pre-School and this will be a key issue in these further consultations.

5. The proposal for closure is detailed in the attached Consultation Document.
6. 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.
7. A key issue in this matter is to determine an alternative school to serve the current catchment area. At the Public Meeting there was an overwhelming view that the current "catchment area" should be reallocated as a "whole". Future numbers at nearby schools suggest that Burbage, Shalbourne and Great Bedwyn could admit Grafton pupils in the

future. As detailed in the Consultation Document the majority of the pupils currently in the catchment area attend Great Bedwyn Church of England Primary School.

8. In total 63% of respondents requested that the catchment area should be reallocated as a whole to one school. Less than 5% of respondents suggested that the existing Grafton school catchment area should be split amongst the other local schools. In addition, 77% of respondents stated a preference that the catchment area should be reallocated to Great Bedwyn school.
9. It is therefore proposed that Great Bedwyn Church of England Primary School becomes the designated primary school for the current area served by Grafton Church of England Primary School.

Risk Assessment

10. 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.
11. Whilst there are mixed views in the responses detailed above there is also a recognition that it is not in the pupils best interests to be in such a small school.
12. The publication of statutory notices for closure may bring about further objections. However, it is felt that there is a clear and substantive case for closure of the school.

Financial Implications

13. If the school closes there will be some additional costs for the Council:
 - (i) transport costs to alternative schools for pupils currently at Grafton – approx £15,000 per annum.
 - (ii) redundancy costs – whilst redundancy procedures have not been initiated yet costs could be in the region of £70,000.

Legal Implications

14. There are clear legal procedures that have to be followed in a school closure. All requirements to date have been met and future legal requirements will be met.

Environmental Implications

15. The closure of the school will require pupils to be transported further. However the Council will organise this through shared provision, thus reducing the environmental impact.

Proposal

16. That:
 - (i) statutory proposals to close Grafton Church of England Primary School on 31 August 2011 are published
 - (ii) that the school's current catchment area is allocated to Great Bedwyn Church of England Primary School