

Children and Young People Committee: Minutes

Date: 25th April 2023

Time: 2.00pm – 4.05pm

Venue: Red Kite Room, New Shire Hall, Alconbury Weald PE28 4YE

Present: Councillors D Ambrose Smith, M Atkins (vice chair), A Bradnam, A Bulat, C Daunton, B Goodliffe (chair), A Hay, S Hoy, J King, M McGuire, A Sharp, P Slatter, S Taylor and F Thompson

Co-opted Members:
Canon A Read, Church of England Diocese of Ely

Also in Attendance: Councillor I Gardener (to Item 6: Future of Great Gidding Church of England Voluntary Controlled Primary School)
Councillor S Ferguson (to Item 7: Passenger Transport Policy Review)

146. Change to membership

The Chair expressed thanks to Councillor M King, the previous vice chair, for her work in support of the committee and welcomed Councillor M Atkins as the new vice chair.

It was resolved to:

- a) note the appointment of Councillor Michael Atkins as a member of the Children and Young People Committee on 16th March 2023. Councillor Atkins succeeded Councillor Maria King.
- b) Note the appointment of Councillor Michael Atkins as Vice Chair of the Children and Young People Committee by Council on 21st March 2023. Councillor Atkins succeeded Councillor Maria King.
- c) Note the appointment of Councillor Maria King as a substitute member of the Children and Young People Committee on 16th March 2023.

147. Apologies for Absence and Declarations of Interest

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor K Prentice and from Dr Andy Stone, the co-opted member representing the Roman Catholic Diocese of East Anglia.

There were no declarations of interest.

148. Minutes – 8th March 2023 and minutes action log

The minutes of the meeting held on 8th March 2023 were agreed as an accurate record and signed by the Chair, subject to replacing the first use of the word 'school' with the word 'village' on page 4, paragraph 5, line 4.

The minutes action log was noted.

149. Petitions

A petition was received from Amy Caldwell, local resident, calling on the Council to [review the current school transport provision from Great Gransden to Comberton Village College.](#)

The petition was heard under Item 7: Passenger Transport Policy Review. Minute 151 below refers. A copy of the Chair's response to Mrs Caldwell is attached at Appendix 1.

150. Public questions

There were no public questions.

Key decision

151. Future of Great Gidding Church of England Voluntary Controlled Primary School [KD2023/054]

The Committee considered an officer recommendation to approve the closure of Great Gidding Church of England Voluntary Controlled Primary School on 31st August 2023. This represented the final stage of the statutory process relating to the closure of a maintained school, which had included reports to the committee on 17th January 2023 and 8th March 2023, public consultation and public information events. The Director of Education described the process as having been challenging for all involved including the children and staff at Great Gidding, their families and the wider community.

There were currently 15 children on roll at Great Gidding, 10 of whom were in Year 6 and would move to secondary school at the end of the summer term. Sufficient capacity remained in other local schools to accommodate those children if required. Wider work on a small schools' strategy continued and would be brought to a future meeting. The decision was complex, but the officer recommendation remained to proceed to closure in the interests of the children's educational outcomes.

Councillor Gardener addressed the committee as the local member for Alconbury and Kimbolton. He described the closure of a rural school as a momentous event and one which would remove the heart of Great Gidding and its surrounding villages and hamlets. This was something he could not support. In his view, the way the consultation was conducted had led parents and residents to believe the outcome was a foregone conclusion. Parents' priority was for their children to be settled at school and it was understandable that some had looked to place their children elsewhere during the

consultation process, making this a self-fulfilling prophecy. He asked the cost of the public consultation exercises and of de-commissioning the school site, and how the Council had supported staff at Great Gidding and whether they had been offered alternative employment. Councillor Gardener asked that officers should be invited to prepare a report regarding the closure of rural schools to look at the lessons learned from the proposed closure of Great Gidding; to see how rural schools could be kept open and, if they could not, how the process could be improved; and to examine the impact of the closure on children, staff and parents and how those effects could be mitigated, and this report to be brought before the committee. Should a decision be taken to close the school he stated that Great and Little Gidding Parish Council would like the school playground to become a play area for local children, and would like to be kept informed of any developments with regards to the school site. Councillor Gardener welcomed the proposed financial support to families with uniform and school transport costs if Great Gidding was closed, and expressed his thanks to the headteacher and staff for their sensitive support to parents and children since the consultation process began. Action required

The Director of Education stated that the public consultation exercises had been carried out within normal business operations with no additional costs incurred. Arrangements for de-commissioning the school site were set out in section 9 of the report and were estimated to cost a maximum of £168k. Remaining resources within the school budget could be used to fund those costs. He paid tribute to the calibre and professionalism of Great Gidding's staff throughout the process. Preliminary conversations around their futures had begun and, subject to the committee's decision, these would continue if required. There was a need to reflect and take learning from the experience at Great Gidding, including the need to be clear about the point at which this type of consultation process should be started and he undertook report back to the committee on lessons learned. Action required

The Chair proposed that the committee discuss the officer recommendation to proceed to closure of the school first.

Individual Members raised the following issues:

- sought clarification of the eligibility to support with uniform and school transport costs. Officers stated that all children on roll at Great Gidding on 10th January 2023 would be eligible to receive this support.
- commented that this was a long report which duplicated information contained in previous reports and asked in future that it should be made clear what information had been presented previously. The Director of Education stated that the report described the process which had been followed and included an equality impact assessment in accordance with the Department for Education's guidance.
- asked why closure of Great Gidding could not be aligned with the opening of a new primary school in Sawtry. Officers stated that the new Sawtry primary school was opening in 2024 and that it would be grown from Reception upwards. There had been a dispersal across a number of local schools by those families who had left Great Gidding, reflecting parental choice. There was a commitment that all of Great Gidding's children would be offered a place elsewhere if this was needed.

- noted that officers had met with all parents and carers who wanted to do so, and that some had indicated that moving to a two class structure would have informed their decision on staying at Great Gidding.
- commented that the committee had heard repeatedly about the importance of Great Gidding school to its rural community and described the proposals as another example of a city centric approach and attack on rural education. They asked which small school was next on the list to be targeted. The Director of Education stated that the future of Great Gidding was a standalone decision and that there were no other schools being considered for closure at this time.
- spoke of the importance of looking at the wider context of the national picture in relation to small schools and pupil funding levels. The number of small schools had halved since the 1980s with rural schools being more likely to close.
- noted a number of queries around the accuracy of the pupil forecasts contained in the committee reports, including from Shailesh Vara MP, and sought clarification. The Director of Education stated that Huntingdonshire District Council had been consulted and that there were no large developments planned in the Great Gidding catchment area, only infill development.
- noted that on current information there would be five children on roll in September 2023 if the school stayed open and asked what the set-up would be and the implications for those children's educational outcomes. The Director of Education stated that schools were funded on the basis of pupil numbers. Officers would have to re-start the school closure process as the quality of education would be impacted.
- asked whether the progress of Great Gidding's pupils would be tracked in their new schools, to offer reassurance that they were in a good place, and how the pupil voice would be captured. The Director of Education stated that there was a commitment to supporting the children's transition to their new schools and that their progress would be tracked through their new headteachers. The pupil voice had been captured through the headteacher and School Improvement Team's discussions with the children early in the process and through the transition support being provide by the SEND team. A pupil passport had been developed for those children already moving to new schools to support their transition and enable them to express their wishes. Learning would be brought back as part of a future report.
- commented on the importance of planning where new houses would be built.
- welcomed the benefits which Great Gidding's pupils had enjoyed due to its small class sizes, but felt that there was a need to be realistic about what could be afforded. They emphasised the importance of equality of opportunity and noted the reference in a previous report to the burden which would be placed on the headteacher in a one or two class structure.

- thanked officers for their careful and painstaking reports and their response to parents, noting that a previous report had recognised the excellent work by the interim headteacher and staff at Great Gidding.
- stated as one of the longest serving committee members that they considered this was the hardest decision the committee had been called on to make during their tenure, but that they believed that closure was the right decision. This was an educational matter, and it had been hard to listen to the politicisation of the decision. They did not consider this to be solely a small schools issue as many schools were struggling with their budgets and they felt that the committee had at best been ambivalent regarding educational structures. In their view many of Cambridgeshire's schools were not in strong structures, whether academies or other structures, and they felt consideration of this was overdue.
- emphasised the positive aspects of small schools and their view that because a school was vulnerable did not mean it had to close. Pupil numbers had gone down when the consultation was announced, and no-one wanted to listen. The impact statements from parents included as an appendix to the report were upsetting to read. They thought they recalled seeing a list of vulnerable schools previously, but that this now seemed to have disappeared.

The Vice Chair stated that it was regrettable to close any school, especially a rural school. He echoed calls for a report to be brought to a future meeting to reflect learning from the process undertaken in relation to Great Gidding and looked forward to seeing the updated small schools strategy. A high percentage of Great Gidding's pupils were from outside its catchment area and it had small numbers on role, placing it in a fragile state. There had been criticism that the consultation process had been left too late and he acknowledged that potentially more could have been done in the public arena earlier in the process. However, the committee had seen what happened when the debate became public so, in his view, it was right to do as much as possible before taking the debate into the public domain. He acknowledged that this had been a shock, but did not feel it was in anyone's interests to prolong the period of uncertainty. He did not doubt there were things to be learned, but he did think the overall timeline and approach were defensible and had children's best educational outcomes in mind.

Co-opted members of the committee were eligible to vote on this item. A recorded vote on recommendation a) was conducted in accordance with the Constitution:

It was resolved by a majority to:

- approve the closure of Great Gidding CE (VC) Primary School on 31 August 2023.

	For	Against	Abstain
Councillor D Ambrose Smith		x	
Councillor M Atkins	x		
Councillor A Bradnam	x		
Councillor A Bulat	x		
Councillor C Daunton	x		
Councillor B Goodliffe	x		

Councillor A Hay		x	
Councillor A Hoy		x	
Councillor J King		x	
Councillor M McGuire		x	
Canon A Read	x		
Councillor A Sharp		x	
Councillor P Slatter	x		
Councillor S Taylor	x		
Councillor F Thompson	x		

The Director of Education stated that it was recognised that the closure of Great Gidding would create a financial burden on families in relation to uniform costs. It was proposed that a one-off payment should be made to assist with the purchase costs. The Great Gidding catchment would be revised, and it was proposed to provide home to school transport assistance in accordance with the Council's policy or a mileage allowance as set out in paragraph 7.2.2 of the report.

Individual Members raised the following issues:

- welcomed the proposal to offer financial support to the families affected by the closure of Great Gidding.
- asked whether this support would be offered to siblings of the children at Great Gidding. The Director of Education stated that the support would only be available to those children on roll at Great Gidding on 10th January 2023. Officers would write to parents and carers setting out the support available. Each child would receive a uniform allowance, backdated if needed for those who had already moved school.
- asked about shared transport to support friendship groups. Officers stated that where it was best value and space was available on a school bus this could be done. It was up to families to decide if they wanted to share journeys.
- expressed surprise about the range of uniform costs referenced in the report. The Director of Education stated that officers regularly reminded schools of the Department for Education's guidance on uniform costs, but that this was outside of the Council's control.
- asked why a fixed sum was not offered for the uniform allowance given the relatively small cost. The Director of Education stated that there was a differential in uniform costs between schools and officers were looking to provide a sufficient and equitable amount of funds from the public purse.

Co-opted members of the committee were eligible to vote on this item. On being put to the vote it was resolved unanimously to:

b) approve, for children displaced by the closure:

- the provision of financial assistance in the form of home to school transport or a mileage allowance.

- the provision of a single per child payment to assist with the purchase of uniform for their new school.

The Chair stated that this had been a long and complex process. She expressed her thanks to parents, staff and residents of Great Gidding and to the school's children and young people. She thanked officers for their diligence.

The meeting adjourned from 3.06pm to 3.13pm.

Councillor Gardener left the meeting at 3.06pm.

Other decisions

152. Passenger Transport Policy Review

The Committee received a petition from local resident Amy Caldwell calling on the Council to [review the current school transport provision from Great Gransden to Comberton Village College.](#)

Mrs Caldwell stated that bus provision to Comberton Village College from Great Gransden was not funded by the local authority. She asked that this should be reviewed given that families were struggling to fund travel costs of around £1000 a year per child; the strong links between Barnabas Oley Primary School and Comberton Village College; no children in the area attended Longsands Academy, for which education transport would be provided; the provision of Council funded home to school transport for villages further from the school, like Gamlingay; and empty spaces existing on Council funded bus routes to the school travelling through the village. Mrs Caldwell considered the current arrangements to be unfair and unequal, to have a negative environmental impact and to have implications for child safety as Comberton Village College was not designed for multiple vehicle drop-offs.

In response to questions from committee members it was established that:

- Mrs Caldwell understood that Gamlingay received transport due to an historical connection.
- Council funded bus routes from Caldecote and Caxton ran through Great Gransden and surrounding villages.
- the existing bus contract for transport from the area to Comberton Village College was organised by the school and financed by parents.

Councillor Ferguson addressed the committee as the member for St Neots East and Gransden. He stated that the Council provided free transport to school for 272 out of 277 villages. Four villages were excluded and had to pay around £1000 per year to get on the bus which was picking up children from other villages. The Council's policy stated that a child's designated school was their catchment school. On that basis, these

villages should in his view be included as both Longsands Academy and Comberton Village College were catchment schools. Since this issue was first raised by Mrs Caldwell the Council's website now specified caveats for Great Gransden and surrounding villages. No child from Great Gransden currently attended Longsands Academy so local authority secondary school transport spend for these villages was zero. If the recommendations in the report on the Passenger Transport Policy Review were approved the exclusion of these four villages would be formalised and he asked the committee to look again at this. In his view it seemed fundamentally unfair that residents in these villages were subsidising school transport provision at significant cost to themselves without being able to access it.

In response to Councillor Ferguson's representations committee members:

- sought clarification of the section of the policy which he had referenced. Councillor Ferguson stated that Appendix 4, Section 2.7 contained three notes. To his reading, the first two notes were intended to exclude these villages from receiving free school transport. He believed that these caveats were not present in the 2016 policy.
- sought clarification of the catchment schools for the area. Councillor Ferguson stated that the Council website listed both Longsands Academy and Comberton Village College as catchment schools. Since August 2022 a caveat had been placed on the website stating that these villages were not eligible to free school transport. In his view, the 2016 policy contained no such exclusion.
- noted that the coach used by Great Gransden families was organised by Comberton Village College. Mrs Caldwell felt that there were other buses travelling through the village which were operating at low capacity where seats could be made available.
- expressed the view that a better bus service available to all was needed throughout the day.

A copy of the Chair's response to the petition is attached at Appendix 1. This would be shared with committee members. **Action required**

Introducing the report, the Director of Education stated that the committee had considered the challenges of home to school transport in November 2022 and had approved a Transport Transformation strategy. Since then, officers had reviewed all areas of education transport policy. There had been an overspend of £3m on education transport in the previous financial year. The first section of the report updated existing policies in line with statutory requirements and to make the documents easier to navigate and did not propose any material changes. The second section related to discretionary expenditure. This included an extended walking distance for pupils aged between 8 and 11, transport to nursery schools for children with special educational needs and disabilities and a Post 16 travel assistance policy. The Council's discretionary provision in these areas was an outlier in comparison to other local authorities and officers were bringing this to the committee's attention with a view to consulting on changes to this provision.

The Chair acknowledged that officers had been asked to provide information on the discretionary element of education transport expenditure for the committee's consideration. In her judgement the savings in these areas would be relatively small, but the impact would be significant and detrimental. With the consent of the meeting, it was agreed not to proceed with recommendations a) to c):

- a) to proceed with a consultation on withdrawing the current discretionary travel arrangements for children aged between 8 and 11 living more than 2 miles but less than the statutory 3 mile walking distance from their home to school.
- b) to consult on revisions to the Council's discretionary Post-16 Travel Assistance offer, for students with Special Educational Needs or Disabilities (SEND), withdrawing the existing provision of free assistance, and introducing a new level of subsidy in line with the mainstream travel assistance subsidy.
- c) to consult on introducing a subsidised charge for discretionary transport assistance for children with SEND, who attend nursery provision and request assistance.

It was proposed by the Vice-Chair and agreed by consent to amend recommendation d) to reflect this change by removing the reference to recommendations a), b) and c):

- d) comment on and agree the adoption of the revised travel assistance policies and governance arrangements, including the new Home to School Travel Assistance Policy for Children in Care. ~~with the exception of the proposed amendments listed in a, b and c above.~~

(Text removed shown as ~~struck through~~)

Individual Members raised the following issues in relation to the report:

- noted that demand for provision for children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) had increased significantly over time. In 2014 the Council had been supporting 2,500 children and young people with statements of special educational need compared to over 7,000 children and young people with Education, Health and Care Plans in 2023.
- encouraged support for active travel options for home to school journeys to support better health and environmental outcomes. The Director of Education stated that it was intended to bring a report on this to a future meeting, but emphasised that safety remained the main priority. The Chair stated that she had met with the Chair and Vice Chair of the Highways and Transport Committee, and they were happy to discuss active travel options.
- noted that education transport policy was reviewed annually by officers and brought before the committee if any material changes were proposed.
- asked whether the shortage of bus drivers was impacting on the provision of education transport. Officers stated that data was being collected and the

Education Transport team would work with providers to look at a sustainable transport model.

- referenced the large catchment for the planned Post 16 college at Northstowe and the need for a transport strategy to address safe vehicle movements around the site and public and active transport options. Officers stated that they worked with schools in relation to active travel options and that they were engaging with the Combined Authority's work on bus route provision.
- suggested learning from the Northstowe development could be used for other proposed schools in Cambridgeshire.
- confirmed with officers that approving recommendation d) would not adversely affect the support available to children in care and care leavers.
- established that the nearest school for most addresses in Great Gransden was Cambourne Village College.

The Vice Chair confirmed that the Council's existing policy contained the discretionary elements referenced in recommendations a) to c), so in agreeing recommendation d) those discretionary elements would be retained.

Co-opted members of the committee were eligible to vote on this item. It was resolved unanimously to:

Comment on and agree the adoption of the revised travel assistance policies and governance arrangements, including the new Home to School Travel Assistance Policy for Children in Care.

153. Children and Young People Committee agenda plan, training plan, committee appointments and Local Authority School Governor nominations and appointments

Nominations were sought for a vacancy which had arisen on the Cambridgeshire Culture Steering Group.

A member suggested that a factual briefing should be arranged on complex matters before committee discussions. **Action required**

The Chair stated that a briefing session had been requested on education transport matters. **Action required**

Officers undertook to send committee members a link to recordings of previous committee training sessions. **Action required**

The Chair placed on record the committee's thanks to all those who gave up their time to be school governors.
It was resolved unanimously to:

- a) note the committee agenda plan.
- b) note the committee training plan.
- c) note committee appointments.
- d) note local authority school governor nominations and appointments for the period January to March 2023.

(Chair)

Chair's response to petition from Mrs Amy Caldwell (minute 152 refers)

Thank you for coming to the meeting today and for your clear articulation of the reasons why you and other families living in Great Gransden submitted this petition calling on the Council to formally review the existing transport arrangements to Comberton Village College.

I think it would be helpful to firstly explain the Council's duties, in respect of home to school transport, and clarify how these relate to families living within Great Gransden.

Cambridgeshire County Council has a statutory duty to provide free transport for all secondary aged pupils (11-16) attending their nearest suitable school if that school is beyond 3 miles from their home address. The Council's Home to School Travel Assistance policy defines the nearest suitable school as a pupil's catchment or nearest secondary school. The Council's defined catchment areas are designed to ensure access to a local school place whilst also ensuring the viability of schools.

In the context of Great Gransden, and the other villages served by Barnabas Oley Primary School, including Little Gransden, Abbotsley and Waresley, the designated catchment school is Longsands Academy in St Neots and the nearest secondary school, for the majority of addresses, is Cambourne Village College.

During January and February 2014 the Governing body of Comberton Village College, as a part of their annual consultation for their school admission arrangements, also consulted on the expansion of their catchment area to include the area served by Barnabas Oley Primary School with effect from September 2015. Any school who are their own Admission Authority, such as Comberton Village College, can seek to change or expand their catchment area for the purposes of admitting pupils to that school. This process does not, however, determine a change to the provision of home to school transport, for which Cambridgeshire County Council is responsible.

At the time of the consultation all parties, including the governing body of Barnabas Oley Primary School, were informed that whilst consideration would be given to the travel arrangements there would be no guarantee or automatic entitlement for Comberton to be recognised by the Council as the catchment school for the area, as there remained an existing catchment in this area for Longsands Academy, St Neots.

After full consideration by senior officers, the Council confirmed to both Comberton Village College and to the Governing Body of Barnabas Oley CofE Primary School that the College's extended catchment area would not be recognised for home to school transport purposes, and the designation of Longsands Academy would remain.

Since then, to ensure that families are able to make informed decisions when making their secondary school preferences, the School Admission publications have clearly confirmed that the revised catchment area is not supported by the Council for the purposes of home to school transport. As a part of the school admissions process families are advised to consult all the information available regarding school catchment areas and consider how their school choices impact eligibility for other services, such as home to school transport. This information includes

the online school directory where the admission arrangements for each school, included Comberton Village College, are published.

With an increasing number of secondary schools converting to academy status and becoming their own Admissions Authority, it was recognised that a formal member process should be adopted for determining whether the Council should accept responsibility for the provision of free transport, as a result of decisions taken by own admission authority schools to change their catchment areas. In March 2015 the Children and Young People Committee gave its approval to the adoption of a process delegating responsibility for decisions on transport entitlement in such circumstances to the Chair and Vice-Chair of the Committee, in liaison with the local Member(s).

In 2017, following representations from families living in Great Gransden, the Chair and Vice Chair of the Committee re-considered the decision regarding home to school transport arrangements to Comberton Village College. As a part of that process all representations received were considered, including views from local members, in accordance with the adopted process outlined above. The decision taken re-affirmed the existing position to not provide free home to school transport for pupils living in the area served by Barnabas Oley to Comberton Village College.

As a part of this process consideration was given to the comparison being drawn between those families living in Great Gransden and those living in Gamlingay, where it was agreed in 2016, via the above member process, to acknowledge Comberton Village College as the catchment school for transport purposes. It was considered that the decision taken, to recognise Comberton Village College for transport purposes for children living in the Gamlingay area, was not directly comparable. As Gamlingay had previously been part of the three-tier education system with transfer links to Stratton Upper School in Biggleswade, Bedfordshire, those children did not have an existing designated secondary catchment school in Cambridgeshire, unlike those children and young people living in the Barnabas Oley catchment area.

I appreciate the views and concerns raised by those parents and carers of children living in Great Gransden, and those expressed by Councillor Ferguson. I am also aware that there has been a long-standing trend of parental preference for children and young people to attend Comberton Village College, pre-dating the College's catchment area change in 2015. It is also clear that this pattern of preference was a significant factor in the College's decision to extend its catchment area in 2015.

Whilst it is clear that the majority of families living within the area served by Barnabas Oley Primary School now choose for their children to attend Comberton Village College, there still remains a number of families whose children attend and receive transport assistance to Longsands Academy.

Families are entitled to express any school preference for their child, but it would be neither fair nor equitable of the Council to fund transport in these circumstances where there are other similar patterns of parental preference replicated across the County, where transport assistance is not provided.

I recognise and sympathise with the concerns raised regarding the cost of the current transport arrangements from Great Gransden to Comberton Village College, however, I am

also aware that these arrangements are operated directly by the College. It should also be recognised, however, that families will have been aware of the responsibility to make or fund their child's transport arrangements, when applying for a place at the College.

I have noted the feedback regarding there being no provision within the travel assistance policy for this type of catchment area scenario. I am aware that this has been included within the revised policy framework being presented today.

It is the view of the Chair and Vice chair of this Committee that the decision in respect of the home to school transport arrangements to Comberton Village College has been fairly and appropriately considered and that there are currently no grounds to undertake a further review of this decision.