

Gt Gidding Church of England (Voluntary Controlled) Primary School – Consultation Update

To:	Children & Young People's Committee
Meeting Date:	8 March 2023
From:	Executive Director: Children's Services
Electoral division(s):	Alconbury and Kimbolton, Sawtry and Stilton, Yaxley and Farcet
Key decision:	No
Forward Plan ref:	N/A
Outcome:	The Committee is asked to determine whether to proceed to stage 2 of the statutory process and publish a statutory notice formally proposing the closure of Gt Gidding CE VC Primary School
Recommendation:	<p>The Committee is recommended to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">a) note and consider the responses to the consultation on the future of Gt Gidding Primary CE VC Primary School.b) consider the evidence presented in relation to the viability of Gt Gidding Church of England (CE) Voluntary Controlled (VC) Primary School remaining open after the end of the current academic year 2022/23.c) decide whether or not to proceed to Stage 2 of the statutory process and publish a statutory notice and formal proposal for the closure of Gt Gidding Primary CE VC Primary School on 31 August 2023.
Voting arrangements:	Co-opted members of the Committee are eligible to vote on this.
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1. Background

- 1.1 Gt Gidding (population 322) and Abbots Ripton (population 310) are the smallest settlements in Cambridgeshire with a primary school. The other 9 villages in Cambridgeshire with population between 300 and 350 do not have a primary school. Dry Drayton (population 700) is the next smallest village with a primary school. The October 2022 pupil census records the 4-11 age population in Gt Gidding catchment as 19, Abbots Ripton 44 and Dry Drayton 66.
- 1.2 There have been longstanding concerns regarding the future viability of Gt Gidding CE VC Primary School (Gt Gidding). In particular, falling pupil numbers, which were forecast to be below 40 in September 2023, financial issues generated by the low number on roll and the associated impact upon the quality of education provided. Officers approached 7 primary schools to explore possibilities for collaboration to support Gt Gidding CE VC Primary School, but these approaches did not come to anything. Consequently, on 17 January 2023, the Committee gave approval for the Local Authority (LA) to launch a consultation on the future of the school, which might include closure. A copy of the consultation document can be viewed in **Appendix 1** of this report.
- 1.3 The Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs has a classification system which defines areas as rural if they fall outside of settlements with more than 10,000 resident population. The community of Gt Gidding is included under the definition of Rural: Hamlets and Isolated Dwellings. A 'rural primary school', in this context, means any school referred to in the Designation of Rural Primary Schools (England) Order and Gt Gidding features in this Order.
- 1.4 The Department for Education's (DfE) *Statutory guidance for proposers and decision-makers: Opening and closing maintained schools* expects all decision-makers to adopt a presumption against the closure of rural schools. This does not mean that a rural school will never close, but that the case for closure should be strong and clearly in the best interests of educational provision in the area and the outcomes of children in schools. The LA, therefore, has a duty to carefully consider the factors set out in the guidance when proposing to close a rural school, as well as the additional requirements on the Council around consultation and factors to consider within decision making as set out in section 15, section 16 Education and Inspections Act 2006 (EIA 2006).
- 1.5 Proposals which could result in closure have to follow a prescribed 5 stage process established by the Education and Inspections Act 2006 (EIA 2006) as updated by the Education Act 2011 and the School Organisation (Establishment and Discontinuance of Schools) (England) Regulations 2013. Stage 1 of the process is an initial consultation. There is no Department for Education (DfE) prescribed timeframe for consultation. The consultation, began on 23 January and ran for 30 days, ending on 21 February 2023. On 10 January the Service Director for Education wrote to all parents/carers of children attending the school and all school staff, as soon as the Committee report was published, alerting them to the content of the report, how they could attend or contribute to this Committee agenda item and what to expect if the Committee decided to approve the launch of a consultation.

2. Consultation Process

- 2.1 A number of questions and requests for information were received prior to the formal opening of the consultation. These were addressed through a Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) document posted on the consultation pages of Council's website at the point of consultation launch. A copy of the current version of the FAQ document is at **Appendix 2** of this report.
- 2.2 The Council have complied with its section 16 obligations under the EIA 2006 by consulting the bodies specified within section 16(1). They have consulted pupils, parents and carers, staff, the governing body, and other local schools. The LA also consulted a wide range of other groups including the district and parish councils, the local MP, the CE Diocese and the wider local community.
- 2.3 On 31 January, 3 separate consultation meetings were held at the school with parents and carers, staff and the local community respectively to provide them with further information and to give interested parties the opportunity to ask questions. 13 adults attended the parents/carers session, 8 members of staff (excluding the Interim Headteacher) attended the staff session, and 74 adults attended the session for the wider community. There were also children at both the parent/carer and wider community session. Notes were taken at all three meetings and the FAQ document, posted on the consultation pages of the Council's website, responding to key issues raised was updated accordingly.
- 2.4 In addition, the LA sought feedback directly from pupils through a pupil engagement session on 2 February led by the Interim Headteacher and the school's Improvement Adviser who knows the school well. Consultations were led in pupils' classrooms wherever possible so that pupils felt comfortable to share their feelings. Pupils were grouped in three ways:
- Reception, Year 1 and 2 as these pupils are taught in one class
 - Years 3, 4, & 5 (Year 5 were asked to join the Year 3/ 4 class, as it was felt that they had more in common with regards to the possible closure than the Year 6 pupils)
 - Year 6 were consulted separately as they are in a position where they will move to secondary school as the school closes, if the proposal were to go ahead.

20 minutes was spent with each group and the same two questions were asked to all 3 groups, in an age-appropriate way:

1. How do you feel about the proposed closure?
2. How can we help you during this time?

Each group was offered the opportunity to share other ideas, by "post-it" note to the Headteacher, if they had ideas after the session. **See Appendix 1.**

- 2.5 All parents/carers of pupils attending the school were also offered the opportunity to meet individually with officers in order to understand their wishes and concerns for their child/ren and their preferences for alternative school placements in the event of the school closing. These meetings took place on 6 and 9 February at the school. 15 sets of parents/carers took up this opportunity.

Of the 15 parents who chose not to take advantage of this opportunity:

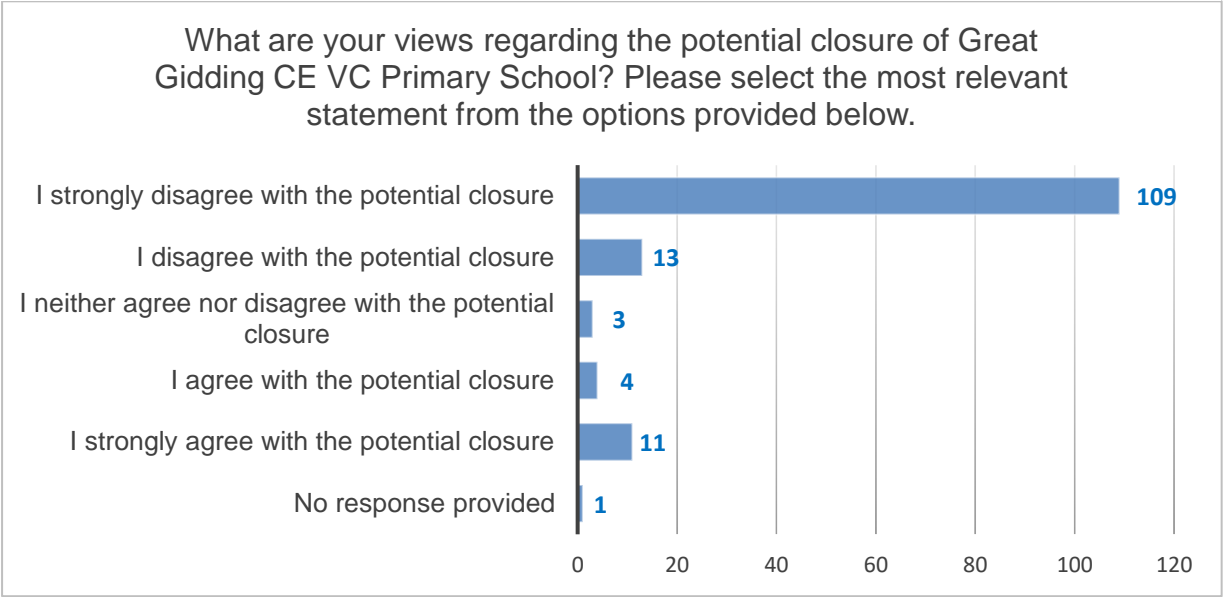
- 4 are parents of pupils in Year (Yr) 6
- 3 were parents of pupils who had already secured a place elsewhere and were leaving the school at half-term
- Another 3 parents were actively applying to move their children
- A further 5 were in the process of looking round other schools prior to putting in an application to move their children

- 2.6 On 6 February, officers met with headteachers and representatives from local Multi-Academy Trusts (MATs). This was an opportunity for them to hear the same presentation given to the school and wider community on 31 January and to ask questions and understand the potential implications for schools in the area in the event of the school closing.
- 2.7 Finally, on the evening of 9 February, officers, together with the Ely Diocesan Director Education, attended an extraordinary meeting of the Giddings Parish Council. In addition to Parish Councillors, local County and District Councillors, the local MP and the agent for Milton Estate (Peterborough) also attended. The Director of Education gave a presentation explaining the background to the consultation, the consultation process and next steps. There were 34 members of the public in the audience who came to listen to that presentation and to hear the responses to the various questions and observations that had been submitted in advance. The Parish Council subsequently submitted its written response to the consultation.

3. Analysis of Consultation Responses

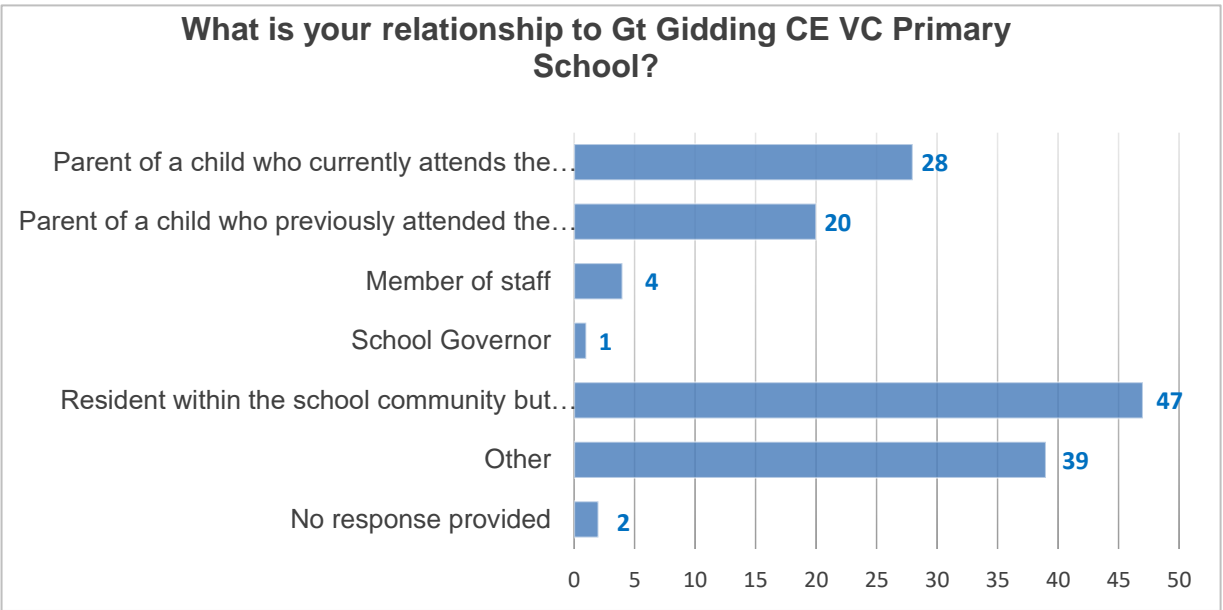
- 3.1 By the end of the consultation period, a total of 141 responses had been received. This included 140 submitted online via the Smart Survey and 1 survey completed in paper format and submitted to the school.
- 3.2 23 of the responses received were from shared households. i.e. more than one response from a single household. It is likely that responses received were submitted from different people living within the household.
- 3.3 In addition to the formal responses received, some individuals chose to email officers and councillors separately. 10 emails were received prior to consultation (excluding any acknowledgements), and 17 emails following its launch. Some individuals sent more than one email and responded to the Smart Survey. These have been shared with the Committee but will not be made public due to the personal information which many contain.
- 3.4 Officers are also aware of a petition objecting to the proposed closure of Gt Gidding CE VC Primary School, which, is due to be presented to the Committee in response to this paper.
- 3.5 Of those who completed the survey, 77% of respondents (109 people in total) '*strongly disagreed*', and a further 9% (13 people in total) '*disagreed*' with the proposed closure of the school. It was clear that those who submitted emails via the consultation inbox, or directly to elected members and officers, also objected to the proposals. This information is shown in figure 1 below.

Figure 1: Graph to show responses to Question 2 of the Smart Survey



3.6 In comparison, 8% of respondents (11 people in total) ‘*strongly agreed*’, and a further 3% (4 people in total) ‘*agreed*’ with the potential closure of Gt Gidding CE VC Primary school. Those who were in favour commented that children would have improved educational outcomes and more opportunities in a larger, more sustainable school. Of those, 3 responses also shared their positive personal experiences of moving their children from Gt Gidding to other nearby schools and noting a marked improvement in their educational offer as a result. In addition to these comments, respondents commented on the lack of funding in Education generally, and the concerns that, if this school were to stay open, it would impact upon other schools and services as a result.

Figure 2: Graph to show responses to Question 1 of the Smart Survey



- 3.7 The majority of respondents (47) were classified as '*residents within the local community but not a parent or member of staff including governors*'. The second largest group to respond (39) selected '*other*'. This included, but was not limited to, former employees and pupils, close friends or family members of children at the school, and governors from other local schools. Some respondents who ticked '*other*' provided no supporting details.

4. Key themes and considerations

- 4.1 Several key themes and considerations arose from the consultation responses. These are set out below, along with the LA's response to each point, and have also been used to inform both the Equalities Impact Assessment (EqIA) and Community Impact Assessment (CIA) which are both appendices to this report.

4.2 Accuracy of Pupil Forecasts

- 4.2.1 At the community events, members of the public expressed concern that the information presented to Committee in January showed the number of pupils resident within the catchment over the coming years and did not take into account patterns of parental preference and the children who, if current patterns of parental preference were to continue, would be likely to attend the school from out of catchment.
- 4.2.2 The Council's Business Intelligence Service produces two sets of forecasts. The first set focuses on children resident in the catchment area only and does not take into account patterns of parental preference. The second focuses on forecasting the number of pupils if previous patterns of parental preference were to continue. These are shown below in **Tables 1** and **3** respectively, with the actual number of pupils on roll in **Tables 2** and **4** for comparison. This confirms that all data shows a decline in pupil numbers.

Table 1: Forecast number of children attending Great Gidding CE VC Primary School								
Academic Year	Rec	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4	Year 5	Year 6	Total
2018/2019	13	8	11	6	6	6	10	60
2019/2020	6	0	9	10	7	6	5	43
2020/2021	4	8	1	9	10	5	6	43
2021/2022	9	5	8	1	9	9	5	46
2022/2023	4	7	5	8	3	8	9	44
2023/2024	4	4	7	5	8	3	8	39

Table 2: Actual number of children attending Great Gidding CE VC Primary School								
Academic Year	Rec	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4	Year 5	Year 6	Total
2018/2019	0	9	10	7	6	5	11	48
2019/2020	8	2	9	10	7	7	7	50
2020/2021	5	8	1	9	9	5	7	44
2021/2022	7	5	8	3	8	9	4	44

Table 3: Forecast number of children living within the Great Gidding catchment area								
Academic Year	Rec	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4	Year 5	Year 6	Total
2018/2019	1	4	3	3	3	5	5	24
2019/2020	3	1	5	3	4	3	5	24
2020/2021	3	3	2	5	2	4	3	22
2021/2022	4	2	3	2	6	2	4	23
2022/2023	0	5	1	1	2	5	2	16
2023/2024	0	0	5	1	1	2	5	14

Table 4: Actual number of children living within the Great Gidding Catchment Area								
Academic Year	Rec	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4	Year 5	Year 6	Total
2018/2019	1	5	2	4	3	5	5	25
2019/2020	3	2	5	2	4	3	4	23
2020/2021	2	3	2	6	2	4	2	21
2021/2022	5	1	1	2	5	2	3	19

4.3 Capacity in local schools

- 4.3.1 A significant number of respondents argued that there would be insufficient capacity in the local schools if Gt Gidding CE VC Primary School were to close, and some drew upon their own recent experiences when applying for a school place, albeit in-year.
- 4.3.2 Whilst some schools are at operational capacity now, halfway through the current academic year, there is physical space which is not currently being utilised and could be resourced if it were required. This includes at Sawtry Infant and Junior Schools, which are the nearest schools to Gt Gidding, where they are operating with two classes per year group but have unused classrooms / mobile classrooms which could be brought into use from September 23 if required. We have held discussions with both schools and they are happy to provide additional capacity in line with demand from parents at Great Gidding, if required.
- 4.3.3 If the decision were to close, parents would be able to apply for a school of their choice. Officers have therefore reviewed several possible scenarios, in recognition that families may choose varied alternatives.
- 4.3.4 If the decision was to be taken to close the school, the Council would arrange a dedicated admissions round for families of Gt Gidding CE VC Primary School to ascertain their preferences and would work collaboratively with the schools concerned to meet these, where possible. From 1:1 meetings held with parents, it would appear preferences are likely to include local schools which officers have considered, and are referenced in this paper.

4.4 Quality of education provision

- 4.4.1 At the community event, one individual referenced the policy position that all children should have access to a 'good' school and highlighted that the current Ofsted rating for Gt

Gidding is 'Good'. Individuals also challenged the Council's concerns regarding pupil outcomes in relation to this Ofsted rating.

- 4.4.2 When Ofsted has judged a school to be good or outstanding after a graded inspection, which is carried out under section 5 of the Education Act 2005, they will then normally return to the school about once every 4 years to confirm that the school remains good or outstanding and that safeguarding is effective. This is called an ungraded inspection, and it is carried out under section 8 of the Act.
- 4.4.3 In October 2017 the school received an overall rating of Good following a section 5 inspection, although the Outcomes for Pupils were deemed 'Requiring Improvement' (RI). A Section 8 inspection was then carried out in November 2022 which confirmed that there had been no change to the overall judgement of the school. However, the report states that *'the evidence gathered suggests that the inspection grade might not be as high if a graded (section 5) inspection were carried out now. The next inspection will therefore be a graded inspection.'*
- 4.4.4 If the school were to remain open, it would be necessary to operate with a two-class structure. This would be likely to require 2 teaching staff, with a teaching head who has significant expertise in either Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) with KS1 or all four year groups across Key Stage (KS) 2. The workload of the Headteacher would also be increased with the expectation that they would need to take on the role of Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator (SENCo) and Designated Safeguarding Lead (DSL) as well as carrying out the necessary training for paediatric first aid.
- 4.4.5 The ability to effectively manage staff absence would be inhibited in a 2-teacher staffing model as there will be limited capacity to implement cover arrangements.
- 4.4.6 The current model at Gt Gidding school is a more traditional mixed-aged class structure especially across KS2 and as a result, there are well-established curriculum support materials to aid teachers to deal with the complexities. This is not the case for a 2-class structure across key stage 2 which would require teachers to plan and differentiate without these materials, or a network of colleagues who could offer their support.
- 4.4.7 Within the local area, all schools are currently graded as 'Good' with the exception of William de Yaxley Junior School (graded RI in 2021) and Holme C of E Primary School which has not been graded since joining the Diocese of Ely Multi-Academy Trust in 2019. Prior to this, it had received a 'Good' Ofsted rating in 2017. The Council is therefore confident that there are sufficient local alternatives which offer high-quality education. Schools in the surrounding area and their latest Ofsted rating can be found in the table below.

Figure 3: Schools in the local area and their current Ofsted rating

Name of School	Ofsted rating
Sawtry Infant School	Good (2019)
Sawtry Junior Academy	Good (2019)
Folksworth C of E Primary School	Good (2022)
Stilton C of E Primary School	Good (2022)
Brington C of E Primary School	Good (2017)
Holme C of E Primary School	No inspection yet
Yaxley Infant School	Good (2022)
William de Yaxley Junior Academy	Requires Improvement (2021)
Fourfields Community Primary School	Good (2018)

4.5 Preference for small schools

4.5.1 There were several responses which stated parental preference was for their child/ren to attend a small school due to the nurturing environment and learning opportunities it can provide with fewer children on roll.

4.5.2 The Council acknowledges that smaller schools may be the preference for some families, and fully supports that a diverse range of schools is necessary to accommodate parental preference. We are confident that there are other small schools within the local area which parents/carers may wish to consider should the school close. For example, the villages of Brington, Folksworth, Holme all have small primary schools.

4.6 Preference for schools with a designated religious character

4.6.1 A number of respondents stated that they had chosen for their children to attend Gt Gidding due to it being a CE school with an Anglican Christian character, and associated values. It should be noted that all non-denominational state funded schools in England have to provide collective worship of a 'broadly Christian character', and that denominational schools are not exclusive to worshipping families. However, should this be a preference for families, there are four other denominational schools within 6 miles of Gt Gidding (as the crow flies). These are listed in Figure 4 below.

Figure 4: Denominational schools within 6 miles of Gt Gidding

Name of school	Distance	Published Admission Number (PAN)
Folksworth CofE Primary School	4.5 miles	15
Stilton C of E Primary Academy	4.7 miles	30
Brington C of E Primary School	5.1 miles	17
Holme C of E Primary School	5.5 miles	17

4.7 Provision for Pupils with Special Educational Needs and/or Disabilities (SEND)

- 4.7.1 Of the responses received, 6 referenced concerns around pupils with SEND, and the ability for a smaller school to offer more targeted support. Other responses also reference children's wellbeing or levels of anxiety resulting from COVID-19 and as a result of the potential to close the school. A separate section on wellbeing is included below.
- 4.7.2 Inclusive education is one of the stated principles underpinning the SEND Code of Practice. All schools should, therefore, aim to be fully inclusive and welcoming to pupils with a diverse range of needs, and to their best endeavours ensure that their needs are met. Should the decision be taken to close, the local authority would take all practicable steps to ease the transition for all pupils, including vulnerable groups. This would include, but is not limited to, working with the receiving schools to arrange transition days for pupils to meet their new teachers and to familiarise themselves with their new environment.

4.8 Impact on pupils' wellbeing

- 4.8.1 A number of responses raised concerns about the impact of closure on pupil wellbeing; both in terms of the awareness of consultation and the potential to close, and closure itself should the Children and Young People Committee consider it to be the most appropriate outcome.
- 4.8.2 As part of the consultation process, all pupils took part in a consultation session whereby they were asked two questions regarding the consultation, and to provide the opportunity for them to share their thoughts and concerns. These can be found within the **Appendix 1**.
- 4.8.3 We acknowledge that, if the school were to close there would be a period of transition and potential unsettlement for pupils. In these circumstances, LA support will be made available to all pupils on roll at Gt Gidding through the Strategic SEND Support Team who will provide support for pupils using a pastoral emotional health and wellbeing approach. The package of support made available will be bespoke to the needs of pupils at Gt Gidding and delivered by a Strategic SEND Support Specialist Teacher.

4.9 Impact on the local community

- 4.9.1 Concerns were raised about the impact upon local businesses and groups, should the school close. This has been considered fully within the Community Impact Assessment at **Appendix 3**, with local data provided by the Parish Council and external research carried out to inform the Council's response. The likely effect of the discontinuance of the school on the local community is also covered in the Council's response to the presumption against the closure of rural schools at **Appendix 4**

4.10 Presumption against the closure of rural schools

- 4.10.1 In the community consultation event, one individual referenced the DfE's policy position of a presumption against the closure of rural schools. The guidance states *'This doesn't mean that a rural school will never close, but that the case for closure should be strong and clearly in the best interests of educational provision in the area.'* This means that the LA has a duty to carefully consider the factors set out in the guidance when proposing to close

a rural school. These factors have been addressed in a separate document which can be found within **Appendix 4**.

4.11 Travel arrangements / Distance to other schools

4.11.1 Impact on travel arrangements is a key consideration when proposing the closure of rural schools. This was also raised by several respondents at the public event. However, the majority of pupils attending Gt Gidding CE VC Primary School live outside of the school's catchment area and so for some, if the school were to close, it may be possible to attend a school closer to their home address.

4.11.2 For children living within the school's catchment area, it is acknowledged that closure of the school would result in a longer travel time. These pupils will be eligible for transport assistance in line with the LA's statutory duties and the Council's Transport Assistance Policy as the nearest alternative schools, located at Sawtry, are more than 2 miles away.

4.12 School site

4.12.1 Throughout consultation events, questions were raised about the site and what would happen to it if the school were to close. The majority of the school site is owned by the Council on a freehold basis. A smaller part of the site is leased from the Milton Estate. This includes the land on which the main school building is situated.

4.12.2 If the school were to close, ownership of all buildings on the land, currently leased to the Diocese, would revert to the Milton Estate. The mobile accommodation would be removed / disposed of.

4.12.3 Approval would then be required from the Department for Education (DfE) to dispose of any land. Any land would be subject to the Council's disposal policy which would involve declaring the site surplus to the Council's requirements, at which point suitable alternative options for their use would be explored.

5. Current Position

5.1 The school organisation chart below shows the number of pupils on roll by year group as at 20 February 2023.

Figure 5: School organisation chart – Gt Gidding CE VC Primary School (February 2023)

Class	Year Group							Total
	Rec	1	2	3	4	5	6	
1	2	5	7					14
2				5	1			6
3						5	10	15
Total Roll	2	5	7	5	1	5	10	35
PAN:	14	14	14	14	14	14	14	98
Spaces	12	9	7	9	13	9	4	63

- 5.2 As of 31 January 2023, there were 44 pupils on roll. Since then, 14 have applied for and 9 have already taken up places elsewhere. In addition to this, 10 Yr 6 children will leave the school at the end of the current academic year to transfer to secondary phase. Consequently, there is expected to be a maximum of 20 pupils on roll in September 2023. This could be as low as 13 if all the further 7 in-year applications for children to move elsewhere are successful.
- 5.3 The LA recognises that the consultation on the future of the school closure has led some parents to seek to move their children from Gt Gidding ahead of a decision being made. However, a steady downward trend was already established prior to 2022/23 as referenced in the tables above and with it the increasing concern that due to the size and capacity of the school there are limitations to the educational provision which can be offered to pupils. A number of parents from the 1:1 discussion have also indicated that they would have considered moving their children had a 2 class structure been announced for the autumn term.

6. Alternative Options

- 6.1 A number of alternative governance models were considered by the LA before seeking agreement to consult on the future viability of Gt Gidding.

6.2 Federation

- 6.2.1 Only maintained schools can federate with each other. A maintained school is a community, voluntary aided or voluntary controlled school. Gt Gidding CE VC Primary School is a voluntary controlled school. A maintained school cannot federate with an academy.

Although federations are recognised as a way of enabling smaller schools to work more formally in partnerships to share costs, this would not necessarily address the financial challenges faced at Gt Gidding. Nevertheless, federation with another local church school has been explored and 3 schools have been approached. This is a voluntary decision for individual governing bodies to take and there is no obligation on those governing bodies to establish or join a federation. In each case, following initial due diligence, the potential partnership school decided not to progress given concerns around the viability of Gt Gidding CE VC Primary School. In summary, this option was not considered reasonable to take forward given a lack of interest from other schools to partner with Gt Gidding CE VC Primary School in this way.

6.3 Academisation.

- 6.3.1 In undertaking their due diligence, academy trusts, both local and national, find some small schools to be financially unviable or too isolated to be included in their trust, unless they convert with other small schools as a local hub. Previous consideration has been given to the academisation of Gt Gidding and adoption into a church Multi Academy Trust (MAT). As a voluntary controlled school, it could only academise with a church MAT unless approval to join a non-Diocesan MAT was granted by the Diocese of Ely. This option was not considered viable by the Diocese and Council given a lack of interest from an appropriate church of England MAT. Academisation would not address the low pupil numbers and budget challenges the school

faces. We did discuss the school with a non-church MAT to seek an opinion and they confirmed that the low pupil numbers would place too great a risk on their trust financial viability.

6.4 No change

6.4.1 As outlined in this consultation document, Gt Gidding CE VC Primary School has been undersubscribed in each of the last five years and pupil numbers fall significantly short of its published admission number (PAN) each year. There is very little in-catchment demand for places at the school. The school faces significant financial challenges, with the governors' five-year budget plan showing a deficit of over £40,000 by 2024/25. Doing nothing will not address these challenges.

6.4.2 A number of further alternative options have been suggested by respondents to address the challenges the school faces, including:

- Aligning the closure with the opening of the planned new primary school at Sawtry.
- reducing from the current three classes to a two-class structure
- changing the catchment area of the school to increase its geographical area and thereby the number of pupils e.g. to include Glatton
- increase the funding for the school either from local authority resources or by lobbying government.

6.4.3 The following sections explain why the Council and the Diocese believe none of these alternatives to be viable.

6.5 Aligning closure with the opening of the planned new Sawtry Primary School

6.5.1 The new primary school in Sawtry will open with Reception children only with a proposed opening date of September 2024. Pupil numbers will be managed to support the existing two schools in Sawtry. The 2023-24 academic year will require significant reduction in the education offer at Great Gidding due to funding. There will also be a challenge to recruit an interim Headteacher. The Council and the Diocese do not, therefore, see this option as viable.

6.6 Class Structure

6.6.1 The school ran a two-class structure just for the 2011-12 academic year when numbers on roll were 47 at January 2012 census (down from 59 in 2011) and it could afford then to provide some non-teaching support in both classes.

6.6.2 Pupil numbers then increased to allow the school to revert back to a three-class structure in September 2012. Numbers on roll at the time of the October 2012 census were 64. Up until the end of the academic year 2012/13, Infant Class Size Funding operated which supported schools with low numbers in Reception and KS1 and the school benefited from this, e.g. in 2012/13, it received an additional £8030 in its budget.

6.6.3 Were the school to move from 3 classes to 2 classes in September 2023, they would be organised with Reception, Year (Yr) 1 and Yr2 pupils in one class (as now) and Yr3, Yr 4, Yr 5 and Yr 6 pupils i.e., the whole of Key Stage 2 (KS2) in the second class.

- 6.6.4 Currently the numbers in Willow Class (Yrs 3 and 4) and Oak class (Yrs 5 and 6) enable a teacher and additional support staff in each of these two classes. The budget deficit for 2024/25 is forecast to be between £60k and £65k. With pupil numbers reduced further, it would not be financially viable to employ any Teaching Assistants for the academic year 2024/25 and all the KS2 children would be taught by a single teacher. Likewise, Cherry Class (Yrs R, 1 and 2) would have a single teacher and no support staff.
- 6.6.5 Creating a class across all four KS2 year groups would require a bespoke curriculum for the school and potentially for the individual children. This would require extensive child development knowledge alongside subject specific knowledge from the single teacher.
- 6.6.6 The teacher (who may be the headteacher) would have to have extensive knowledge of the KS1, KS2 and year 7 curriculum. Planning would need to take account of the sequence and progression of learning across three curriculum frameworks. The developmental needs, physical and emotional maturity, and level of independence of the pupils across this age range vastly differ.
- 6.6.7 Alongside this, the teacher would have to ensure effective provision and completion of the statutory assessments for year 4 and year 6. In addition, for any children who did not move into year 3 at the expected level, there would be the additional pressure of targeted intervention to narrow any gaps in learning.
- 6.6.8 In addition, the 2014 curriculum and the expectations around progressive sequence of key knowledge makes four year groups in a class much more challenging than in 2011.
- 6.6.9 We asked the current interim Headteacher at Great Gidding to consider what a two-class structure and a reduced budget would entail for the school and its staff. Her observations are set out below.

With only two teachers and a Head this set up would mean that all leadership would fall to them:

- *Special Education Needs and Disability Coordinate (SENCo) - this would most likely need to either be the incoming head or someone would need training as no on-site staff have training. Currently the council has loaned one of its county SENCOs. This arrangement is interim only.*
- *Designated Safeguarding Lead (DSL) - both teachers would need this training to ensure it is always covered in the event of illness or a course.*
- *Subject Leadership responsibilities for - English/Maths/Science/ICT/Early Years Foundation Stage/History/Geography/Design Technology/Art/Music/Modern Foreign Languages/Personal Social Health Education/RE*
- *Mental Health Lead*
- *Assessment Leader*
- *Continued Professional Development Leader*

The Head would also need to have capacity and training to take on:

- *Health and Safety*
- *Premises and the caretaker role (or a good list of people to support with this).*
- *Updating and implement new policies*

- Finance/budgeting
- Strategic vision for the school

An issue/area of concern would be staff absence - if one of the teachers was off sick that would leave the school in a vulnerable place (I appreciate for the first year there would be Teaching Assistants (TAs) but after that the school would be unlikely to be able to afford TAs). The school would be unlikely to be able to afford supply.

Mid-Day Supervisors - this is also an area to consider. Currently I do this and a TA. If the Head is teaching, they would then get no break at all. When the plan moves to no TAs, the school might not manage with MDS as getting someone to travel here for a MDS role for one hour a day is not easy.

Planning, Preparation and Assessment time (PPA – Teacher entitlement to 10% of their time for planning etc). This is currently this is covered by 2 hours of PE. This is out-sourced to third party at a cost which may not be affordable moving forward.

Teaching and Learning Development - This would be difficult to ensure is always of a high quality and to offer training and CPD in as with only two teachers, both would be in class. Getting access to quality CPD would be difficult and monitoring would also be hard (as well as team teaching and support).

Meetings - If the Head is teaching, they would not be available to parents or other professionals for meetings. Networking for a Head in a school like GG is key (it is a lonely job and this is also how you make connections for things you need), teaching would make this impossible as the A1 and Cambridgeshire Heads meetings are daytime meetings. Currently, I meet parents a lot, to support, listen and guide: this happens first thing (when the head would be in class) and just before the end of the day (again, when a teaching head would be in class).

6.6.10 The Council and the Diocese are clear that they would not support the above structural solution and would have significant concerns about the impact on educational outcomes for all children.

6.6.11 It should be noted that given the current predicted numbers for Sept 23 not being greater than 22, there is a chance the school would need to move to a 1-class structure, i.e., all children being taught in one class, should the school not close.

6.7 Financial Position

6.7.1 The DfE allocates funding to LAs on an annual basis through the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG). Maintained schools are then funded directly by the LA using a formulaic approach. This means that the LA does not have the power or resources to increase the amount of funding that Gt Gidding receives, and any increase for one school would subsequently reduce the amount of funding available for other schools across the county.

6.7.2 Sparsity funding is a compulsory funding factor within the National Funding Formula, designed to provide additional funding to schools that are both small and remote. Gt Gidding is currently in receipt of the maximum sparsity funding value as defined by the ESFA (£56,300 for the 23/24 financial year).

- 6.7.3 Despite receiving the highest level of per-pupil funding in Cambridgeshire at more than £8,000 per child, compared to the median of £4,400 per child, the current budget is not sustainable and would require organisational change to balance.
- 6.7.4 When the proposal to consult was first brought to committee, the five-year budget forecast showed a deficit of £-150,500. However, with now just 22 pupils, this is further exacerbated, and revised forecasts suggest a deficit of £-252,000 by 2026/27.

6.8 Catchment Area

- 6.8.1 Expanding the catchment area could only be undertaken in line with the School Admissions Code 2021 and would require a further consultation process to be undertaken. The earliest this could happen would be Autumn 2023 and could not be implemented for entry before September 2025. This assumes that the expansion was not subject to objections to the Office of the Schools Adjudicator and a contrary decision from the Adjudicator. Changing the catchment area of a school is a significant undertaking and there will always be gains and losses. Whilst broadening Gt Gidding CE VC Primary School's catchment might attract more pupils, it would need to be significantly broader than the addition of Glatton to make a positive difference to the school's financial challenges. It would also mean other pupils may have further to travel to their local school, and negatively impact the rolls of other schools. Expanding the catchment area would not necessarily result in greater pupil numbers as that would depend upon parental preference.

7. Summary

- 7.1 86% of the consultation responses object to the proposed closure; there is a clear strength of feeling that the impact on current pupils and the local community would be significant. However, the challenges of delivering a full educational offer to those remaining on roll remains and the impact of reduction in pupil numbers at the school since the consultation was launched will further impact. 20 pupils have applied to move school now with 14 of those allocated a place. No solutions or actions have been identified in the consultation process to address these critical issues and provide a sustainable education for the pupils of the school.
- 7.2 While recognising the level and nature of objection to the proposal, the case for the closure of Gt Gidding continues to be strong and in the best interests of local educational provision. Hence the recommendation, reached jointly by the LA and the Diocese of Ely, to proceed to a formal proposal for closure of the school on 31 August 2023. It is important to note this is not a decision to close the school. Following the public representation period, the CYP Committee would need to meet again in April to make a final decision on whether to propose school closure.

8. Next Steps

- 8.1 If the Committee decides to move to Stage 2, the LA would publish the statutory proposal on Monday, 13 March 2023. The proposal would be published on the local authority's website and a brief notice containing the website address would be published in the local newspaper (in this instance the Hunts Post). Publication of the proposal would trigger a

four-week period of representation when interested parties can make further comment on the proposal. The final decision on the proposal would then be taken by the Committee on 25 April 2023.

- 8.2 If the Committee decision at that stage was to close the school the School Admissions service would run a specific primary admissions round for pupils the week after the closure decision in April. Parents would be able to make 3 preferences and places would be allocated for September 2023 and parents informed by 12 May. Officers would work with the local schools involved to maximise the possibility of meeting parents' preferences.

- 8.3 The statutory process timeline is outlined in the table below.

8 March 2023	CYP Committee decides whether or not to authorise officers to proceed to Stage 2
13 March 2023	Stage 2 - Publication of Statutory notice and formal proposal document marks start of 4-week representation period (Stage 3 of statutory process)
9 April 2023	Statutory representation period closes
April 2023	Stage 4 of statutory process. CYP Committee makes decision whether or not to proceed to closure. (Decision must be published within one week)
April 2023	If the Stage 4 decision is to close the school, parents can apply for new school places and will be communicated with individually by Admissions Team staff
Early May 2023	HR process initiated for school staff
31 August 2023	Stage 5 School closure enacted.

- 8.4 The consultation process has already raised a number of concerns from parents whose children would be displaced to other schools in the event of Gt Gidding CE VC Primary School closing. These include the cost of purchasing new uniform and transport to their child's new school if their choice of school does not entitle them to transport assistance under the Council's transport policy. If Committee were to decide to move to Stage 4 of the statutory process and close the school, officers would propose that the Committee considers an exceptional case for the parents/carers of pupils who were on roll at the school on 17 January 2023 and subsequently displaced to other schools, to receive support with transport to the school nearest to their home address or the nearest Church of England School with an Anglican Christian character to their home address, and with uniform costs. Officers would present more information in support of this if the Committee were to meet in April.

9. Alignment with corporate priorities

9.1 Environment and Sustainability

The following bullet point sets out details of implications identified by officers:

- Given the geographical location of the school there is no opportunity for the use of public transport services for pupils living in the communities served by Gt Gidding Primary School who would be displaced to other schools

9.2 Health and Care

There are no significant implications for this priority.

9.3 Places and Communities

The village of Great Gidding has a number of other focal points apart from the school, including a modern village hall where community activities and events take place.

9.4 Children and Young People

This corporate priority is explicit throughout the report as it relates to school provision for primary-age children. The key themes and considerations are set out in Section 4.

9.5 Transport

The report sets out the implications for this priority in section 4.11.

10. Significant Implications

10.1 Resource Implications

The report above sets out details of significant implications in section 6.7. The current national funding formula (NFF) only allows funding to be allocated via factors defined within the NFF. As a result, there is no flexibility to subsidise smaller schools other than by the application of the sparsity factor which supports small schools in remote areas. Despite Great Gidding being the highest funded school in Cambridgeshire (either maintained or academy) and qualifying for this factor the maximum allowable allocation is not sufficient to support long term sustainability.

10.2 Transport

There will also be financial implications for transporting pupils displaced by the closure. Of the 8 children currently on roll who reside in Gt Gidding's catchment 2 are in Yr 6 and will transfer to secondary phase in Sept 2023. In September 2023 the remaining 6 in-catchment on roll will be comprised of 2 pupils in Yr 6, 1 in Yr3 and 3 in Yr2. Estimated transport cost, based on current quotes, for them to attend primary provision in Sawtry (the nearest to Gt Gidding and its feeder villages) is £134 daily/£25,460 per annum. The journey time by minibus or taxi (depending on the number of children) would be approximately 30 minutes depending on the number of pick-up points. This is well within timeframe of 45 minutes for primary age pupils.

The transport route will be required for between one (for Yr 6 pupils) and four years (for current Yr 3 pupil) for displaced children. Table 2 above indicates that there are forecast to be 2 children in Reception in catchment in 2024 and 1 in each of the following years. The transport estimates include costs for transporting these children. As catchment children

reduce in number it is envisaged that a smaller vehicle (taxi rather than minibus) will be required and this will be reflected in reduced costs.

10.3 The school site

A smaller part of the school site is leased from the Milton Estate (the landlord /owners of this part of the site) which includes the land on which the main school building is situated. There will be costs associated with termination of the lease in the order of £60k if the Committee were to decide to close the school. There would also be a cost associated with the removal of the mobile accommodation from the school site.

10.4 Low carbon heating project

The Council's Climate Change & Energy Service is part way through a low carbon heating project to install an Air Source Heat Pump (ASHP) into the permanent part of the site (not the mobile accommodation). The lead in time for this will have been in order of 2 to 3 years when closure was not being considered. The decision was taken by the school's governing body on 30 November 2021 to proceed with the installation of ASHP. Declining pupil numbers and a low risk to the future use of the site were highlighted as part of the process for seeking Council approval to fund the project. Noting the risks, and the likely need to replace the oil boiler, oil tank and bund within the next 2-3 years along with the Council's decarbonisation objectives, Council approval for the project was granted and landlord approval for the works to take place was obtained. Funding for the £109,913 project costs consists of a combination of loan, grant and capital contribution as follows:

- A £42,596 grant;
- A £30,400 non-repayable capital contribution from the Education Capital team in view of the avoided costs of replacing the oil boiler, oil tank and bund;
- A £29,527 non-repayable capital contribution from the Council's Decarbonisation Fund in view of the social value of the carbon savings delivered by the project;
- A £7,390 loan to the school at the Council's own borrowing costs, repayable over 20 years.

Comparing the oil boiler cost option (£20-£25K plus the value of carbon emissions of £22,462) with the Council's contribution to the ASHP of £48,000, means it is a similar cost to the Council whether or not it had decided to support this project.

The school is in contract with the Council's energy project contractor Bouygues Energies & Services for delivery of the works. The ASHP was delivered to the school site in March 2022 and is in situ awaiting pipework and electrical connections. Bouygues have invoiced the school £63,579 for the equipment and works delivered so far and the full grant has been claimed. The project has been delayed since then due to complexities in upgrading the site's electrical supply for the ASHP. These complexities have now been resolved but no further work is to be progressed until a final decision has been made by CYP Committee on the future of the school.

In the event of a decision to close the school the external funding partner is content for the project to be completed and the building handed back to the landlord with a decarbonised heating system.

If the CYP Committee decides to proceed to Stage 2 and decides subsequently in April to close the school, the Council's Climate Change & Energy Services team will take stock after the April Committee decision and if required by the Grant funder plan in a programme

to complete after the Committee decision unless an alternative option can be agreed. There is no change to the current request that no further work should be progressed on site prior to the April Committee.

10.5 Procurement/Contractual/Council Contract Procedure Rules Implications

There are no significant implications within this category.

10.6 Statutory, Legal and Risk Implications

The school is running an aging heating system approaching the end of its life. The alternative upgrade would add a loan to the school's struggling finances and would add further to the Council's overall costs. See wording under 4.1 and guidance in Appendix 2.

10.7 Equality and Diversity Implications

Gt Gidding currently has no children with an Education Health & Care Plan (EHCP). There are 9 children in receipt of SEN Support, whose needs can be met through ordinarily available provision at any mainstream school. A strategy is in development to ensure supported, effective transition arrangements are in place should relocation to alternative schools be required. This will be shared as part of the consultation process. An Equality and Diversity Impact Assessment (EqIA) will be kept under review and added to as appropriate following consultation to ensure that all perspectives are considered. A copy of the EqIA is in **Appendix 5**

10.8 Engagement and Communications Implications

Section 2 above sets out how the LA consulted and engaged with stakeholders including the local community.

10.9 Localism and Local Member Involvement

Officers have engaged with the Local Member regarding the consultation process and the wider statutory processes and also shared relevant information with the Members of the wards where displaced pupils would be offered new school places.

10.7 Public Health Implications

No significant implications

10.8 Environment and Climate Change Implications on Priority Areas

The overall balance of implications is neutral and the completion of the following paras in this section has been undertaken in discussion with, and the approval of, the Council's Climate Crisis Strategy Manager

10.8.1 Implication 1: Energy efficient, low carbon buildings.

Neutral Status

10.8.2 Implication 2: Low carbon transport.

Neutral Status:

Explanation: except for the very small number of children who live in the village of Gt Gidding and can walk to school and who will be displaced and need to travel to a new school, those living in the other catchment feeder villages already travel to the school. Secondly, there is the potential for the 30+ out-of-catchment children currently traveling to Gt Gidding Primary to transfer to schools which they can either walk to or will have shorter journeys to access.

10.8.3 Implication 3: Green spaces, peatland, afforestation, habitats and land management.
Neutral Status

10.8.4 Implication 4: Waste Management and Tackling Plastic Pollution.
Neutral Status

10.8.5 Implication 5: Water use, availability and management:
Neutral Status

10.8.6 Implication 6: Air Pollution.
Neutral Status

Explanation: except for the very small number of children who live in the village of Gt Gidding and can walk to school and who will be displaced and need to travel to a new school, those living in the other catchment feeder villages already travel to the school. Secondly, there is the potential for the 30+ out-of-catchment children currently traveling to Gt Gidding Primary to transfer to schools to which they can either walk or will have shorter journeys to access.

10.8.7 Implication 7: Resilience of our services and infrastructure, and supporting vulnerable people to cope with climate change.
Neutral Status

Have the resource implications been cleared by Finance?

Yes

Name of Financial Officer: Martin Wade

Have the procurement/contractual/ Council Contract Procedure Rules implications been cleared by the Head of Procurement and Commercial?

Yes

Name of Officer: Clare Ellis

Has the impact on statutory, legal and risk implications been cleared by the Council's Monitoring Officer or Pathfinder Legal?

Yes

Name of Legal Officer: Linda Walker

Have the equality and diversity implications been cleared by your EqIA Super User?

Yes

Name of Officer: Josette Kennington

Have any engagement and communication implications been cleared by Communications?

Yes

Name of Officer: Simon Cobby

Have any localism and Local Member involvement issues been cleared by your Service Contact?

Yes

Name of Officer: Jonathan Lewis

Have any Public Health implications been cleared by Public Health?

Yes

Name of Officer: Raj Lakshman

If a Key decision, have any Environment and Climate Change implications been cleared by the Climate Change Officer?

Yes

Name of Officer: Emily Bolton

11.0 Source documents guidance

11.1 Source documents

Children and Young People Committee Report (17 January 2023)

Opening and closing maintained schools: Statutory guidance for proposers and decision makers (January 2023)

11.2 Location

[Children and Young People Committee Report \(17 January 2023\)](#)

[Opening and closing maintained schools Statutory guidance for proposers and decision makers](#)