

Great Giddings Church of England Primary School

- To: Children & Young People's Committee
- Meeting Date: 17 January 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:
- (a) consider the evidence presented in relation to the viability of Great Gidding Voluntary Controlled (VC) Primary School remaining open after the end of the current academic year 2022/23;and
 - (b) decide whether to move to publicly consult on the potential closure of the school.
- Recommendation: The Committee is recommended to approve the opening of a Stage 1, 30-day consultation period on the potential closure of Great Gidding VC Primary School
- Voting arrangements: Co-opted members of the Committee are eligible to vote on this item.

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1. Background

- 1.1 Located on the border with Northamptonshire, and approximately 10 miles north of Huntingdon, Gt Gidding Primary School ('the school') serves the villages of Great, Little and Steeple Gidding, Winwick and Hamerton. The schools bordering this catchment are Sawtry Infant School and Sawtry Junior School, both approximately 5 miles away by road, Folksworth Church of England Primary School approximately 5.5 miles away by road and Brington Church of England Primary School, approximately 6 miles away by road.
- 1.2 The Council has concerns, on several fronts, as to the future viability of this small, maintained primary school. These include, but are not limited to, demographic and financial issues in particular and the associated impact upon the quality of education provided. In the last 10 years pupil numbers at the school have dropped from 75 to 47. 35 pupils, 74.5% of those on roll (at time of October 2022 Pupil Lead Annual School Census (PLASC)), live outside the catchment area of the school.
- 1.3 The Department for Environment, Food and 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.
- 1.5 The following sections of this report set out the details and compelling evidence which has led officers to the conclusion that the school should be closed on 31 August 2023 on the grounds that it is no longer considered to be viable.
- 1.6 As Great Gidding is a maintained primary school the Council is the responsible body in terms of lead on any statutory processes, but in close collaboration with the Diocese of Ely as it is a Church of England Voluntary Controlled (VC) School. Voluntary schools are those where the land and buildings are typically owned by a charitable foundation or trust, usually a religious organisation. At a VC school, the foundation (in this case the Diocese of Ely) appoints about 25% of the governors. The Local Authority employs the school's staff and is the admission authority for the school.
- 1.7 The majority of the school site is owned by Cambridgeshire County Council (CCC) on a freehold basis. A smaller part of the 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. The lease is dated 13th November 2019 for a period of 20 years, at an annual rent payable of £7,500 (currently paid by CCC) with an RPI index linked rent review due in September 2023. The rent is currently included in the exceptional premises factor in the local formula within the schools block Designated Schools Grant. Going forward this might not be covered within this grant due to the Education Skills Funding Agency changes to eligible criteria.

1.8 The named tenant under the lease is the Ely Diocese Board of Finance (EDBF). The lease can be terminated at any time by the tenant having provided 12 months written notice in advance. The EDBF would need to be involved in the termination of lease should that decision be reached. Approval will be required from the DfE to dispose of any land should the school be closed and any disposal would be subject to the Council's current disposal policy which would involve declaring the site surplus to CCC's requirements and would also consider any suitable options for re-purposing the existing educational use.

2. Main Issues

2.1 Recent and Current Demographics

Since the most recent height between 2013 and 2015 when total pupil numbers ranged from 70 to 75, pupil numbers have fluctuated between 56 and 66 between January 2016 and January 2018, and then continued to drop to 50 or below for the following 3 years. The October 2022 Pupil Lead Annual School Census (PLASC) recorded 47 pupils on roll.

2.2 Numbers on roll

Great Gidding Primary School has a published admission number (PAN) of 14 and has 47 pupils on roll. The school is organised across three mixed year classes as shown in Table 1 below.

In September 2021 there were 8 offers for Reception, 4 were in catchment and 4 were out of catchment.

In September 2022 there were 4 offers for Reception, all out of catchment and 3 children took up a place.

Table 1

	YEAR	2022-23						
CLASS	Rec	1	2	3	4	5	6	Totals
1	3	8	7					18
2				8	2			10
3						9	10	19
Total Roll	3	8	7	8	2	9	10	47
PAN:	14	14	14	14	14	14	14	98
Spaces	11	6	7	6	12	5	4	51

- Class organisation chart as at the October 2022 PLASC

2.3 As referenced in 1.2 above the school has always attracted parental preference applications from outside its designated catchment area. Of the out-of-catchment children on roll, 20 travel from Sawtry's catchment and 5 attend from Holme Primary School's catchment. The remaining 10 children travel to Great Gidding from 6 other catchment areas, including in 2 children in Peterborough and 1 child in Northamptonshire.

2.4 A new primary school serving the 4 to 11 age range is scheduled to open in Sawtry in September 2024. This will offer an all-through primary school option closer to home for those parents who currently opt to send their children to Great Gidding, and we could see a further drop in out-of-catchment children applying to Great Gidding, which could further reduce its pupil numbers.

2.5 Demographic Forecasts

Pupil forecasts for the number of primary age children living in the school's catchment continue to be low. In September 2023 we would expect 2 in-catchment children going into Reception and after that the numbers drop to 1 per year. See Table 2 below. In addition, there are no planned housing developments identified in the Huntingdonshire Local Plan within Great Gidding's catchment area.

Table 2

Gt Gidding Primary	R	Y1	Y2	Y3	Y4	Y5	Y6	Total
2022/2023	0	5	1	1	2	5	2	16
2023/2024	0	0	5	1	1	2	5	14
2024/2025	2	0	0	5	1	1	2	11
2025/2026	1	2	0	0	5	1	1	10
2026/2027	1	1	2	0	0	5	1	10

2.6 Viability of the school buildings

- All the teaching spaces at the school are in temporary accommodation. The classrooms are made up of several bays installed at different times. The ones on site have been there since 1996 (8 bays of space – originally a 4-bay then another 4-bay added in 1999). In 2003 an additional 2 bays of space was added.

We would normally assume mobiles have up to 40 years life, but that depends on how well they are looked after, maintained and whether they are moved. As these have not been moved since installation, one would expect them to be in a decent state of repair structurally. The Council has had to undertake some minor maintenance works to these mobiles over the years to ensure they are still fit for purpose.

To remove the existing mobiles and canopies and replace with similar sized accommodation utilising mobile accommodation plus canopies would cost between £750k and £1m.

- 2.7 The mobiles do not have permanent planning permission, so a retention process is required every 4-5 years. This has recently taken place and the application was granted to keep the mobiles and canopies (which also have limited planning permission) until August 2027. The Notification of the grant of planning permission states: *This planning permission for modular buildings shall be for the limited period expiring on 31 August 2027 at which time they shall be removed, and the site restored to its former condition of soft landscaping /playing field.* Implicit in this statement is the ever-present risk that further planning permission for mobile classrooms will not be granted unless there is an evidenced plan for them to be replaced with permanent accommodation.

In 2009/10 a capital scheme to replace the mobile classrooms with permanent accommodation was costed at £4m (£3.3m construction plus fees, furniture and equipment)

2.8 School Budget Considerations

The current staffing is 4 full time equivalent teachers (fte) including the headteacher. The future viability of the school is very much dependent on pupil numbers. Section 2 above shows that the pupil forecasts do not support financial viability. The current financial forecast is at Appendix 1.

2.9 Table 1 above shows that the two largest cohorts, current Years 5 and 6, will move out of the school in July 2023 and July 2024 respectively. With Reception numbers forecast to be between 1 and 2 at most, numbers on roll will reduce to 40 pupils in total in September 2023 and below 40 in September 2024. At this point financial viability at current funding levels becomes a challenge and the educational aims of the school would be negatively impacted by the structure needed to produce a balanced budget e.g., curriculum planning and delivery, no TA support, to name but two examples both of which would compromise the educational offer to and experience of the pupils.

2.10 Quality of Education

In September 2015 the school was rated by Ofsted as Requires Improvement (RI). In October 2017 the school received an overall rating of Good, although the Outcomes for Pupils remained as Requiring Improvement (RI). The school was inspected again in November 2022. The outcome of this inspection is pending publication, however the inspection did identify aspects of positive practice that will require a further visit in the near future.

Due to the size and capacity of the school there are limitations to the provision offered to pupils. As links with other schools are minimal; specialist teaching, curriculum resourcing and enrichment opportunities are limited due to financial and human resource pressures. Wider opportunities outside of the school day are also limited to sport and Art for key stage 2 pupils. These will be further exacerbated when, for budgetary reasons the school reaches the point of having to reduce from operating three classes to two which would be the case when pupil numbers drop to 40 or below in September 2024 at the latest.

2.11 Pupil Outcomes 2021/22

It should be stressed when viewing the outcomes below that because of the very small pupil numbers involved, each child represents a high percentage of their respective cohort.

The table below shows how many pupils met the expected level in SATs. (Figure in brackets denotes the number of pupils).

	Reading	Writing	Maths	Combined (RWM)
Key Stage 1	87.5%	75%	87.5%	75%
Key Stage 2	100%	0%	50%	0%

100% (7 pupils) passed the Year 1 Phonics Screening Assessment

62.5% of Reception children achieved a Good Level of Development (GLD) at the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage. National GLD was 65.2% and in Cambridgeshire was 65.8%

2.12 School Governance

The Constitution has provision for 10 governors. On 3rd October 2022, the majority governing body gave written notice of their resignation with immediate effect particularly as a result of challenges encountered regarding securing leadership capacity for the school. Of

the previous governance arrangements there is currently one ex officio governor and one staff governor. The remainder of the Governing Body membership has been provided by the Local Authority and the Diocese to ensure that arrangements meet minimum expectations and quorum.

2.13 School Leadership

The substantive headteacher of the school resigned with effect from July 2022. The subsequently appointed interim headteacher also handed in their notice (effective from the 31st October 2022) at the same time as the governing body. Another interim headteacher has since been seconded and is due to lead the school for the remainder of the academic year 2022/23.

2.14 The previous governing body had made some initial steps in terms of appointing a permanent headteacher. There was not a good response to their initial enquires and as such it was recommended to assess the longer-term options for the school ahead of making a decision regarding the permanent leadership of the school.

2.15 Indicative Timeline for closure including statutory process

A closure process (set out in 3.5 below) would be undertaken under section 15 of the Education & Inspections Act (EIA) 2006 with the Committee making the final decision whether or not to close the school.

2.16 If Members approve the recommendation to start the statutory process leading to closure, the Council will publish a consultation document setting out the reasons for the proposal. It will also include details of the schools at which pupils at Great Gidding Primary School will be offered places, including arrangements for pupils who receive educational provision recognised by the LA as reserved for children with special educational needs, the impact on the community and on travel.

2.17 The statutory process entails broad consultation requirements as set out in section 16(1) of EIA 2006. As a minimum, the Council must consult the parents of pupils registered at the school, the local district and parish council where the school is located. The wider group of consultees will include the Diocese, all staff who work at the school and the trade unions who represent them, and the governing bodies of other local schools affected by the proposal.

2.17 There will be financial costs to closing the school in particular in relation to staff redundancy costs and the decommissioning of the buildings. Initial estimates of these costs are £18k for redundancy and between £100k and £150k for decommissioning the buildings. All possible steps will be taken to support staff affected to secure posts in other local schools.

2.18 Approval will be required from the DfE to dispose of any land once the school had been closed and any disposal would be subject to the Council's current disposal policy which would involve declaring the site surplus to the Council's requirements and would also consider any suitable options for re-purposing the existing educational use.

2.19 If, at the end of the statutory process the Committee decides to close the school, in the week following that decision, a separate, brief admissions round will open for parents/carers of children attending Gt Gidding Primary School in the current Yrs R to 5 to apply for new

school places. Parents would be notified, on 12 May, of the new school places allocated to their child(ren). The Council's Transport Assistance Policy will apply whereby if the parents express a preference for a school that is not their child's catchment or designated school, they will be responsible for arranging and funding the daily transport for their child. This applies to the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough resident children.

2.20 Officers are working to ensure that Northamptonshire County Council is consulted and prepared for the potential relocation of the child residing there.

3. Assessment of viability and statutory processes

3.1 Considering the areas of concern outlined above in section 2, council officers have worked with the Diocese to consider all options for the school. It is not lightly that either the Council or the Diocese would consider recommending a statutory process for a school closure be initiated.

3.2 The Council and the Diocese have worked in collaboration over the past 9 months to consider options to build resilience and viability. Federation with another local church school has been explored and a number of schools have been approached. This option was not considered reasonable to take forward given a lack of interest from other schools to partner with Great Gidding in this way.

3.3 There has also been consideration given to the academisation of the school and adoption into a church Multi Academy Trust (MAT). As a voluntary controlled school, the preference of the Diocese would be for it to academise within a church MAT unless approval to join a non-Diocesan MAT was granted by the Diocese of Ely Board of Education. This option was not considered viable by the Diocese and Council given significant concerns around viability as detailed in this report.

3.4 The Council and the Diocese have met ahead of the submission of this paper to consider the most appropriate recommendation to the committee. Given the data, the lack of resilience across all areas assessed and particularly the impact on educational outcomes, both the Council and the Diocese, regretfully, recommend that Committee consider agreeing to the Council initiating the statutory process involved in closing a school.

3.5 The statutory process timeline is outlined below.

Dates to be confirmed	Activity
17 January 2023	CYP Committee decision to start initial consultation process which may or may not lead to formal proposal to close Gt Gidding Primary School
23 January 2023	Stage 1 of statutory process - Council's consultation document published and 30-day consultation period begins including consultation meetings with: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Staff • Parents and pupils • The Diocese of Ely • Schools where pupils will be offered a place for Sept 2023

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The local community
Late February/early March Date to be confirmed	CYP Committee decides whether or not to authorise officers to proceed to Stage 2
March 2023	Stage 2 - Publication of Statutory notice and formal proposal document marks start of 4-week representation period (Stage 3 of statutory process)
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	Following Stage 4 decision, 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.

Alignment with corporate priorities

3.1 Environment and Sustainability

The following bullet points set 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

3.2 Health and Care

There are no significant implications for this priority.

3.3 Places and Communities

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.

3.4 Children and Young People

The report above sets out the implications for this priority in section 2:10.

3.5 Transport

The report above sets out the implications for this priority in section 2.19

4. Significant Implications

4.1 Resource Implications

- 4.1.1 The report above sets out details of significant implications in section 1.7 above. 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 qualifying for this factor the maximum allowable allocation is not sufficient to support long term sustainability.

4.1.2 Transport

In addition, there will also be financial implications for transporting pupils displaced by the closure. Of the 12 children currently on roll who reside in Great Gidding's catchment 2 are in Yr 6 and will transfer to secondary phase in Sept 2023. The remaining 10 in-catchment on roll will be comprised of 4 pupils in Yr 6, 1 in Yr4, 1 in Yr3 and 4 in Yr2. Estimated transport cost, based on current quotes, for them to attend primary provision in Sawtry (the nearest to Great 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.

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.

4.1.3 Costs associated with termination of the lease (see 1.7 above) will be in the order of £60k assuming the final decision whether or not to close the school is made in April 2023

4.2 Procurement/Contractual/Council Contract Procedure Rules Implications
None

4.3 Statutory, Legal and Risk Implications

4.3.1 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.

4.4 Equality and Diversity Implications

Great 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 will be kept under review and added to as appropriate following consultation to ensure that all perspectives are considered.

4.5 Engagement and Communications Implications

Section 3.5 above sets out the proposals for consulting and engaging with the stakeholders including the local community.

4.6 Localism and Local Member Involvement

Officers have made the Local Member aware of the proposal to move to closure of the school and also shared relevant information with the Members of the divisions where displaced pupils will be offered new school places. The Local MP has also been informed of the content of the report.

4.7 Public Health Implications

None.

4.8 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

4.8.1 Implication 1: Energy efficient, low carbon buildings.

Neutral Status

4.8.2 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.

4.8.3 Implication 3: Green spaces, peatland, afforestation, habitats and land management.

Neutral Status

4.8.4 Implication 4: Waste Management and Tackling Plastic Pollution.

Neutral Status

4.8.5 Implication 5: Water use, availability and management:

Neutral Status

4.8.6 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 which they can either walk to or will have shorter journeys to access.

4.8.7 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? 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 or No
Name of Officer:

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 or No
Name of Officer:

If a Key decision, have any Environment and Climate Change implications been cleared by the Climate Change Officer?
Yes
Name of Officer: Emily Bolton

5. Source documents guidance

- 5.1 [The Department for Education's \(DfE\) Statutory guidance for proposers and decision-makers - Opening and closing maintained schools](#)