

## Draft Small School Strategy

To:	Children and Young People Committee
Meeting Date:	28 <sup>th</sup> November 2023
From:	Executive Director of Children, Education and Families
Electoral division(s):	All
Key decision:	No
Forward Plan ref:	n/a
Outcome:	The Council will have a clear framework to work within when supporting and challenging the smallest schools across Cambridgeshire to be educationally and financially sustainable.
Recommendation:	The Committee is asked to endorse the Small Schools Strategy (which includes the school closure process) set out in Appendix 1 to this report for immediate adoption and implementation.
Voting arrangements:	Co-opted members are eligible to vote on this report.

Officer contact:  
Name: Rachael Pinion  
Post: Area Education Officer  
Email: [Rachael.pinion@cambridgeshire.gov.uk](mailto:Rachael.pinion@cambridgeshire.gov.uk)  
Tel: 01223 715694

# 1. Background

- 1.1 At Children and Young People's (CYP) Committee on 8<sup>th</sup> March 2023 officers committed to bringing forward a policy on small schools for the Committee's consideration. This was followed at CYP Committee on 25<sup>th</sup> April 2023 by a request from Cllr Gardener for a report exploring how rural schools could be kept open.
- 1.2 At CYP Committee on 25<sup>th</sup> April 2023 officers committed to reflect on the closure of Great Gidding Primary School, to report on the lessons learned from the Great Gidding closure process and to report on how the consultation process could be improved.
- 1.3 At Children and Young People's Committee on 25<sup>th</sup> April 2023 Cllr Gardener asked for officers to be invited to prepare a report to examine the impact of the closure of Great Gidding on children, staff and parents and how those effects could be mitigated in the future. Officers also committed to tracking the progress of Great Gidding's pupils and to bringing this information back as part of a future report.
- 1.4 This report looks to address these points.

# 2. Main Issues

## 2.1 Small Schools Strategy

The draft Small Schools Strategy found in Appendix 1 of this report is a policy which seeks to create a sustainable future for Cambridgeshire's small schools. Cambridgeshire currently has 65 maintained small schools who serve 9779 primary aged pupils, ranging in size from 61 pupils to 210 pupils (the upper limit for Cambridgeshire's working definition of a small school). They face several unique challenges to their sustainability:

- Recruitment and retention of staff
- Recruitment and retention of governors
- Falling/fluctuating pupil numbers
- Education quality
- Sustainable budget setting

2.2. The draft Small Schools Strategy details how officers have now assessed each of Cambridgeshire's maintained small schools against a list of criteria including:

- learning outcomes
- learning progress
- leadership and governance
- catchment forecasts
- pupil forecasts
- number on roll versus capacity
- local housing development
- suitability and condition of school buildings and their sites
- finance – forecast budget deficits and timings

2.3 Based on their overall score the schools have been sorted into Red, Amber and Green categories. These scores will be updated on an annual basis as new information is published.

- 2.4 Officers have met with school leaders to discuss these scores and will explore potential actions with schools to increase their sustainability. A list of potential options is provided in Appendix 2 of the strategy. Officers recognise that what may work for one school may be detrimental to another and that exploration of options in partnership with other schools within the local area is key.
- 2.5 The Local Authority has been working closely with all maintained schools to look at options around sharing costs and different models of sustainability including shared procurement, shared roles and centralised purchasing. These discussions will continue around our review of small schools and the pressure on budgets is across all schools.
- 2.6 As requested, the strategy also details a draft consultation process for school closure based on the learning from the Great Gidding process.
- 2.7 Lessons learnt from the consultation process run to determine whether or not to close Great Gidding  
Officers from the Great Gidding project group and working groups have given feedback on their lessons learnt from the closure process of Great Gidding.

#### Pre- Stage 1 consultation period

- Before the first Committee meeting officers need to brief Councillors on the statutory process and provide an opportunity for them to ask questions so that the process and background are fully understood.
- The first Committee report to CYP needs to clearly detail the options already explored by schools, officers and Governing Body before recommending a move to consult on closure. The school action plans detailed in the draft Small Schools Strategy could provide evidence for this. The report also needs to ask Councillors for suggestions and ideas before asking for approval to move to the next stage.

#### Stage 1 consultation period

- Parental contact information and consent to use their personal email for correspondence should be sought by officers at the onset of the consultation process so that there is a clear line of communication between parents and officers.

- 2.8 Officers also believed there were several operational aspects which could be improved:
- Seek specialist education legal advice and commission this at an early stage in the process.
  - Set a clear communications strategy from the start with key dates.
  - If there are vacancies in the Governing Body officers need to ensure the Governors are actively recruiting to these.
  - Admissions, Transport and SEND officers should be part of the process from the initial stages.
- 2.9 To ensure these aspects would be addressed if the closure process is required again a proposed governance chart (see Appendix 3 in the draft Small Schools Strategy) has been written to ensure the correct officers are involved from the project outset.

## 2.12 Impact of the closure of Great Gidding on children, staff and parents

To assess the impact of the closure on the children of Great Gidding school a questionnaire was sent to all 34 children who were on roll when the consultation was launched (the Year 6s were not included) in the 2023 summer term. There were 22 pupil response to this questionnaire. The results from this are generally positive:

- 86% of pupils either always or most of the time enjoy going to their new school.
- 72% of pupils always feel safe at their new school.
- All pupils have made at least one or two new friends at their new school.
- 95% of pupils feel they have an adult at their new school that they can talk to if something is worrying them.
- 95% of pupils know the next steps for their learning.

This questionnaire was then sent again to all 34 children who were on roll when the consultation was launched (the Year 6s were not included) in the 2023 autumn term. There were 11 pupil response to this questionnaire. The results from this are also generally positive:

- 73% of pupils either always or most of the time enjoy going to their new school.
- 50% of pupils always feel safe at their new school.
- All pupils have made at least one or two new friends at their new school.
- 91% of pupils feel they have an adult at their new school that they can talk to if something is worrying them.
- 90% of pupils know the next steps for their learning.

2.13 A separate questionnaire was also sent to the children's new teachers in the summer term. There were 24 teacher responses to this questionnaire. A summary of these responses are below:

### Transition

- 75% of teachers felt that transition arrangements were effective.
- 58.3% of teachers felt they did not have sufficient information from teachers at Great Gidding to support their new pupils effectively. Many commented they were sent no information about the children from Great Gidding and that they would have found assessment data and current working levels useful.

### Support and wellbeing

- Teachers responded that on average parents from Great Gidding are engaging really well with their new schools, pupils enjoy coming to school, have settled well and have made positive friendships.
- The average score for responding to 'the pupil approaches an adult for support when needed' was still high (7.38) but was the lowest of all the scores in the support and wellbeing section.
- The written responses for the support and wellbeing section were varied and seemed to be dependent on each child's individual circumstances.

### Progress and attainment

- 41.7% children are working at or above expectations for their age group.
- 58.3% of children are working below expectations for their age group in some areas or for all areas.
- 41.7% of teachers have concerns about the progress the children have made.

- The written responses suggest that many of the concerns are around writing, reading and maths.

This time next year officers will report on whether or not Great Gidding pupils have made expected progress across the 2023-24 academic year.

- 2.14 Due to data protection issues the survey on the impact on staff was delayed. It is currently being undertaken. The results of this will be brought to Committee once it is completed.
- 2.15 A questionnaire was also sent to parents in the autumn term to assess the impact of the closure on parents.
- 83% of parents found their wellbeing was impacted negatively when Great Gidding was being considered for closure
  - Once their child was offered a new school place this changed to 16% being positively impacted, 67% neutrally impacted and 16% negatively impacted.
  - Once their child was attending their new school 33% of parents found their wellbeing positively impact, 66% neutrally impacted and none negatively impacted.
  - 16% of parents found their daily routines have been positively impacted by their child's move to a new school, 50% neutrally impacted and 33% negatively impacted.

### 3. Alignment with ambitions

- 3.1 Net zero carbon emissions for Cambridgeshire by 2045, and our communities and natural environment are supported to adapt and thrive as the climate changes

The following bullet points set out details of significant implications identified by officers:

- Supporting small schools to remain open will likely to require additional investment into school buildings. Small schools generally have older buildings which will need to be modernised.

- 3.2 Travel across the county is safer and more environmentally sustainable

The following bullet points set out details of significant implications identified by officers:

- By supporting small schools to remain open the Council is avoiding additional travel for some pupils.

- 3.3 Health inequalities are reduced  
There are no significant implications for this ambition.

- 3.4 People enjoy healthy, safe, and independent lives through timely support that is most suited to their needs  
There are no significant implications for this ambition.

- 3.5 Helping people out of poverty and income inequality  
There are no significant implications for this ambition.

- 3.6 Places and communities prosper because they have a resilient and inclusive economy, access to good quality public services and social justice is prioritised

The following bullet points set out details of significant implications identified by officers:

- There is an expectation that schools will provide access to and use of the school's accommodation for activities for example sporting, cultural, outside of school hours. Therefore, keeping small schools open and sustainable will continue to allow a community focal point in small communities.

- 3.7 Children and young people have opportunities to thrive  
The report above sets out the implications for this ambition in paragraph 2.

## 4. Significant Implications

### 4.1 Resource Implications

The following bullet points set out details of significant implications identified by officers:

- Schools revenue funding is allocated from the Dedicated Schools Grant so the financial health of an individual school does not directly impact on the Cambridgeshire County Council revenue budget. However, many of the small schools are forecasting a significant deficit budget in the next three years. As a result if the schools are unable to set a sustainable budget and recover any cumulative deficit there could be revenue implications for the local authority in future years.
- Keeping some small schools open will likely keep the impact on school transport revenue neutral. If small schools were to close these costs may increase.
- Keeping Cambridgeshire's small schools open means potentially missing the opportunity to dispose of an asset, gain a receipt and support CCC's capital programme.

- 4.2 Procurement/Contractual/Council Contract Procedure Rules Implications  
There are no significant implications within this category.

- 4.3 Statutory, Legal and Risk Implications  
There are no significant implications within this category.

- 4.4 Equality and Diversity Implications  
A completed EQiA for the Small Schools Strategy is attached.  
There are no significant implications within this category.

- 4.5 Engagement and Communications Implications  
The following bullet points set out details of significant implications identified by officers:
- A workshop on drafting the small schools strategy with small school leaders was held in the summer term. Workshops have been held this Autumn to share the small school ratings with school leaders. Further engagement with school leaders, governors and local members will be carried out this academic year.

- 4.6 Localism and Local Member Involvement  
The following bullet points set out details of significant implications identified by officers:

- The relevant Local Members will be involved as changes detailed in school action plans are consulted on.

#### 4.7 Public Health Implications

There are no significant implications within this category.

#### 4.8 Climate Change and Environment Implications on Priority Areas

##### 4.8.1 Implication 1: Energy efficient, low carbon buildings.

Status: Negative

Explanation: The strategy will mean that the Council will be committed to education the same numbers of children in more buildings, therefore likely carrying more surplus capacity. Some of Cambridgeshire's smaller schools are in older accommodation which has had little investment and will require considerable investment to make them energy efficient, low carbon buildings.

##### 4.8.2 Implication 2: Low carbon transport.

Status: Neutral

Explanation: Having schools in local communities can encourage sustainable travel habits. However, small schools with falling rolls can attract out of catchment pupils who access the school generally in a car.

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

Status: Neutral

Explanation: The Small School Strategy will not impact on this implication.

##### 4.8.4 Implication 4: Waste Management and Tackling Plastic Pollution.

Status: Neutral

Explanation: The Small School Strategy will not impact on this implication.

##### 4.8.5 Implication 5: Water use, availability and management:

Status: Negative

Explanation: The small school strategy proposes keeping more older buildings open which are likely to be less efficient with water use.

##### 4.8.6 Implication 6: Air Pollution.

Status: Neutral

Explanation: Having schools in local communities can encourage sustainable travel habits. However, small schools with falling rolls can attract out of catchment pupils who access the school generally in a car.

##### 4.8.7 Implication 7: Resilience of our services and infrastructure, and supporting vulnerable people to cope with climate change.

Status: Neutral

Explanation: The Small School Strategy will not impact on this implication.

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: Sophie Exton, Pathfinder Legal and Emma Duncan

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 Climate Change and Environment implications been cleared by the Climate Change Officer?  
Not a key decision.

## 5. Source documents

5.1 None.