

CABINET – 16 FEBRUARY 2011

CULHAM PAROCHIAL PRIMARY SCHOOL – OUTCOME OF CONSULTATION ABOUT PROPOSED CLOSURE

Report by Director for Children, Young people & Families

Introduction

1. Culham Parochial Primary School is a small, voluntary controlled (VC) Church of England 4-11 primary school. It has an admission number of eight, and is large enough to accommodate a total of 56 children. The current numbers on roll and in previous years are:

	<i>F1</i>	<i>Year 1</i>	<i>Year 2</i>	<i>Year 3</i>	<i>Year 4</i>	<i>Year 5</i>	<i>Year 6</i>	<i>Total</i>
<i>September 2006</i>	1	7	7	5	6	8	6	40
<i>September 2007</i>	2	6	6	6	5	7	8	40
<i>September 2008</i>	2	9	5	4	6	3	6	35
<i>September 2009</i>	10	8	8	4	5	6	3	44
<i>September 2010</i>	8	10	8	6	3	3	3	41
<i>November 2010</i>	7	10	6	6	3	1	1	34
<i>January 2011*</i>	6	6	6	4	1	1	0	24

* The January 2011 formal pupil count on 20th January reported 27 pupils on roll. Since then the acting Headteacher has reported three further departures, leaving just 24 children in the school. Any further variations by the Cabinet meeting on 16th February will be reported orally.

2. For almost three years the Culham Parochial Primary School's Governing Body, with the help of Oxfordshire County Council and the Oxford Diocese, tried to secure permanent leadership and a long-term future for the school. Despite several attempts to appoint a new Headteacher, they were unable to appoint a suitable candidate on a permanent basis. In the meantime, the school has been led by acting headteachers on a temporary basis, shared with other schools.
3. During this time of uncertainty about the school's future, concerns over long-term staff absence and social limitations for pupils in Key Stage 2 have caused some parents to move their children to other schools. This has had a great effect on the school budget, which has had to be supported with additional funding from the local authority in order to ensure necessary school improvement activities were undertaken.
4. The Governing Body, supported by the Local Authority and the Diocese, has twice explored the idea of federation; once with a similar sized school and once with a larger school, but neither was successful.

An amalgamation with another school has been considered but, as with a federation, it is dependant upon identifying a suitable partner school to amalgamate with. Often when these amalgamations do occur, the smaller site can eventually end up closing with the school consolidating onto the larger site. The small size of the Culham site could still make it vulnerable to closure even with an amalgamation.

5. Other possibilities, such as a tie in with the European Academy to work as its feeder school, have been explored, but have not been fruitful. A factor which has constrained some of options which could be explored, is the need to retain the school's church character which, whilst not precluding collaboration with community schools, requires the retention of a separate governing body and a leader who can sustain the religious ethos of the school.

Exempt Information

6. None

Consultation

7. Staff and governors were briefed about the consultation at the end of the school day on the 23rd November 2010, followed by a meeting for current parents later in the evening prior to the consultation document being published on the Council's public website on 24th November. At both briefings the reasons for the Council's closure proposal were detailed and the forthcoming consultation process was described. Those attending were advised that the decision to propose closure was the culmination of a lengthy process (more information was made available on the website to augment the summary in the consultation leaflet) and that the Council remained open to consideration of viable 'recovery plans' which could sustain keeping the school open.
8. Conditions which any 'recovery' plan would need to satisfy include:
 - a. Recruitment of a permanent headteacher, or an arrangement with another school, which would provide sustained leadership for Culham Parochial School;
 - b. Admissions to the school combined with pupil retention which would sustain numbers at a viable level (i.e. in the region of those seen historically, typically 40+); and
 - c. A balanced budget both in-year and over a three year period.
9. Section 16 of the Education & Inspections Act 2006 establishes the consultation procedures and local authorities also have a duty to have regard to statutory guidance ('The Guidance'), in this particular case 'Closing a Mainstream School: A guide for Local Authorities' ("the Guidance"). The period of consultation is not prescribed by legislation, although the Guidance recommends a minimum of 6 weeks. The consultation period was in line with the Guidance having run from 24th

November 2010 until 21st January 2011, thereby meeting the six week requirement (excluding school holidays).

10. The Guidance also lists interested parties who 'should' be consulted. The word 'should' means it is a recommendation rather than a requirement in legislation. All relevant parties listed in the guidance were provided with copies of the consultation leaflet, copies of which (with supplementary information) were also made available on the Council's public website.

Summary of responses

11. A large number of responses (175) to the consultation have been received, for which officers are very grateful. The respondents fell into the following categories (some respondents are in more than one category, so the total sums to more than 100%)

Category of respondent	Number of responses	% of total
Parent of child at Culham Parochial Primary School	13	7
Parent of child at another primary school	16	9
Parent of child not yet at primary school	20	11
Local resident	107	61
Staff/governor	16	6
None of the above/not specified	24	20

12. Included among the responses was a significant number (38% of total responses) of what can be best described as a 'disaggregated petition' i.e. consultation forms returned in pre-addressed envelopes with the 'disagree' box ticked, a signature appended against a 'x' to indicate where to sign, but no comments about the proposal or suggestions about how to address the key issues identified in paragraph 8, above.
13. 95% of responses objected to the proposal. The reasons for objection are summarised in the table below, and provided in more detail in Annex 2 with officer responses made against each.

Community value of the school	31%
The school is vital to its local community	22%
The village has no other (non-church) meeting place	9%
Young families will leave/not move to the village	3%
Local schools help children become members of their community	4%
Value of local schools in general	5%
Educational value of the school	22%
Culham provides a high quality of education	19%
Culham meets demand for a small school – value of small schools	3%
Alternative schools are not as good	1%

CA6

Closure would harm transition from the pre-school	1%
Traffic and travel	12%
Difficult for parents to transport children to other schools	10%
Increased traffic	5%
Need for school places	10%
Population rising locally and beyond	6%
Forecasts/numbers of young children in village indicate school will be full/have rising numbers	5%
Causes of current problems	19%
Weaknesses in recent leadership and management have undermined the school	7%
Pupil numbers have fallen because of concern at current situation	4%
Current problems are short term and can be overcome by new governing body	5%
Not enough time allowed/ effort made at recruiting head; flaws in HT recruitment process/requirements	7%
Not enough time was allowed/effort made for federation	2%
Lack of headteacher insufficient reason to close school	2%
European Academy proposal has harmed viability of Culham School	1%

14. A small proportion of contributions (7%) to the consultation included specific proposals about how the school's future could be secured:

Alternative solutions	
Allow more time to find a headteacher/reconsider previous candidates	6%
Close Key Stage 2 until numbers rebuild	1%
Close the school and reopen it on the same site	1%
The European School to provide leadership for the school	1%

15. The vast majority of responses to the consultation failed to put forward specific proposals in respect of the three key issues described above (paragraph 8, points a), b) and c). However, there was a detailed response from the recently appointed Chair of Governors on behalf of the "governors and local support group ['Save Culham School', SCS]". [Annex 1] This document was produced with the support of officers who provided financial and other information, along with guidance about what might constitute a viable 'recovery plan'. In summary, the response proposes the following solutions to each of the three key issues:
- a. Permanent headteacher: Governors will, by the time Cabinet considers this report, have placed a national advertisement for suitably qualified candidates to apply for the post. In parallel, local Headteachers will be approached to consider shared

- leadership with another school. It is hoped that there will be a positive outcome by the end of Term 4 [i.e. Easter 2011].
- b. Finances: Whilst a surplus is anticipated at the end of the 2010-11 financial year, a deficit of c.£50,000 [approximately 25%] is forecast for 2011-2012. Subsequent in-year balanced budgets have been modelled on a school roll of more than 40 pupils. Fundraising efforts to address the 2011-12 deficit are reported, although it is acknowledged that it is difficult to raise this sum whilst the possibility of closure remains.
 - c. School roll: Reasons for recent transfers of children from the school are identified and initiatives to attract more children are said to be underway; other than the recruitment of a permanent headteacher to restore confidence in the school's future, these are not detailed.
16. The response from the Chair of Governors deals with each of the key points but, when this report was written, there was insufficient detail to provide officers with the assurance that the underlying reasons for the decision to embark upon a closure consultation have been addressed. It is possible that by the time Cabinet considers this paper that further work will have been undertaken by the governors and Save Culham School, and that sufficient elements of a 'recovery plan' are in place to at least warrant further work with officers prior to a final decision about whether or not to close the school. Specifically:
- a. A shortlist of suitably qualified and experienced prospective Headteachers is confirmed (quality assured by the school's Improvement Adviser) or a shared leadership arrangement with another school is confirmed in writing;
 - b. A significant proportion of the 2011-12 deficit is covered by confirmed contributions, plus details and a timetable for raising the balance are available. Also a three year balanced budget for 2011-12 to 2013-14 based upon realistic pupil number forecasts; and
 - c. A forecast pupil roll of at least 40 by January 2012 (to determine the 2012-13 school budget share) with supporting documentary evidence e.g. written confirmation from parents of their intention to send their children to Culham Parochial School if there were to be no 'live' closure proposal.
17. Detailed responses were also received from the Oxfordshire Rural Community Council and Culham Parish Council, requesting that more time be made available to the governing body to secure a permanent headteacher for the school.

Financial and Staff Implications

18. Apart from the costs of undertaking the consultation (estimated to be £100 for printing & distribution of leaflets, £40 for Freepost returned consultation questionnaires, plus a small sum for additional officer travel costs) there are none arising directly from this report. If a

decision is made to publish a statutory closure notice this would incur a publication cost of £250 - £300. These costs have been met from the existing School Organisation & Planning operational budget. If a decision is made to publish a statutory closure notice, the financial implications of school closure will be reported to the May Cabinet, along with responses to the notice.

19. Other than officer time, there are no staff implications arising directly from this report. If a decision is taken to publish a statutory closure notice, the implications of closure for school staff will be reported to the May Cabinet.

Next steps

20. If a decision is taken to publish a statutory closure notice it is proposed that this should be on the 3rd March 2011. This would allow sufficient time for a six week period of representation (excluding school holidays), the outcome of which would be reported to Cabinet in May. This is when a final decision about closure, with effect from the end of the current academic year (i.e. August 2011), could be taken. It would be possible to delay publishing the statutory notice by a number of weeks; however, this would prevent personnel procedures being completed in time for any necessary redundancies to take effect at the same time as the school closure. This could result in staff continuing to be employed at the Council's expense whilst statutory notice periods expire.
21. If Cabinet decides that the 'recovery plan' put forward by the Chair of Governors warrants further work, supported by officers, there are approximately twelve weeks (10 if the Easter school holiday period is excluded) in which the proposers could undertake this. Final plans could be considered at any time up to and including the May Cabinet meeting, although it would be prudent to set a deadline for submission by the end of April to allow officers time to provide an evaluation of the plans in the May Cabinet paper.

RECOMMENDATION

The Cabinet is RECOMMENDED to:

- a) **Consider the responses to the consultation; and**
- b) **Determine whether, at this stage, any of the alternatives to closure are sufficiently well developed to provide a robust assurance that the Council should continue to maintain the school on its current site; or**
- c) **Determine whether any alternatives, whilst not yet providing sufficient assurance, nevertheless merit further development and request officers to work with their proposer(s) on these, with final version(s) to be submitted by the end of April; and**

- d) **Determine whether to proceed with the publication of a statutory notice to close Culham Parochial School with effect from 31st August 2011.**

MEERA SPILLETT

Director for Children, Young people & Families

Background papers: Consultation document

Annexes: 1. Consultation on closure of Culham Parochial School formal response from school governors and local support group

2. Summary of comments made as part of the consultation and officer responses.

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