
Reading BC response to the consultation on the closure of Chiltern Edge school

1 General

1.1 Reading borough council (RBC) is strongly opposed to the closure of Chiltern Edge school by Oxfordshire county council (OCC). It is RBC's view that the:

- school, which has over 500 pupils on roll, is viable;
- closure of a rural school will have significant negative implications for Reading-resident pupils at the school: current year 6 pupils whose parents have expressed a preference for Chiltern Edge school; and pupils with special educational needs;
- closure will cause insurmountable problems with placing children in other schools in Reading, will increase transportation costs and cause environmental damage as additional travel will be required.

1.2 This report will go through the above points in detail. We hope it will cause OCC officers and lead members to change their view and determine, following the consultation, to keep Chiltern Edge school open.

2 The school's viability

2.1 In the consultation document, OCC questions the viability on three key grounds. The first is the concern about the quality of education at the school following the regulator's judgement that the school has serious weaknesses; the second is that council 'must consider closure' in these circumstances'; and the third is the size of the school. In the following paragraphs we respond to these points in turn.

2.2 The judgement of the inspectors (see [here](#)) was that the school is inadequate. However, the report made seven clear, concise recommendations setting out what actions were needed to improve the effectiveness of leadership and management, and a further five to improve the quality of teaching and learning and raise achievement, particularly in English, mathematics and science. With appropriate support and challenge, brokered by the local authority, there is no reason why rapid improvements cannot be made. We know, through our population estimates (a rising year 6 population), siblings and the continuing popularity with Reading parents that year 7 numbers at Chiltern Edge are unlikely to be below four forms, and could be higher than this.

2.3 Following an inadequate judgement, the secretary of state for education may make an Academy Order in respect of a maintained school in England if the school is 'eligible for intervention' within the meaning of Part 4 of the Education and Inspections Act, 2006. A judgement of serious weaknesses is one of the criteria for intervention. The consultation document states:

At the same time (as closure is being considered), the Department for Education will be trying to identify an academy sponsor to run the school, to enable it to stay open.

The consultation document implies that the school can only stay open if a sponsoring academy trust is found. However, there is no deadline for a sponsoring school taking on a 'failing' school in this situation. It is possible under existing legislation for a school judged to have serious weaknesses to be supported to improve, and progress to a judgement of good or better as a maintained school. Given the school's continuing popularity, we believe the school should be supported by its maintaining authority, OCC, to improve and become at least good as judged by the regulator if a sponsor is not forthcoming..

2.4 The consultation document puts forward the school's 'small size' as a challenge. However, in 2012, of the 3,268 state-funded secondary schools, 317 (almost 10 per cent of the total) had fewer pupils than Chiltern Edge, and a further 1,405 were in the same DfE pupil bracket (43 per cent) – see [here](#).

2.5 The schools adjudicator has, in the past, made judgements on schools that authorities have proposed to close on the basis of their small size. In an adjudication about The Deanes school (see [here](#)), Essex county council proposed to close the school as its projected role was as low as 448 pupils, the adjudicator noting that:

‘the council has stated that this decision for closure is not about finance but about its fear that a school of the size projected will be financially unsustainable and unable to deliver the curriculum effectively’.

The adjudicator’s view was that the issue is whether or not a school of this size is sustainable. He noted:

The council has agreed that it has schools of this size or smaller in the county and has no plans to close these schools. In saying this it answers the question.

2.6 The situation is no different in Oxfordshire, in our view. While it might be the smallest school in the county, this is not relevant to its viability. There are many smaller schools in England, and there has been a specific judgement by the schools adjudicator rejecting a proposal to close a school based on its unsustainability due to lower pupil numbers than at Chiltern Edge school.

2.7 In summary, our view is that Chiltern edge school is not only viable. It has the possibility to thrive, growing its pupil numbers and improving the progress and attainment of its pupils well into the future.

3 The school’s ‘rural’ status

3.1 There is no mention in the consultation document of Chiltern edge being a rural school. However the schools in the ‘list of designated rural primary schools, 2016’ published on the gov.uk website (see [here](#)) website are statutorily rural primary schools in England. This includes Sonning Common primary school, which is in the same village as Chiltern Edge and is classified as D1 (Rural town and fringe). Therefore, it is clear that Chiltern Edge is a secondary school in a rural area.

3.2 The government’s statutory guidance for proposers and decision-makers ([here](#)) states: there is a presumption against the closure of rural schools. This does not mean that a rural school will never close, but the case for closure should be strong and a proposal must be clearly in the best interests of educational provision in the area. Therefore, when producing a proposal, the proposer must carefully consider:

- the likely effect of the closure of the school on the local community;
- educational standards at the school and the likely effect on standards at neighbouring schools;
- the availability, and likely cost to the LA, of transport to other schools;
- any increase in the use of motor vehicles which is likely to result from the closure of the school, and the likely effects of any such increase; and
- any alternatives to the closure of the school.

3.3 There is no evidence in the consultation document that anything approaching a ‘careful consideration’ of these factors has been attempted. It is clear that there is a straightforward alternative to closing the school. It is a) to support and challenge the school in its response to the regulator’s recommendations (see the link in paragraph 2.2 above); b) to continue to seek to attract strong trusts to become the school’s sponsor; and c) if no sponsor can be identified, support the school over the Ofsted monitoring process for schools with serious weaknesses (see [here](#)).

3 The difficulties closure will cause to parents and current / future pupils of the school

3.1 The closure of Chiltern Edge school will cause major and potentially life-changing difficulties for pupils currently on roll and pupils currently in primary education for whom Chiltern Edge is the first preference for secondary education. The specific challenges are set out in the paragraphs below.

3.2 The map (attachment 1) shows where the parents of pupils currently attending the school (years 7-10) live, by year group. It is self-explanatory – but in summary there are 261 Reading-resident pupils currently in years 7 to 10 at Chiltern Edge who would expect to be attending the school in the school year 2018/19. Moreover, there are 109 children allocated to year 7 places in the 2017/18 school year who should also expect to be at the school in 2018/19 – thus a total of 370 pupils who are potentially affected.

3.3 The table in attachment 2 shows the Reading secondary schools with places, projected to the 2018/19 school year. While there are places available, these are, for the most part, in schools more than three miles distant from where current Reading-resident Chiltern Edge pupils live. The numbers of pupils who would require financial assistance for travel and would also have journeys involving two busses each way daily.

3.4 Moreover, over 70 per cent of the places available are in schools requiring special measures, and 85 per cent are in schools that are either requiring improvement or special measures. The table below shows the breakdown of places available by Reading secondary schools' most recent regulator judgement.

	PAN	Year 7	Year 8	Year 9	Year 10	Year 11
Places at schools rated as SM	350	180	188	117	123	150
Places at schools rated as RI	240	66	46	26	0	11
Places at schools rated SM or RI	590	246	234	143	123	161
Total PAN / available places	1384	244	289	245	119	169
Percentage of total places in SM schools	25%	74%	65%	48%	100%	89%
Percentage of total places in SM or RI schools	43%	100%	81%	58%	100%	95%

4 Concluding comments

4.1 The closure of Chiltern Edge school – and in particular the proposed closure at the end of the 2017/18 school year – would have a serious effect of pupils in years 7, 8, 9 and 10. The disruption of moving mid key stage is particularly damaging. In most closure proposals, there is a phased approach to closure that protects the interests of 'mid key stage' pupils, but not in this proposal.

4.2 It must be emphasised that Reading BC is absolutely opposed to the proposal to close the school – but it is worse still for the failure to consider the educational needs of pupils currently attending the school, and whose parents wish them to continue to do so.

4.3 To summarise the reasons Reading BC regards the consultation as flawed:

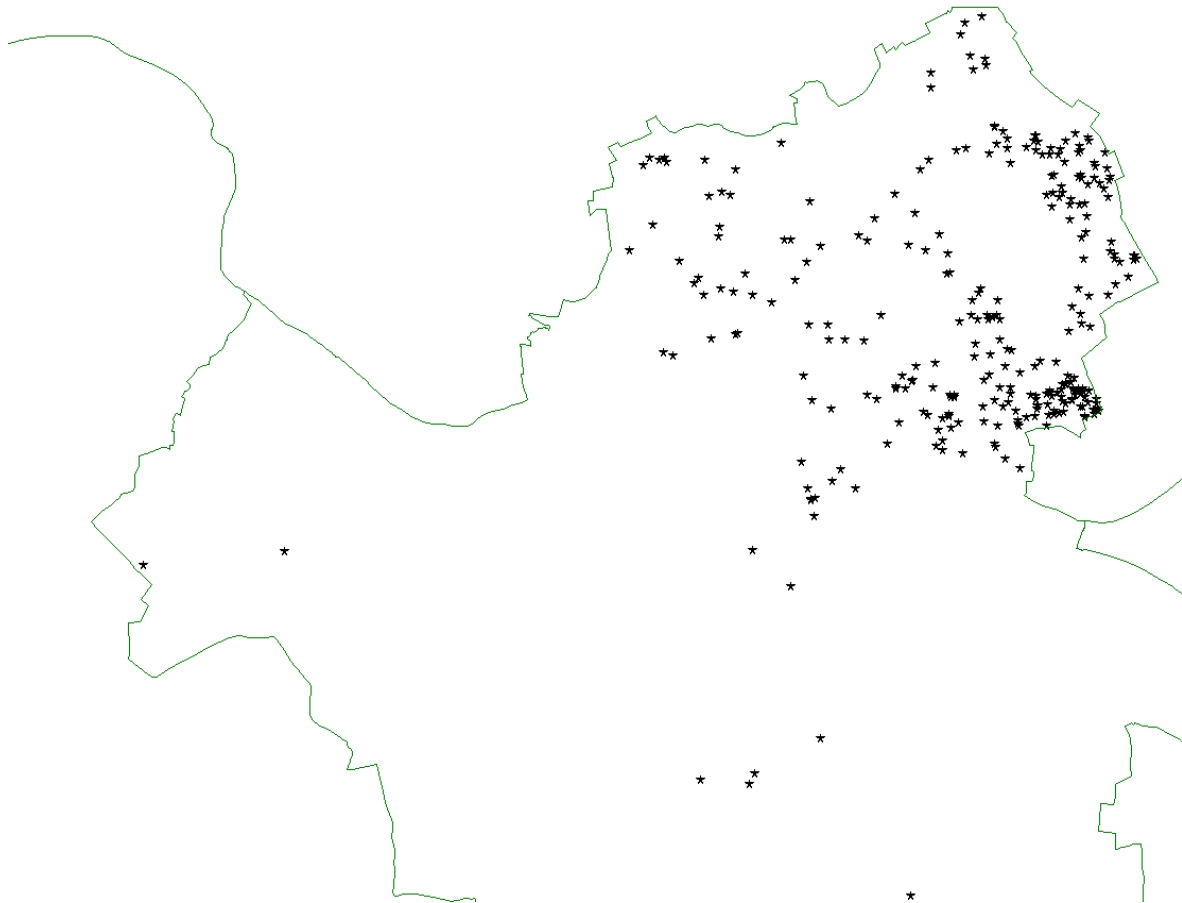
- the school is viable in terms of its current size, and is capable, as are hundreds of schools the same size, of offering a broad curriculum offer;
- there appears to have been no proper consideration of the presumption against closure of what is clearly a school in a rural area;
- the school's closure will deleteriously affect hundreds of Reading-resident pupils, who will experience considerable disruption, including many having to move schools within key stage 3 or even key stage 4 – where there will be huge problems arising from different syllabuses and option choices;
- the closure will mean an overwhelming majority of Reading resident pupils are forced to transfer to schools that are in special measures, or that require improvement
- the closure will cause significant extra journey time, with adverse effects for pupils – many of whom face four separate bus journeys a day – and the environment; and
- the closure will cost Reading BC significant extra costs, in travel, pupil placement, funding extra in-year pupils and engaging a large number of distressed parents.

4.4 The proposal is weak and the proposed closure option should be discounted following the consultation. We formally request that OCC set aside the threat of closure at their Cabinet meeting in July. Any prolonged period of uncertainty in the minds of parents or potential parents will only serve to undermine the future better options for the future of the school.

Attachment 1: Reading BC Chiltern Edge school response

1 Where the parents of pupils currently attending the school (years 7-10) live

The map shows the addresses of all current Reading-resident pupils, most of which reside in Caversham. Chiltern Edge school is under three miles from north end of Caversham



2 The numbers of students currently allocated live in RG4 (Caversham).

Year 7	Year 8	Year 9	Year 10	total
87	56	69	49	261

3 Reading-resident parents of pupils currently allocated a year 7 place at Chiltern Edge

There are currently 109 pupils allocated live in RG4 (Caversham)..

Attachment 2: Reading BC Chiltern Edge school response

1 Secondary schools with (current Ofsted gradings) and places in Reading

	PAN	Year 7	Year 8	Year 9	Year 10	Year 11
Blessed Hugh Faringdon (2)	150	-4	-4	-1	-3	-1
Highdown School (2)	220	2	24	9	-1	9
John Madejski Academy (4)	180	97	93	39	53	64
Kendrick School (1)	96	0	0	0	0	0
Maiden Erlegh Reading (no grade)	180	0	0	0		
Prospect School (3)	240	66	46	26	0	11
Reading School (1)	150	0	0	0	0	0
Reading Girls School (4)	170	83	95	78	70	86
WREN (no grade)	168	0	35	94		
Totals	1384	244	289	245	119	169

2 Likely placements, distances to travel, and where bus passes might be needed;

2.1 Assuming that parents fill up the places at Highdown, Wren, Prospect and then Reading Girls (based on the current popularity of the schools), we would most likely place children as follows:

- year 7: 65 at schools likely to be over distance and who will be eligible for a bus pass;
- year 8: 45 likely to be eligible for assistance with a bus pass;
- Year 9s, we believe there will be no spaces at any schools closer than Reading Girls and JMA, and therefore most or all pupils would be eligible for transport support;
- Year 10: at present, there are no places within 'reasonable' travelling distance, so all of the 49 pupils would be entitled to bus passes or assisted travel.

2.2 All Schools other than Highdown would require pupils (from addresses at which they are currently resident) to take a bus into Reading and back out to the prospective schools. Therefore all pupils living in the RG4 postcode would almost certainly be eligible for free school transport unless allocated Highdown. The exception to this is a small number of pupils living in the south of Caversham if allocated places at Reading Girls or The Wren, as these may be under distance.

3 The likely deficit of places in 2018/19 should the closure go ahead.

3.1 Assuming that the same number of pupils allocated places at Chiltern Edge school is approximately 100 in 2018/19 (fewer than this year as Oxfordshire county council has consulted on a reduction of PAN 180 to 120) there is the capacity within Reading. Forecast year 6 next year is

east	south	central west	west	north	total
261	338	340	339	408	1,686

3.2 There are 1,384 places in Reading Schools: 675 went out of borough last year. In theory, there should be over 350 year 7 places available. However, if Langtree, Gillotts and – possibly – Chiltern Edge are unavailable, there will be either no surplus places or a deficit of places. Moreover, places will not be available within a reasonable travelling distance for children whose parents currently want them to attend Chiltern Edge school.