

Annex 2: consultation responses for the proposal to close Culham Parochial CE Primary School

| Comment | OCC response |
|--|--|
| Community value of the school | |
| <p>The school is supported by, and is a vital part of, its local community. A local school helps children become members of their local community.</p> | <p>The Council recognises the contribution that schools make to their local communities and this is reflected in the 'Primary Strategy for Change' where the aim is for a 'good school at the heart of the community. Whilst consideration will be given to the impact closure would have upon a community, the Council cannot continue to maintain schools primarily for non-educational reasons.</p> <p>Community commitments to make greater use (and thereby financial contributions) to the school would help to address one of the key issues, the budget deficit.</p> |
| <p>Small village schools are important to their communities. Without a school, future parents will not want to move to the village, which will become a dormer village.</p> | |
| <p>The village has no other (non-church) meeting place. It has no village hall, post office, pub or shop.</p> | |
| Educational value of the school | |
| <p>Culham provides an excellent quality of education.</p> | <p>The current proposal is in no way prompted by concern about the standard of education either specifically at Culham Parochial, or at small schools in general. Oxfordshire County Council has repeatedly stated its support for our many small rural schools, and we know how much they are valued by their local communities. However, all schools need to be able to operate within their budgets, and need to be able to attract appropriate staff.</p> |
| <p>Culham meets the demand for a small school; other alternatives are larger.</p> | |
| <p>Small schools provide a good quality of education.</p> | |
| <p>Closure would contradict the promises of the Conservative Manifesto 2010: <i>"A Conservative government will give many more children access to the kind of education that is currently only available to the well-off: safe classrooms, talented and specialist teachers, access to the best curriculum and exams, and smaller schools with smaller class sizes with teachers who know the children's names"</i>.</p> | <p>If Culham School does close, then parental preference is likely to lead to a dispersal of children to a number of different schools. The proposal to add Culham to Sutton Courtenay's catchment area is because it is the closest school and also a VC school, like Culham. Sutton Courtenay currently has an admission number of 20; if it attracts more pupils we do not foresee it needing to expand beyond an admission number of 30, and some year groups will remain smaller than this. While this is larger than Culham, it still offers many of the benefits of a smaller school.</p> |
| <p>The nearest alternative (Sutton Courtenay) is not such a good school.</p> | <p>At its last Ofsted inspection, Sutton Courtenay was judged as "satisfactory" with a good capacity for sustained improvement. The Ofsted report commented "This happy and friendly school provides pupils with a sound standard of education. Good care, guidance and support have a positive impact on the pupils' good personal development, including their behaviour. Arrangements for</p> |

| | |
|---|---|
| | safeguarding pupils are outstanding. Consequently, they feel exceptionally safe and secure at school and understand how to stay safe. The school's good links with parents and carers are evident in the appreciative comments made." |
| Traffic and transport issues | |
| Closing the school will lead to more traffic, and transporting children to school will be difficult for parents. | The traffic impact would depend on the residence of children currently at Culham, and the school they choose to move to in the event of closure. At the start of this year, just over a third of the children at Culham School lived within the Culham catchment area; almost as many lived within the Sutton Courtenay catchment area, and therefore may actually travel less if they attend Sutton Courtenay instead of Culham. Other children live in Abingdon or Didcot, and may also transfer to schools closer to home, again reducing traffic. While some children will need to travel further, the net effect is therefore uncertain. |
| The route to the nearest alternative school is too dangerous to walk. | Free transport will be provided for children under 8 who have to travel more than 2 miles and children of 8 and over who have to travel more than 3 miles to the next nearest school with places. When there are issues raised over the possible safety of a walking route the Admissions Team will arrange for an initial assessment by the Integrated Transport Unit and if necessary a full risk assessment by Road Safety. |
| If this proposal were to go ahead, would like to see the extension of the cycle path into Abingdon and a crossing at the Culham junction nearest to Abingdon; the scene of at least two fatal accidents in the last 20 years. | This suggestion has been passed onto the Council's Road safety Team. |
| Need for the school | |
| There are rising numbers of children needing school places, and numbers will rise further due to housing planned for the Didcot area. | Although there is significant housing development planned in the Didcot area, this would not be planned to feed into Culham School, as the intention would be to ensure sufficient local capacity. In the short-medium term Didcot has sufficient school places. |
| Many families in the village have small children. Numbers are high in the pre-school. | Pupil forecasts are calculated annually, and were last calculated in spring 2010, since when numbers at the school have fallen. Demographic data indicates that the local demand for the school is likely to remain fairly stable, but parental preference will have a major impact on the school's numbers. |
| Forecast numbers for the school show that it will be full. | |
| Causes of current problems/alternative solutions | |
| The school just needs a good headteacher to be appointed. | For almost three years the school's Governing Body, with the help of Oxfordshire County Council |

CA6

| | |
|--|--|
| Culham's problems are short term and can be overcome. | and the Oxford Diocese, has tried to secure permanent leadership and a long-term future for Culham Parochial School, so far unsuccessfully. Efforts continue, and if they are successful before a final decision is taken in the summer, then the closure process can be halted. |
| Why can the school not carry on without a headteacher until one can be appointed? | |
| It's hard to believe a new head cannot be found. Why were no previous candidates considered appropriate? Could it not have a part-time or job-share head? | |
| There are problems with the system for headteacher recruitment: candidates not considered without an NPQH; workload is excessive compared to salary for small schools. | Culham School is subject to the same national requirements as all other schools regarding headteacher qualifications. Workload and relatively low salaries of Headteachers of small schools is likewise a national phenomenon and this is reflected in difficulty in recruitment. |
| Existing management should be replaced with new temporary management, which should be given time to rebuild confidence in the school. | The school has had temporary leadership and management for a number of years and needs the stability of a permanent headteacher or other sustainable shared leadership. |
| Not enough time was allowed to agree a federation solution with other schools. | One federation proposal got to the point of the two governing bodies considering formal ratification of the proposal but was rejected at the partner school. Other options have also been explored. |
| If the problem is KS2 numbers, could KS2 be closed temporarily until numbers rebuild from rising cohorts? | A slow rebuilding of numbers would not address the forecast growing budget difficulties of the school. It is uncertain whether Culham operating as an infant school would be attractive to prospective parents and leaves unaddressed the question of how to ensure adequate provision for the remaining KS2 pupils. |
| Could the school be closed and reopened to allow a fresh start? | It is possible that if the school were legally closed that an alternative 'promoter' of the school could come forward with proposals to establish, for instance, a 'free school'. This would need approval from the Department for Education and the agreement of the school's trustees to lease the building. |
| An inability to find a head teacher is not a sufficient reason to close a school. | On its own the short term failure to recruit a permanent headteacher might not warrant closure, although all schools are legally required to have someone who is designated as such. With a small school it can be difficult to identify anyone suitable from within existing staff. The absence of a headteacher is only one factor contributing to the closure consultation. |
| The school's projected deficit for 2011/12 can be turned round once the school's future is secure, allowing pupil numbers to grow again. The school has a number | A firm, evidence based plan to increase the school's roll, would be an important element of any 'recovery plan'. Supporters of the school have identified 40+ pupils as 'break even' point for producing an in-year balanced budget; larger |

CA6

| | |
|--|--|
| of plans to increase recruitment. | numbers would be needed to repay the c.£50,000 deficit. |
| Is this closure related to the European Academy proposal – will the Academy harm numbers at Culham Parochial? | The proposal to close Culham School and that to create the European Academy are separate although it is possible that the latter could have a small impact (in terms of absolute pupil numbers) on neighbouring schools. It is unlikely that academy curriculum, delivered in one or more European languages, will appeal to the majority of mono-lingual families who currently send their children to Culham School. |
| What has the local authority done to increase numbers at the school? | The Council has not sought to actively promote Culham School at the expense of other schools. Enquirers about the availability of schools in the Culham area have had their attentions drawn to the availability of places at the school. No attempts have been made to dissuade parents from applying for places at the school. |
| Could the European School provide leadership? | Links with the European School have been explored but at the current stage of the European Academy project it has not been possible to develop these. |
| Poor management and governance/staffing difficulties in recent years have caused the decline of this school. Why did the local authority not investigate staff absences, resignations and falling pupil numbers? | The Council has been extensively involved in trying to resolve a number of personnel issues, the details of which are confidential. The Council has provided the school with interim leadership and, along with the Diocese, has worked with governors to try to recruit a permanent headteacher or establish a federation with another school. |
| Changes to the governing body have revitalised the leadership of the school. | The Council acknowledges that the school has a very active chair of governors and parental/community engagement with the school has been stimulated by the closure proposal. |
| Consultation process | |
| The timing of the consultation has deterred parents from applying. | The statutory consultation and decision-making process for school closure sets out a lengthy timetable, including two periods of 6 week consultation which need to be fitted round school holidays and also County Council Cabinet meeting dates. In order to minimise the disruption of pupil transfer <i>if</i> a decision is made to close the school, we wanted to time that closure for the end of the school year. Once various contractual deadlines are met, this requires a final decision before the end of May. Working back from that required that the consultation be started in November. |
| The consultation period is too short. | The consultation has lasted 8½ weeks, including 2 weeks of the school holidays. Government guidance recommends 6 weeks excluding school holidays. There will be a further period for representations if the Cabinet decides to publish a statutory notice to close the school. |
| The decision has been rushed and undertaken without sufficient warning for parents. | |

| Future options if the school closes | |
|--|--|
| What will happen to the school site? Could the building become a village hall? | The buildings are the property of the Diocese of Oxford. If the school closes, and an alternative educational use is not found, the Diocese will be bound by trust terms to sell it and use the proceeds for its educational purposes. |
| Has the authority considered the cost of extending other schools who would take additional children if Culham closes? | If Culham School does close, then parental preference is likely to lead to a dispersal of children to a number of different schools, and depending on the pattern of preference, it may not be necessary to expand other schools. There is a proposal to add Culham to Sutton Courtenay's catchment area as it is the closest school and also a VC school, like Culham. Sutton Courtenay currently has an admission number of 20; if it attracts more pupils we do not foresee it needing to expand beyond an admission number of 30, and some year groups will remain smaller than this. Admissions to the European Academy will be determined in line with its admissions rules and places cannot be guaranteed for current Culham School pupils. It is unlikely that all parents would want their children to attend the academy. |
| There are no other suitable schools that could offer places to all the current children, which would mean splitting them up. | |
| If the school closes, could pupils be transferred en bloc to the European School (in a single bus)? | |
| Can the staff be redeployed into local schools? Would governors being willing to be recruited to other local governing bodies? | |
| The proposal is financially motivated. | The proposal to close Culham Parochial is not prompted by any economic benefit to Oxfordshire County Council. The total Dedicated School Grant paid out by OCC would remain the same if Culham closed, but the element that would not be paid to Culham in the event of its closure would be "recycled" across the OCC school sector - either through a slightly higher rate paid to all schools on a per-pupil or per-establishment basis or in some other way as agreed by the Schools Forum. The reduction in spending on Culham would not therefore be a "saving" to OCC, or a reduction in education spending by OCC; it would be a redistribution. The council would derive no direct financial benefit from the closure and disposal of the Culham School buildings as they are the property of the Diocese of Oxford. |
| The local authority will not save any money by closing the school, or benefit from the proceeds of the sale. | |