

Report to: Lead Member for Education and Inclusion, Special Educational Needs and Disability

Date of meeting: 23 December 2019

By: Director of Children's Services

Title: Proposed closure of Fletching CE Primary School

Purpose: To report on the outcome of the consultation on the proposed closure of Fletching CE Primary School and to recommend next steps.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Lead Member is recommended to halt the consultation on the proposed closure of Fletching CE Primary School and for the school to remain open.

1 Background and consultation process

1.1 A review of primary school provision in East Sussex was undertaken by the local authority during the 2018/19 academic year. The review identified significant concerns about the viability of Fletching CE Primary School (Fletching) in relation to its predicted ongoing budget deficit, the high number of surplus places at the school, and its location in relation to current and projected local pupil numbers. As a result of the review the Lead Member for Education and Inclusion, Special Educational Needs and Disability (the Lead Member) gave approval on [24 June 2019](#) for the local authority to commence a consultation on the proposed closure of Fletching.

1.2 Proposals for closure have to follow a prescribed process established by the Education and Inspections Act 2006 (EIA 2006) as updated by the Education Act 2011 and the School Organisation (Establishment and Discontinuance of Schools) (England) Regulations 2013. The consultation began on 5 July 2019. There is no prescribed timeframe for consultation, but the Department for Education (DfE) recommends that it should last for a minimum of 6 weeks. The local authority acknowledged that the consultation period straddled the summer holiday and accordingly extended the consultation period to 11 October 2019, meaning there were a total of 14 weeks of consultation, of which eight were during term time. A copy of the consultation document can be viewed in **Appendix 1** of this report.

1.3 The local authority consulted pupils, parents and carers, staff and trade unions, the governing board and other local school communities. The local authority also consulted a wide range of other groups and organisations including early years providers, the district and parish councils, West Sussex County Council, the local MP, the Church of England and Catholic dioceses and the wider local community.

1.4 Consultation meetings were held with staff, union representatives, parents and carers and the local community on 16 July 2019 to provide further information on the proposal and give interested parties the opportunity to ask questions. Notes were taken at both meetings and a Q&A document responding to key issues raised was produced and posted on the consultation hub for people to view. The Q&A is provided in **Appendix 2**.

1.5 Some questions and comments were received prior to the consultation formally opening. These were addressed through the Q&A on the consultation hub.

1.6 In addition, the local authority sought feedback directly from pupils through a pupil engagement session at the school on 13 September 2019 facilitated by two consultant headteachers. The responses from the pupil engagement session are available for elected members to view in the Cabinet and Members' rooms.

2. Analysis of consultation responses

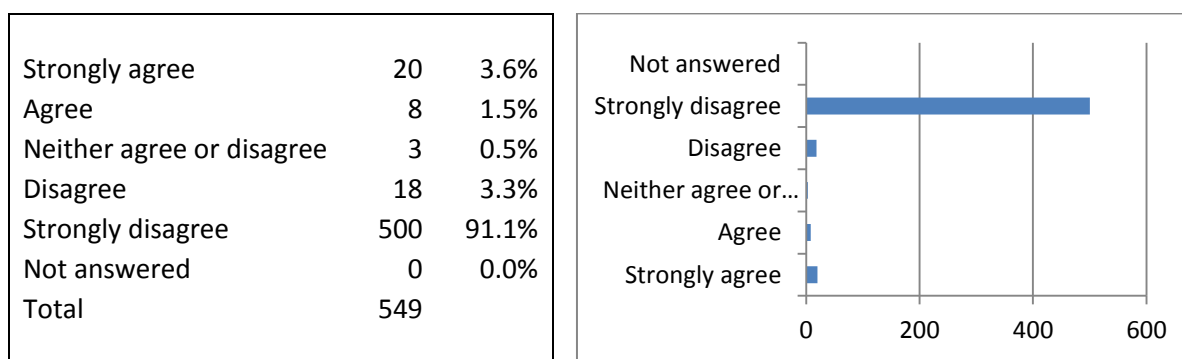
2.1 By the end of the consultation period a total of 611 responses had been received, 549 via the consultation hub and 62 by letter or email to the consultation inbox. A number of individuals also emailed elected members and officers separately and in some cases on more than one occasion. Some respondents chose to complete both the online response form and submit an email / letter response. All of the responses to the consultation are available for elected members to view in the Cabinet and Members' rooms.

2.2 Two responses were received after the consultation closed. These have not been taken into account in the analysis below.

2.3 A petition in relation to the proposed closure of Fletching was submitted containing over 3,000 signatures. Signatories include people living locally, in the UK and across the world. The petition is still [open](#).

2.4 Feedback was overwhelmingly in support of keeping the school open.

2.5 A summary of the 549 consultation hub responses is provided below.

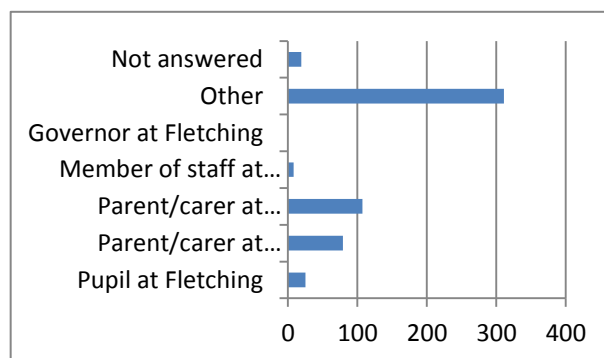


2.6 It would appear from the comments received that 11 of the 20 respondents who ticked 'strongly agree', identified in the table above, actually disagree with the proposal to close the school and simply ticked the wrong box. This would take the total number of objections to 529 or 96%. It is clear that respondents who chose to email and write letters also object to the proposal.

2.7 Respondents who agree that the school should close number 17 or 3% (reduced to take account of those that ticked the wrong box). Those in favour commented that closing the school would help to secure the future of other schools in the local area; that they do not agree with Uckfield parents driving their children to Fletching when there are school places in the town and that pupils would benefit from a different school, with more pupils and more facilities.

2.8 Respondents identified themselves as:

Pupil at Fletching	25	4.6%
Parent/carer at Fletching	79	14.4%
Parent/carer at another school	107	19.5%
Member of staff at Fletching	8	1.5%
Governor at Fletching	0	0.0%
Other	311	56.6%
Not answered	19	3.5%
	549	



2.9 The majority of respondents classified themselves as 'other'. Although not everyone that ticked 'other' gave details, at least 84 identified as members of the local community. 57 identified as relatives of staff and/or pupils at the school whilst 47 identified as past parents or past pupils of the school. 'Other' respondents also included, but were not limited to, the local MP, Fletching Parish Council, friends of families and staff at Fletching and governors at other schools.

2.10 In total, 113 online responses were received from pupils, parents and carers and members of staff at Fletching. It could therefore be said that at least 113 of the 549 respondents would be directly affected by the proposal. In addition, many local residents would argue that they too would be directly impacted as they see the school as the heart of the community.

2.11 Although no-one identified themselves as a school governor through the online response form the local authority did receive individual responses from governors via email. The governing board also submitted a response via email.

2.12 The Lead Member is required to have 'due regard' to the duties set out in Section 149 of the Equality Act 2010 ('the PSED') in considering the proposal to close Fletching. Respondents to the consultation were asked to provide personal information, including information about protected and other characteristics in order to analyse the equality implications of the proposal and to identify appropriate mitigations. The Equality Impact Assessment is attached at **Appendix 3**. Some respondents chose not to provide personal information.

3. Key themes and considerations

3.1 A number of key themes and considerations arose from the consultation responses. These are provided below, along with the local authority's response to each point.

3.2 Pupil numbers and capacity in local schools

A significant number of respondents argued that there would be insufficient capacity in the local schools if Fletching closed. The data used in the consultation was taken from the January 2019 school census. At the time of writing, the October 2019 school census had not been released by the Department for Education (DfE). In the absence of this official data set, the local authority has used pupil number returns submitted by schools between September and November 2019 to assess, albeit informally, the current capacity at Fletching and schools in the North Chailey area.

Provisional pupil numbers in North Chailey review area

Capacity	PAN	YR	Y1	Y2	Y3	Y4	Y5	Y6	Total	Capacity	Surplus	% surplus
		80	80	80	80	80	80	80				
Fletching	15	5	9	10	10	13	8	14	69	105	36	34%
Chailey St Peter's	20	17	15	17	20	22	23	25	139	140	1	1%
Danehill*	15	13	16	11	11	17	10	18	96	105	9	9%
Newick	30	30	27	33	34	32	30	30	216	210	0	0%
Totals	80	65	67	71	75	84	71	87	520	560	46	8%

Data source: Pupil number returns from individual schools during the 2019/20 academic year.

* Danehill's capacity takes account of the decision to increase its PAN to 15 with effect from 2020/21 and that the school is already organised to its new PAN.

Fletching has largely maintained its pupil numbers despite the consultation on closure. There has been a net loss of only two pupils since the January 2019 school census.

Reflecting that Fletching takes pupils from a wider area than just North Chailey (including Uckfield and the surrounding area), an analysis of pupil numbers in the wider area is included below.

Provisional pupil numbers in North Chailey, Uckfield and the surrounding area

Capacity	PAN	YR	Y1	Y2	Y3	Y4	Y5	Y6	Total	Capacity	Surplus	% surplus
		365	365	365	365	365	365	365				
Fletching	15	5	9	10	10	13	8	14	69	105	36	34%
Chailey St Peter's	20	17	15	17	20	22	23	25	139	140	1	1%
Danehill*	15	13	16	11	11	17	10	18	96	105	9	9%
Newick	30	30	27	33	34	32	30	30	216	210	0	0%
Bonnors	15	17	20	19	18	14	13	10	111	105	0	0%
Buxted**	30	30	27	23	26	25	30	24	185	210	25	12%
Framfield	15	15	15	9	14	17	12	13	95	105	10	10%
Harlands	30	28	30	24	30	29	26	28	195	210	15	7%
High Hurstwood	15	16	15	15	15	16	15	13	105	105	0	0%
Holy Cross	30	9	15	11	10	19	9	12	85	210	125	60%
Little Horsted	15	17	14	18	17	13	16	13	108	105	0	0%
Manor	60	60	55	61	60	60	59	60	415	420	5	1%
Nutley	15	16	12	17	12	12	16	14	99	105	6	6%
Rocks Park	30	30	30	30	30	30	30	30	210	210	0	0%
St Philips	30	29	30	15	32	27	30	30	193	210	17	8%
Totals	365	332	330	313	339	346	327	334	2321	2555	249	10%

Data source: Pupil number returns from schools between September and November 2019.

* Danehill's capacity takes account of the decision to increase its PAN to 15 with effect from 2020/21 and that the school is already organised to its new PAN.

** Buxted's capacity takes account of the decision to increase its PAN to 30 with effect from 2020/21 and that the school is already organised to its new PAN.

Surplus places at Fletching remain high at 34%. Schools operate most efficiently and effectively when full or nearly full. To this end the local authority seeks to keep the number of surplus places (the number of places in schools that are unfilled) to a minimum. However, it is generally accepted that not all unfilled places in a school are surplus places, but that a small margin of surplus capacity is often allowed to facilitate parental preference, to take account of the fact that schools with available places may not always be in the part of a planning area where the demand is, and to allow for a degree of error in the forecasts. A school is generally considered to be full when it has less than 5% of its places unfilled. This is in line with the National Audit Office report on Capital Funding for new school places published in 2013, where it states:

"It is considered that on average 5 per cent was the bare minimum needed for authorities to meet their statutory duty with operational flexibility, while enabling parents to have some choice of schools".

In larger towns around one form of entry (30 intake places) is allowed while in other areas around half a form of entry (15 intake places) is allowed although margins vary depending on specific forecasts, capacities and circumstances. This figure is deemed to give the

appropriate amount of flexibility in an area and is set against the need to ensure the efficient use of resources. In practice, the amount of surplus places planned for in an area will also take account of local circumstances.

3.3 Community area boundaries and housing development

Challenge was made around the relevance of the Fletching community area. Respondents argue that community areas were implemented with the intent of allowing oversubscribed schools to give priority to pupils living closest to them and that they were not intended to imply that a school should serve only families living within the area. They question why Fletching is not considered part of the Uckfield community area.

As an urban area Uckfield is its own community area served by five schools. As a rural school, Fletching, like all other rural areas located in the area surrounding Uckfield, has its own community area. Community areas are designed to give priority to pupils living within the area, not to exclude pupils living outside it. The guidance the local authority publishes as part of the admissions process makes it clear that parents are able to apply for schools in other community areas besides their own; the vast majority of applicants for Fletching in recent years have come from outside its community area which indicates this option is widely understood.

There was also challenge around why the local authority has not consulted on the proposed change to the Published Admission Number (PAN) at Chailey St Peter's CE Primary School (Chailey St Peter's) at the same time as the Fletching closure proposal as respondents believe the two proposals are linked. This was not done because:

- a) In the event that Fletching closed, the local authority would need to analyse which alternative schools parents and carers had applied for to assess whether additional places at Chailey St Peter's would be required, and
- b) The consultation to change a maintained school's PAN is subject to different legislation and timeframes.

The local authority is consulting on a proposal to expand the community area for Chailey St Peter's to encompass the area currently served by Fletching (see 3.5 below).

Respondents also referenced housing developments in Scaynes Hill (55 homes) and Newick (68 homes) in addition to the significant development in Uckfield which could put pressure on places in the area. Taking information from the School Organisation Plan (SOP) 2019-2023 about the predicted number of spare places in Uckfield and using the local authority's published pupil yields from new homes, respondents have concluded that a total of at least 263 new primary school pupils will be living in the area immediately surrounding Fletching with insufficient capacity to accommodate everyone by the end of the SOP period in 2022/23.

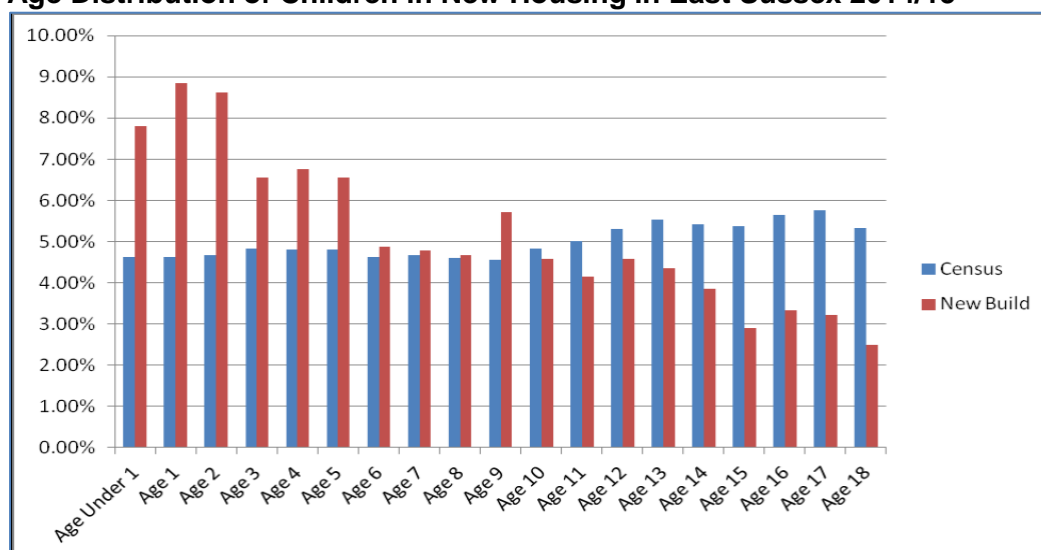
The local authority's published yields from new housing for primary schools are as follows.

- Houses 2 bed+ = 0.25 pupils per dwelling
- Flats 2 bed+ = 0.0375 pupils per dwelling
- Houses / flats 1 bed = 0 pupils per dwelling

Housing trajectory data from Wealden District Council suggests that development in Uckfield will take another eight years to build out. Even if all the dwellings built were 2 bed+ houses and there were 263 additional pupils generated from new homes in the area it will be some years before all of this demand materialises. This is evidenced in the chart below which shows the results of a recent countywide survey of children in new housing developments. Households surveyed had been resident in new housing development for up to six years. When this is taken into account it is clear that many of the children living in new housing

development are born after households move in. This indicates that there is a time lag between new homes being occupied, children being born and the subsequent demand for primary school places. Many of the children arising from new housing built in the wider area in the SOP period to 2022/23 are unlikely to actually impact on primary school pupil numbers until at least the middle of the next decade.

Age Distribution of Children in New Housing in East Sussex 2014/15



Source: Cognisant Pupil Yield Survey for East Sussex County Council 2014/15; ONS, Age by Single Year, Census 2011

Very few of the children arising from new housing in the area are expected to be in homes built in Fletching Parish. The new housing will be in school admissions areas served by other schools. The majority of the housing planned will be in Uckfield.

As can be seen from the 2019/20 pupil number analysis on page 4 of the report there are currently 249 surplus places across 15 schools in the wider area. In the SOP period to 2022/23, with increases in PANs at Buxted CE Primary School and Danehill CE Primary School and incoming Reception cohorts being lower than the Year 6 cohorts they are replacing, the local authority is forecasting that, even after allowing for those additional pupils from new housing in the area who will more immediately require a primary school place, there will be sufficient places to meet demand.

Should primary school places be required to accommodate children arising from new housing in the wider area over the longer term of the Wealden and Lewes District Local Plan periods, it is appropriate to provide those places closer to where the new housing is being built. The local authority has an option agreement on land for a new school within the Ridgewood Farm development site in the South West of Uckfield (1,000 homes) and will bring forward proposals to create provision to serve the development at the appropriate time.

For clarification, new housing in Newick was included in the North Chailey area review but excluded from the consultation as it is served by Newick CE Primary School rather than Fletching. New housing in Scaynes Hill was not included in the area review and is not considered a material factor in the Fletching closure proposal as it is out of county and the responsibility for school places in that area lies with West Sussex County Council (WSCC). Data tells us that there are fewer than five pupils attending Fletching who live in Scaynes Hill. WSCC has not raised Scaynes Hill as an area of concern for them through the regular place planning meetings the local authority has with its neighbouring authorities.

3.4 Lack of comparative data

Respondents criticised the lack of comparative data and the local authority's perceived unwillingness to share data on other schools considered as part of the area reviews in

response to FOI requests. The local authority took the view that some data about individual schools was considered commercially sensitive and should not be shared as there was a risk that sharing data could negatively impact on or potentially destabilise other schools.

3.5 Impact on pupils

The impact on pupils, particularly those with special educational needs (SEN), is a concern for a significant number of respondents. They question the ability of other schools to provide for pupils with additional needs, referencing what they perceive to be the ability of Fletching to understand and accommodate all pupils' needs. There is anxiety amongst parents that other schools would not be able to replicate the SEN offer at Fletching and that some of the pupils now at Fletching have been at other schools in the area where they were not successful. The school has identified a higher percentage of pupils with SEN (27.8%) than the East Sussex primary school average (13.5%).

Chapter 6 of the SEND Code of Practice explains the action that mainstream schools should take to meet their duties in relation to identifying and supporting all pupils with SEN whether or not they have an Education, Health and Care (EHC) plan. Chapters 6.36 to 6.39 of the code state:

'Teachers are responsible and accountable for the progress and development of the pupils in their class, including where pupils access support from teaching assistants or specialist staff.

High quality teaching, differentiated for individual pupils, is the first step in responding to pupils who have or may have SEN. Additional intervention and support cannot compensate for a lack of good quality teaching. Schools should regularly and carefully review the quality of teaching for all pupils, including those at risk of underachievement. This includes reviewing and, where necessary, improving, teachers' understanding of strategies to identify and support vulnerable pupils and their knowledge of the SEN most frequently encountered.

In deciding whether to make special educational provision, the teacher and SENCO should consider all of the information gathered from within the school about the pupil's progress, alongside national data and expectations of progress. This should include high quality and accurate formative assessment, using effective tools and early assessment materials. For higher levels of need, schools should have arrangements in place to draw on more specialised assessments from external agencies and professionals.

This information gathering should include an early discussion with the pupil and their parents. These early discussions with parents should be structured in such a way that they develop a good understanding of the pupil's areas of strength and difficulty, the parents' concerns, the agreed outcomes sought for the child and the next steps'.

The determination of whether a child has SEN is down to individual schools in consultation with parents and the threshold varies between establishments. All schools have the same duties under the Equalities Act 2010 and the Children and Families Act 2014 to identify and provide for pupils with SEN and, unless there are specific provisions named in a statutory plan, which would make admission incompatible with the requirement for reasonable adjustments, it is a legal requirement for all schools to comply. As barriers to learning, that a pupil with SEN might experience, change over time, the local authority would expect provision to adapt and change accordingly and, therefore, the requirements of an individual at any given time are not reflective of those in the future. In some cases, pupils may cease to be identified as having SEN if appropriate adjustments are put in place to enable them to overcome barriers and to make progress in line with their peers.

Should Fletching close it is proposed that, for admissions purposes, the Fletching community area would be merged with the Chailey St Peter's community area. Parents and carers of pupils at Fletching would be able to express a preference for a place at an alternative school

including Chailey St Peter's. Parents and carers would be asked to complete an admissions application form and to name up to three schools they would prefer their children to attend. Parents and carers would be offered a school place either at one of their preferred schools named on the application form or, if this is not possible, at the nearest school to the child's home where a place is available. The local authority would try to meet parents and carers preferences wherever possible but cannot guarantee to do so. The allocation of places would be made in line with the admissions policy as set out in the school admissions booklet which is available on the local authority's website at:

<https://www.eastsussex.gov.uk/educationandlearning/schools/admissions/>

On 4 November 2019 the Lead Member gave approval for the local authority to consult on a proposal to expand the community area for Chailey St Peter's to encompass the area currently served by Fletching. This is to ensure that, should Fletching close, children living in the school's community area would be able to access a local school. If the decision is taken not to proceed with closure the local authority would not take forward the proposed change to the community areas.

Many respondents also referred to the impact of the proposed school closure on the mental health and wellbeing of pupils, parents and carers and staff. Local authority support is available to schools, pupils and their families for mental health and emotional wellbeing as set out in **Appendix 4**.

3.6 Quality of education provision

A number of responses referenced the 'Good' Ofsted rating at the school, and the improvement in outcomes over the last three years, including for those with SEN. The local authority has recently categorised the school as good. The local authority recognises that the school provides a good level of education, as do other schools in the local area. However, the case to consult on the proposed closure of the school was based also on the low pupil numbers, long-term limited in-area demand for places and the high level of surplus places which creates uncertainty and impacts negatively on Fletching and other small schools in the area.

3.7 Impact on the community

Significant concern was raised about the impact closure would have on the local community. Examples include:

- The loss of the 'heart of the community' and events such as the Garden Trail, school performances, church events, 'cake and cuppa' and bell ringing.
- The loss of passing trade on the village shop which is about to re-open.
- Impact on traffic and the environment of pupils having to travel by car to their nearest alternative school.
- The potential loss of families with young children moving into the village.
- The impact on the church.

These issues are addressed in the Community Impact Assessment in **Appendix 5**.

3.8 Presumption against the closure of rural schools

Respondents argue that the local authority has ignored the presumption against the closure of rural schools, arguing that the case for closure must be strong and in the best interests of educational provision in the area. The DfE statutory guidance '*Opening and closing maintained schools*' updated in November 2019 (the guidance) states:

"Proposers should be aware that the Department expects all decision makers to adopt a presumption against the closure of rural schools. This doesn't 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".

The presumption against closure does not mean that rural schools cannot be considered for closure by local authorities, but they have a duty to carefully consider the factors set out in the guidance when proposing to close a rural school. These factors have been considered by the local authority and are addressed in **Appendix 6**.

3.9 Impact on travel arrangements

Impact on travel arrangements is one of the key considerations when proposing the closure of rural schools. Respondents raised concerns about having to travel by car to their nearest alternative school and the impact this would have on traffic and the environment. They argue that it would increase traffic movement not reduce it. However, the majority of pupils currently attending Fletching are from out of the area, while a number of children living in the village travel to other schools. The majority of pupils therefore already face journeys to and from school each day. Latest analysis shows that of the 55 Reception to Year 5 pupils likely to be affected by the proposal, approximately 68% live nearer to an alternative school, with approximately 32% living further away. Should the school close the likely impact on traffic and the environment might potentially be reduced if displaced pupils attend schools nearer to their home address. The local authority acknowledges that some pupils living in Fletching and attending the school might face longer journeys to and from an alternative school each day and that this might increase car usage for these families. For families that live outside of the Fletching community area it is envisaged that displaced pupils would continue to be transported to and from school under arrangements made by their parents and carers. It is hoped that for these families car usage might reduce. The local authority currently estimates that five pupils might be eligible for free transport to their nearest alternative school, although it is recognised that this figure might change if pupils are unable to access a place at their nearest alternative school.

3.10 Budget position

The governing board's three-year budget plan, submitted in May 2019, showed the following budget position.

Financial year	End of year
2019/20	-£5,457 Deficit
2020/21	-£62,138 Deficit
2021/22	-£145,863 Deficit

Since the consultation began, the school's PTA has been actively fundraising to try to address the budget deficit to 2020/21. To date they have secured funding commitments totalling £74,368 made up from:

- Fundraising £44,368
- A pledge from the School House Trust for £20,000 spread over two financial years
- A resolution by Fletching Parish Council for £10,000

Taking the fundraising into account, governors submitted a revised budget plan on 8 November 2019 which shows the following budget position.

Financial year	End of year	
2019/20	£40,920	Carry forward
2020/21	-£3,299	Deficit
2021/22	-£39,338 to -£95,588*	Deficit

* The school's predicted budget deficit in 2021/22 of -£39,000 is based on their assumption of 78 pupils on roll in October 2020. Governors have assumed the school will pick up 15

additional pupils, on top of the estimated 63 on their roll, from new house building in the surrounding area including Uckfield and Newick. As identified in 3.3 above, the local authority does not believe this is achievable within the timeframe. Ignoring the additional 15 pupils and basing the budget on the estimated 63, the deficit in 2021/22 increases to over £95,000. In reality the deficit is likely to be somewhere between the two figures if the school picks up additional pupils without losing anymore.

While the governors latest budget submission largely addresses the school's deficit in 2019/20 and 2020/21 it does not allay the local authority's concerns about the long term viability of the school. The fundraising shown to date has been largely allocated to the current financial year with a large part of it carried forward to next financial year, 2020/21. There is no commitment for further equivalent amounts to be available for future years apart from £10,000 from the School House Trust in 2020/21. These donations / pledges appear to be largely one off in their nature with no ongoing commitment.

The school has already restructured to make savings by moving from four classes to three. The school has not identified where further savings could be made in the future.

4. Alternative Options

4.1 A number of alternative options were considered by the local authority before agreeing to consult on the proposed closure of Fletching. These included:

- **Federation.** Fletching is in partnership with Chailey St Peter's CE Primary School until August 2020 and could consider federation beyond this. Although federations are recognised as a way of enabling smaller schools to work more formally in partnerships to share costs, the governing board have not presented any plans that demonstrate how a federation would address the financial challenges faced at the school.
- **Amalgamation.** Consideration was given to amalgamating Fletching with Chailey St Peter's. This option would produce the same outcome as the current proposal to close Fletching and merge the two community areas for admissions purposes.
- **Academisation.** In undertaking their due diligence, academy trusts, both local and national, find some small schools to be financially unviable or too isolated to be included in their trust, unless they convert with other small schools as a local hub. Governors have not expressed a desire to academise. The diocese has not indicated any interest in the school becoming an academy in a diocese multi-academy trust. No other academy trust has approached the local authority about taking the school into their trust.
- **No change.** Fletching has been undersubscribed in each of the last five years and pupil numbers fall significantly short of its published admission number each year. There is very little in-area demand for places at the school. The school faces significant financial challenges, with the governors three year budget plan submitted in May 2019 showing a deficit of over £145,000 by 2021/22. Doing nothing will not address the low pupil numbers and the longer term viability of the school. Since the consultation was launched the financial position of the school has changed and this is addressed in 3.10 above.

4.2 A number of alternative options to closure have been suggested by respondents to address the challenges the school faces. These are set out below and have been categorised according to the following headings.

4.3 Those considered unrealistic, costly or outside the control of the local authority or school:

- Ask parents for a subscription type payment
- Make the school a privately funded community school

Local authority response: Fletching is a state funded primary school. It is not allowed to ask parents for a subscription type payment and cannot change its status to become a privately funded school.

- Organise a school bus to run from Uckfield to the school:

Local authority response: Running a bus from Uckfield could be costly and would potentially take children away from their local schools.

- Establish/recognise the specialist SEN provision at the school

Local authority response: The local authority recognises the strength of positive comments regarding how the school meets the needs of pupils with SEN. However, identifying and meeting the needs of learners with SEN is an expectation of all mainstream schools, as set out in the SEND Code of Practice and measured through the East Sussex Quality Mark for Inclusion (ESQMI).

Fletching is a mainstream school; it is not a special school. Although the school identifies a high percentage of pupils requiring SEN support this is a threshold the school sets for additional support. The needs of these pupils are well below the threshold for specialist provision, which requires an Education Health and Care Plan (EHCP). Unlike the threshold for additional needs which is determined at school level, the threshold for EHCPs is managed consistently across the County.

Data indicates that there is limited demand for specialist SEN provision in the area and pupil need is met through existing provision. A specialist facility would not address the challenges that the school is facing as it would not be available to the current Fletching School pupils as they are working above the threshold for that provision.

- Increase the funding for the school either from local authority resources or by lobbying central government

Local authority response: The national funding formula is determined by the government and allocated to local authorities via the Dedicated Schools Grant. The local authority does not have resources to increase funding for the school.

- Build more houses in the local area

Local authority response: The local authority is not responsible for planning house building in the local area, this falls to Wealden District Council as the local planning authority.

- Encourage more families with young children to move to the village

Local authority response: It is not the school's or local authority's role to seek to encourage families with young children to move to the village and indeed the resources required to attempt to do so would be prohibitive and likely to be of little effect.

4.4 Those considered within the local authority's and/or school's control:

- Merge the school with another local school

Local authority response: No further information was provided about the option to merge Fletching with another school so it is unclear how this would address the challenges the school faces.

- Establish a pre-school on the school site to help recruit more pupils

Local authority response: The birth rate in the village is low at less than 7 per annum and there is insufficient demand locally for a pre-school on the school site. As there is no unmet demand in the area, a new pre-school would need to attract children from other providers potentially putting those existing providers at risk.

- Reassign the community area of the school so that it is larger. One suggestion was to merge the community area with that of Newick rather than Chailey St Peter's as it is the closest neighbouring school

Local authority response: Expanding Fletching's community area is unlikely to increase the roll as there are sufficient unfilled places at the school for out of area children. In addition the increase might be at the expense of other schools which would be required to operate within a reduced community area and it is very unlikely they would agree to such a proposal.

- Shut another local school (Holy Cross)

Local authority response: Closing Holy Cross is not an option as it would reduce capacity in Uckfield when 1,000 new homes are to be built there.

4.5 Those considered within the school's / diocese's control:

- Expand the partnership / federation with more schools to share costs
- Academisation
- Seek funds from the Diocese / Church
- Consider the sale of the school house to invest in the school
- Put a road sign on the main road to advertise the school.

Local authority response: These are options for the school and diocese to consider together. The local authority's view on partnership, federation and academisation is referred to under the heading 'alternatives to closure' above. The installation of a road sign would be unlikely to increase pupil numbers; the school is advertised to parents and carers through information provided during the admissions process as is the case for all schools. A significant proportion of pupils who attend Fletching live outside the school's community area. This indicates that parents and carers who do not live in Fletching are already aware of the school; it is unlikely that the installation of a road sign would make a material difference.

5. Diocese of Chichester response

5.1 At the time of seeking Lead Member approval to begin consultation on the proposed closure of Fletching, officers from the Diocese of Chichester agreed that this was an appropriate action to take. The Diocesan Board of Education submitted a response to the consultation which *'acknowledges the challenges that the school faces in terms of the high level of vacant places and significant challenges to the school's viability...the Board understands that [the governors] are developing a plan to address the challenges presented by their immediate financial profile...the Board ask that this plan is scrutinised carefully to*

explore its potential to give the school a chance to demonstrate future viability...If it is obvious that this plan does not present an option for viability, then we acknowledge that the next stage of the process will need to be considered'.

6. Area review criteria

6.1 The criteria used during the area reviews to identify schools potentially at risk included:

- The quality of provision and outcomes achieved for pupils
- School leadership
- Federations and collaborations
- Financial viability
- The level of surplus places in an area / school
- The location of schools in relation to local pupil numbers
- Parental preference for schools
- Premises

6.2 The key factors relating to Fletching were its predicted ongoing budget deficit, the high number of surplus places at the school, and its location in relation to current and projected local pupil numbers.

6.3 Surplus places remain high and there is a lack of demand locally for places at the school. The governors remain of the view that the school will attract pupils from outside their local area who might otherwise have attended other schools. While they are unable to provide any evidence to support this aspiration they have largely maintained their school roll during the consultation process.

6.4 The budget position for this year and next year has improved. The substantial PTA fundraising effort has allowed the school to avoid a deficit for 2019/20 and significantly improves the 2020/21 year end forecast. However, though comparatively small, the school is still forecasting a deficit in 2020/21 and spending exceeds sustainable income sources year on year. The majority of the fundraising appears to be one off in nature with no demonstrable ongoing commitment beyond 2019/20. The school has already restructured to three classes to achieve budget savings, further restructuring is arguably not possible without impacting on the quality of education being provided.

7. Conclusion and reasons for recommendations

7.1 The consultation responses overwhelmingly object to the proposed closure; there is a clear strength of feeling that the impact on current pupils and the local community would be significant. Substantial fundraising has been undertaken by the community which largely addresses the school's predicated budget deficit in 2019/20 and 2020/21. Pupil numbers at the school have largely been maintained despite the consultation, governors believe that pupil numbers will begin to increase in the coming years as a result of house building in the area, notably in Uckfield.

7.2 Nonetheless, the local authority remains of the view that the school continues to be vulnerable, its budget deficit has only been addressed on a short-term basis through one-off funding and concern remains about the lack of any ongoing committed funding to support the school beyond next financial year. Current forecasts for the school do not suggest it will attract many more pupils from out of area than it has in the past. In-area demand for places remains low.

7.3 Despite this unpromising outlook and taking account of the improved short term budget position, the fact that pupil numbers at the school have largely been maintained and the Diocese of Chichester's position, the local authority recommends to the Lead Member that the consultation on closure is halted and the school remains open.

7.4 In taking this position the local authority strongly recommends that the governing board should continue to address the challenge in relation to the school's budget and fundraising and explore sustainable strategies to attract more pupils to the school. It also recommends that the Diocese of Chichester considers the actions it can take to swiftly and proactively address the local authority's concerns about the fragility of the school, in particular how it might support the school to explore other options, for example, academisation.

7.5 Importantly, the position has not changed with regard to the number of pupils in the surrounding area and there is a risk that while Fletching may succeed to grow its roll over time the cost could be felt by other local schools. As the majority of schools in the surrounding area are Church of England Diocese schools the Diocese might want to consider how it will proactively develop plans to mitigate this risk.

7.6 The consultation outcomes support the local authority's decision to consult on the closure of Fletching. No new information has been made available to challenge the criteria for consultation on closure; that is the ongoing, structural budget deficit, high surplus places and location in relation to current and projected local pupil numbers. It is regrettable that the process has also not brought forward any medium to long term solutions to these challenges. However the consultation process has enabled the governors to create a short-term solution to the challenges at the school which they consider could provide the opportunity to enable the school to become viable in the longer term. The local authority will continue to closely monitor the local area for vulnerabilities that arise from surplus places, should any school(s) show signs of such vulnerability in the future a review of the area may be initiated.

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LOCAL MEMBERS
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APPENDICES

Appendix 1 – Consultation document
Appendix 2 – Q&A document
Appendix 3 – Equality Impact Assessment
Appendix 4 – Local authority support available for mental health and emotional wellbeing
Appendix 5 – Community Impact Assessment
Appendix 6 – Presumption report