



## RESPONSE FROM TROTTON WITH CHITHURST PARISH COUNCIL TO THE WSCC CONSULTATION ON “PROPOSED REORGANISATION OF RURAL AND SMALL SCHOOLS IN WEST SUSSEX”

**Responding organisation:** Trotton with Chithurst parish council, Steps, Trotton, W Sussex, GU31 5EP  
**Responding as:** Parish council representing residents within Stedham catchment area

### 1 Local background

- 1.1 We are one of the two parish councils within the catchment area of Stedham primary school (the other is Stedham with Iping).
- 1.2 Stedham Primary is 1.4 miles from the nearest boundary of our parish; Rogate C of E primary school is 1.2 miles from our nearest boundary, and Rake, Harting, Hollycombe, Compton, Midhurst and Easebourne primaries are all within 10 miles.
- 1.3 Stedham and Hollycombe are the only two of these schools that are not C of E “voluntary controlled schools”.
- 1.4 We have not been able to obtain figures on how many children from our parish attend each of the local primary schools and, if this consultation leads to any formal consultations on school closures or reorganisations, we will ask for this information (by FOI request if necessary) in order to assess the importance of the changes to our residents. We believe, however, that the numbers of our residents going to Stedham, Rogate and Harting schools are approximately equal. We also have past pupils and parents, current or recent employees, volunteers and/or governors of at all 3 schools living in the parish.
- 1.5 We support the key elements of the WSCC “School effectiveness strategy” (including the school organisation strategy) and particularly the aim to “secure the very best start in life for all children and young people in” [our parish]. We also understand that this requires that “there should be sufficient places available in schools to support parental preference whilst avoiding an excess of surplus capacity”
- 1.6 We support the core aim of the school organisation strategy to ensure a ‘strong model of sustainable education for all types of school’ and we strongly believe that a key element of parental preference is the need for this model to include the offer of small, rural schools, rather than aggregation into larger schools. Small schools offer a different set of values and cultures than their larger peers, and one that is particularly prized by people that live in areas like ours.
- 1.7 Small schools can also be important hubs of community life and activity, and we would strongly resist any move to remove this option for parents living in our parish.

### 2 The consultation process

- 2.1 This consultation comes less than two years after the one to double the size of Easebourne school. We, and many others, strongly resisted that proposal, not because we disagree on the need to expand that school (we accept that may be necessary at some stage) but because WSCC did not give enough information to allow us to properly assess the proposal or to justify its proposed timing.
- 2.2 It now seems that WSCC learned little from that experience:
  - 2.2.1 This consultation exercise was launched, only a few days before the end of the summer term, giving schools little time to agree and send letters to parents.
  - 2.2.2 The timing of the consultation is appalling: it was launched just before the start of the period in which parents have to make their selections for next September, and the decisions will not be known until close to the end of that period. In the meantime, the 5 schools are shown on the WSCC website admissions pages as being under consultation. This exposes parents to unnecessary uncertainty over an important decision, and the schools to almost certain reductions in admissions for next year.

- 2.2.3 We are a parish council within the catchment area of Stedham Primary school, and therefore consider ourselves to have an interest in this consultation. However, we have received no direct communication from the county council, apart from a short article in the “WSCC E-Newsletter October 2019”, which appeared to be aimed more at asking us to encourage individual residents to respond. A regular newsletter is no substitute for a direct letter / email.
- 2.2.4 We received no invitation to any of the public meetings nor requests for views before the public consultation started. Given that we would be a statutory consultee if this survey resulted in a recommendation to close Stedham Primary, we consider this to be a dereliction of WSCC’s duty.
- 2.2.5 The launch was extensively covered in the media as being about the closure of the schools, seriously damaging their recruitment and retention of pupils – and this was the fault of bad communication by the CC.
- 2.2.6 According to the WSCC select committee, the information given in the consultation papers, which were made public on the launch of the consultation, was seriously inaccurate and/or misleading.
- 2.2.7 As in the Easebourne consultation, the information given is woefully inadequate to enable those outside the education system (eg parents and local communities) to assess the schools and answer the questions – see next section.

### 3 The information provided in the consultation papers

- 3.1 The papers state that an impact assessment was done against the criteria given in the WSCC school effectiveness strategy. However, the table given to summarise the impact assessment does not give enough information for us to make any reasonable judgements. For example, it is not obvious to us why proportions of pupils coming from outside the catchment area should be considered a weakness: if parental choice is a guiding principle (as the strategy suggests) the ability of schools to attract pupils from outside their catchment area would appear to be a strength – if they are there by parental selection, but we are not given information on parental selection!
- 3.2 No information is given to explain why these 5 schools were chosen from the 25 which were considered to be at risk and, without comparable data for other local schools, it is impossible to assess these schools properly. For example, we can see why the % of pupils that attend a school from its own catchment area should be considered important (again, if they are there by parental selection) – because it indicates community support – but, without knowing how these numbers compare with other local schools, the number is meaningless, and without being given current numbers of our own children currently attending each school, the statistics are irrelevant to us.
- 3.3 Indeed, there is no information at all given on local context – eg we are given no information on overall school places required over coming years, or what the LA’s plans are for the others – eg Easebourne – which would clearly affect pupil numbers at the local schools, and therefore their financial viability. For parish councils to be able to comment in any detail, we would need to see admissions data for all pupils at state primary schools from our parish, and this is not given.
- 3.4 There are many other criticisms we could make of the information in the papers but suffice it to say that the information is so inaccurate, misleading and incomplete that we consider the entire exercise invalid.

### 4 Our catchment school: Stedham

- 1 Do you agree or disagree this school secures the highest quality educational provision for all children and young people?  
 Response: Don’t know – the information given is totally inadequate: all local schools have ‘Good’ ratings from Ofsted so Stedham seems as good as the others.
- 2 How much do you agree this school is centred on the needs of the children and learners?  
 Response: Don’t know – no information at all is given to address this question. If parents are choosing to come to the school from outside the catchment area, we would assume that they believe it is centred on their needs- but no information is given on whether parents are choosing, or being forced, to take their children to the school.
- 3 In your opinion, would you agree or disagree this school is financially viable?  
 Response: Don’t know - again the information given is wholly inadequate. School income depends mainly on pupil numbers but projections for the whole area and for each local school are not given – and Stedham governors disagree with the projections for their school. This question would also need to take into account the costs (and environmental impact) of extra transport if children had to be transported to other schools.
- 4 What do you consider to be the best option for your school?  
 Response: Don’t know - again, nowhere near enough information is given to enable us to assess the best option.

## 5 General comments

We would argue that:

- It is not possible for us to assess the impact of any changes to the schools without much more complete information;
- Rural village schools can be critically important to their local communities and we were given no information about community impact;
- Much more strategic work would be required before any schools could be properly assessed in their local contexts;

Overall, therefore, we believe the timing of this consultation, the information provided and the questions asked were all appalling, creating unnecessary damage to the schools. We would urge the cabinet member:

- Should not allow any forced changes to any of the schools on the basis of this consultation;
- To force WSCC to do proper research on parental selection criteria (how do parents choose schools, why are some of them travelling well outside catchment areas, etc) BEFORE doing any further assessments of schools for this kind of review.
- To then consult schools (headteachers & governors) by area first – describing the problem and giving local data about schools to come up with viable comparative options.