

Ridgmont Lower School

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**Governor Response to the CBC consultation regarding the future of Ridgmont School.**

Having now received the Ofsted Report from our recent inspection, governors are finally able to speak publicly about the situation we find ourselves in. Until now, we have not been free to comment on the outcome of the inspection, nor the many avenues we have been pursuing to secure the future of the school. It has been immensely frustrating for us all, particularly as many in the community appear to have formed the impression that we do not care and have not been working hard enough to save the school. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Since 2019, Mrs Jakes and the governors have been assiduously working towards securing the future of the school. Before the pandemic, the Local Authority had plans for our area to become two-tier with a new primary school to accommodate all pupils from Woburn, Husborne Crawley and Ridgmont Lower Schools, with the appointment of one Headteacher. Janine Cox, our Headteacher at the time, retired and there was little prospect of attracting a new Headteacher who could not be certain of a job when the proposed new school opened. Mrs Jakes agreed to act as Interim Headteacher until the new school was built, after which she wished to return to classroom teaching. It is testament to her dedication and commitment to the school that she has continued to serve as our Headteacher during the subsequent challenges, not least of which was a global pandemic.

Unfortunately, the problems presented by the local pyramid of schools were complex and time-consuming. Fulbrook had a lengthy battle over its future designation and in the meantime the site for the new school was refused planning permission, as were other proposed sites. Ridgmont asked for a feasibility study to see if our site could be expanded to become a primary school, which was duly carried out, but these proposals were also refused by the planning committee. We worked towards federating with Husborne Crawley to become a two-site school, but they decided they did not wish to pursue this option. CBC tried to find another school to federate with us, but they were unsuccessful. Rumours circulated by a local councillor, from a neighbouring ward, that the school was closing did not help our cause.

Until this year, the school managed to maintain a balanced budget, but unfortunately it came at the cost of investment in resources and time for staff to carry out their many additional responsibilities. Mrs Jakes has had an increased teaching commitment alongside her strategic role of trying to implement and monitor improvements and take on the day-to-day management, including the time-consuming and ongoing fight to secure the future of the school. The qualified teaching staff refused their pay rise to help the budget, such was their commitment to the school.

Undoubtedly the uncertainty surrounding the future of the school has been a major factor in parental decisions to remove their children, but they have also been understandably concerned about restricted social groups and the structure of teaching groups enforced by the budget constraints.

Although the school receives a lump sum from the LA given to all small schools, most of the funding comes from the AWPU, (Age-Weighted Pupil Unit), an amount paid per pupil each year. When we realised that there would be only eleven pupils on role this September, Governors had no option but to apply for a deficit budget, knowing that the income would not meet the school's already tightened expenditure. However, the school could not prepare the required plan which would show how the loan for the deficit would be repaid in the coming years. For this reason, the school was obliged to inform the LA that we could no longer remain viable. CBC has more small rural schools than most local authorities which are a financial drain on their limited resources and it simply cannot afford to subsidize them if they are not viable.

However, Ridgmont is designated as a 'small rural school' by the DfE and there is a presumption against closing such schools. Nevertheless, CBC agreed to carry out a consultation about the future of the school, recognising our financial situation, but it does make this process and decision more complex.

We would have liked to share all this information with parents and the community, but we were not allowed to inform anyone of our request or their decision, even our own staff! You will be aware that this was made so much more difficult when CBC themselves disclosed the information early.

Ridgmont seems to have been in the eye of a perfect storm for several years, but throughout this time Mrs Jakes, the staff and governors have fought for the school, but we have been powerless to make strategic decisions because of the uncertainty. Marketing a school under these constraints was difficult; we also have a village with a by-pass, very few families with children living in the catchment area, and some of those who do have elected to take their children elsewhere.

Whilst we have all been heartened by the response of the village community to the prospect of our school closure, the reality is that without the pupils, we cannot continue.



Christine Sweetnam

Chair of Governors
Ridgmont Lower School