



## **Statutory proposal for the closure of Wareside Church of England (C of E) Primary School**

### **Contact details**

Proposal, published by Hertfordshire County Council, County Hall, Pegs Lane, Hertford SG13 8DF, to discontinue:

Wareside C of E Primary School (“the School”), Reeves Green, Wareside, Ware SG12 7QR on 31 August 2022.

Wareside C of E Primary School is a 3-11 Church of England, Voluntary Controlled (VC) primary school situated in East Hertfordshire near Ware.

### **Implementation**

It is proposed to close the School on 31 August 2022.

### **Reason for closure**

The main factors leading to the closure proposal are low and falling pupil numbers impacting on the School’s financial viability and consequent ability to sustain a high-quality education for pupils.

The School is only about a third full, with 18 children on roll as at the beginning of the autumn term in September 2021; the lowest number of pupils of any maintained primary school in Hertfordshire. The number of pupils attending the school has fallen each year from 2018, when it had 46 pupils. It has surplus places in all year groups with currently no pupils in Nursery, Reception or Year 4.

For September 2021, of the three families living in Wareside seeking a Reception place; none expressed a preference for a place at Wareside Primary School. Historically, about two thirds of pupils from the local community for whom Wareside was their closest school, chose schools elsewhere, outside the village.

Schools are mainly funded by an amount of money for each child attending the school. Low pupil numbers make it challenging for schools to operate within budget. Managing a school and maintaining high-quality provision with quality teaching and learning can be difficult on a low budget.

Wareside Primary School is in financial difficulty and currently has a cumulative forecast deficit for the end of the 2022/23 year of just over £80,000. With the average level of funding/expenditure across Hertfordshire for a primary aged pupil being £4,560; the financial situation at the School means that the forecast expenditure per pupil at the School is around four times as great as the average.

Continued low pupil numbers mean the School will be unable to return to a balanced budget and while it may be possible to identify some cost savings through efficiency, the School would not be able to achieve the scale of saving necessary without also cutting back even further on staff, which would be unacceptable in terms of the impact on education quality.

With the School's low pupil numbers, it currently organises its pupils in two classes, one class with Year 1 and Year 2 pupils and a second class with Year 3, Year 5 and Year 6 pupils. Achieving good educational outcomes from teaching such a wide range of age groups (Year 3 to Year 6) in one class, presents significant challenges. Even though the staff at the School do their best for the pupils, the breadth of need in each class creates difficulties for leaders and teachers to plan the School's curriculum so that it is coherent and appropriately sequenced to meet the pupils' needs. While we would support schools with some of these challenges, local demand is low with few parents choosing to send their children to the School.

In addition, the options for leadership to consistently improve and maintain the quality of education are reduced, which in turn limits opportunities for staff professional development. This further impacts on the educational standards and quality of education for the pupils at the School.

There is not expected to be any growth in demand from the local area with no significant number of new homes proposed to be built within the village (less than 10 have been built in the village in the last five years). New housing proposed in the wider area, such as in the neighbouring town of Ware, has existing schools with vacancies closer and new schools planned within the large strategic development to the north of Ware.

Based on these factors and despite the best efforts of governors, staff and the support of the local authority and the Diocese of St Albans, the county council is publishing this statutory proposal for closure of Wareside C of E Primary School effective from 31 August 2022.

### **Pupil numbers and admissions**

There were 18 pupils on roll at the School as of the beginning of the autumn term in September 2021 (data source: autumn 2021 School Census), all of whom are pupils of mainstream school age with no nursery-aged pupils (see following table).

Nursery	Reception	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4	Year 5	Year 6	Total
0	0	3	3	5	0	3	4	18

One Year 6 child has joined the school since this autumn census, bringing current pupil numbers on roll across the school to 19.

The School's age range is 3-11 years, and provision is available for boys and girls. There is no boarding provision. The School has seven children on roll with SEND which includes two with education, health and care (EHC) plans, and another two in the process of assessment for EHC plans. Total pupil numbers are significantly lower

than the capacity of the School, which is 56, based on the current Published Admission Number (PAN) of 8.

### **Displaced pupils**

Should the decision be taken to close the School, all pupils on roll at Wareside C of E Primary School at the time of closure would be offered a place at Widford School. Widford is the next nearest primary school and is in the neighbouring rural settlement to Wareside, 1.9 miles away by road. It has the capacity to accommodate all of the pupils currently on roll at Wareside C of E Primary School and the two schools are currently working together to ensure a smooth transition should the decision to close be confirmed.

Alternatively, parents/carers who do not wish to take up the offer of a place at Widford School will be able to apply for a place at another school with a vacancy, via the county council's in-year application process. Some parents who chose a place at Wareside C of E Primary School based on faith may wish to continue a faith education. There are currently spaces available in schools in the surrounding area, including at alternative faith-based schools. Although admission to alternative schools will depend upon vacancies at that time, it is proposed to support families through the process by holding surgeries at the School in April 2022 with admissions officers available to support families in completing in-year applications.

All existing pupils attending the School at the time of closure who live within the settlement of Wareside will be entitled to transport to Widford School. Entitlement to alternative schools will be assessed on an individual basis against the eligibility criteria.

This is a mainstream school, and not a special school that is reserved for providing to pupils with special educational needs and disability (SEND). However, SEND specialists will work with the school to ensure that those children with an education health and care (EHC) plan will have that EHC plan reviewed, and a new school named.

### **Impact on the community**

While the impact on the wider community is an important consideration, the key consideration is to determine whether the proposal is in the best interests of children who are educated at the School.

Notwithstanding this, it is recognised that the closure of the school in Wareside will result in the loss of school provision in the village.

The School is not used by any community groups or for community use. Wareside has a village hall and a church which are more frequently used, but there is little community activity in the village. There is a breakfast club run at the School from 8am each morning and after-school activities for pupils, and the school offers nursery places although, as a result of low demand, it currently has no nursery pupils.

The ownership of the land is complex as it involves both the county council and the Diocese of St Albans. A decision on the disposal of the land has not been taken yet and will not be taken until a final decision on the closure is made.

During the public consultation, concern was expressed over the loss of Christian-based education in the village. There are other faith schools across the area which currently have vacancies and would be able to offer places should families of pupils currently attending the School wish to seek a place in a faith school. Furthermore, as outlined above, the next nearest primary school in Widford has sufficient capacity to accommodate all pupils at Wareside C of E Primary School should they wish to take up the offer of a place there.

The impact of the loss of the school on the community has been carefully considered in light of the presumption against the closure of rural schools and been weighed up against minimal local demand for school places and the sustainability of delivering quality education and financial viability into the future.

### **Rural primary schools**

Officers at Hertfordshire County Council have considered section 15(4) of the Education and Inspections Act 2006 and do not believe there are any factors which support the school remaining open.

In bringing forward this proposal, the county council has taken account of the Government's guidance on the presumption against the closure of rural schools. The guidance does not preclude closure but does require proposers to demonstrate that they have considered all available alternatives to closure and the impact it will have on the local community and other schools.

Wareside C of E Primary school is designated as a small rural school under the Designation of Rural Primary Schools (England) Order and so, in line with that guidance, officers have included consideration of:

- alternatives to closure including, federation with another local school, conversion to academy status and joining a multi-academy trust
- the scope for an extended school to provide local community services and facilities e.g., child-care facilities, family and adult learning, healthcare, community internet access etc.
- transport implications i.e., the availability, and likely cost of transport to other schools and sustainability issues
- the size of the School and whether it puts the children at an educational disadvantage e.g., in terms of breadth of curriculum or resources available
- the overall and long-term impact on the local community of the closure of the village school and of the loss of the building as a community facility
- wider school organisation and capacity of good schools in the area to accommodate displaced pupils

Consideration of these points is summarised in appendix 3 (p32) of the [report for Cabinet of 14 December 2021](#)<sup>1</sup>.

### **Balance of denominational provision**

Closure of Wareside C of E Primary School will mean the loss of Christian-based education in the village. In light of the school being undersubscribed, to what degree parental choice for a place at the School is based on faith, is not known.

However, there are other C of E faith schools across the area which currently have vacancies and would be able to offer places should families of pupils currently attending the School wish to seek a place in a faith school. Although the number and pattern of vacancies in faith provision cannot be foreseen at the point of closure, should that decision be taken, officers will work closely with families to complete in-year applications for alternative places.

Table showing the nearest 10 Church of England primary schools to Wareside C of E Primary School:

<b>Order</b>	<b>DfE</b>	<b>School</b>	<b>School Type</b>	<b>Distance (m) Straight Line Distance</b>
1	3394	Christ Church (C of E) VA Primary & Nursery (Ware)	Voluntary Aided	3313
2	3040	St Andrew's C of E (V C) Primary (Stanstead Abbotts)	Voluntary Controlled	3560
3	3334	St John The Baptist VA C of E Primary School (Great Amwell)	Voluntary Aided	3734
4	3041	Thundridge Primary School	Voluntary Controlled	3844
5	3043	St Catherine's (C of E) Primary School (Ware)	Voluntary Controlled	4342
6	3366	Puller Memorial C of E Voluntary Aided Primary School (High Cross)	Voluntary Aided	4362
7	3353	St Andrew's C of E Primary and Nursery (Much Hadham)	Voluntary Aided	5053
8	3008	Tonwell St Mary's C of E Primary School	Voluntary Controlled	6132
9	3978	St Catherine's Hoddesdon VC CE Primary School	Voluntary Controlled	6710
10	3026	High Wych C of E Primary School	Voluntary Controlled	7187

Officers from both the county council and the Diocese of St Albans have explored alternative options to closure which have included the opportunity for the School joining a Multi-Academy Trust (MAT) or federating with other schools. Although

<sup>1</sup> <https://democracy.hertfordshire.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=146&MId=4737&Ver=4>

joining a MAT or federation could offer benefits in terms of economies of scale, collaboration across schools, shared learning and resources etc., both the Diocese and county council officers consider it unlikely that a trust would, through its due diligence, consider the school viable into the future. The county council directly approached the Diocesan Multi-Academy Trust about the potential of the School joining the trust, however with its very low pupil numbers and its geographical location remote from other trust schools, it did not feel able to support the School.

The Diocese of St Albans Board of Education responded to the initial public consultation supporting the consultation on the school's future but seeking further clarification on the process and due diligence before it is able to fully support a decision to close.

### **Maintained nursery schools**

Not applicable

### **Sixth form provision**

Not applicable

### **Special educational needs provision**

The existing provision at Wareside C of E Primary School is not reserved for pupils with special educational needs.

### **Travel**

Although most families in Wareside already travel to schools further afield which are not within walking distance, it is recognised that should the School close, children living in the village in the future would have to travel out of the village for a school place.

Should the decision be taken to close the School, all existing pupils attending at the time of closure and living within the settlement will be entitled to transport to Widford Primary School, which will remove the need for parents to drive and thereby reduce the environmental impact. Alternatively, families would be supported through an in-year application process to apply for another place at a school with a vacancy. Home to school transport would be available for families based on eligibility, determined in line with the county council's current home to school transport policy and procedures based on each child's home address and individual circumstances.

Approximately half of the pupils attending the School are travelling from outside of the village currently. If these pupils were to attend a school local to their home address where they could walk or cycle, this would have a positive impact on sustainability and the environment.

**Table showing the five closest primary schools to Wareside C of E Primary School (based on distance by road):**

School name	PAN 2021	Approx. distance (miles)
Widford School	8	1.8
Christ Church (C of E) VA Primary School (Ware)	45	2.6
Larkspur Primary Academy (Ware)	30	2.9
Priors Wood Primary School (Ware)	30	2.9
Sacred Heart RC Primary School (Ware)	30	2.9

PAN = Published Admission Number

Other environmental considerations have been taken within the Sustainable Hertfordshire Impact Assessment, in appendix 5 (p42) of the [report for Cabinet of 14 December 2021](#).

**Procedure for making representations (objections and comments)**

Anyone can provide comments or objections, but you need to ensure that they are received by Hertfordshire County Council by Tuesday 1 February 2022 by sending them by post, marked for the attention of Wareside C of E Primary School, to: Freepost RTHH-LXSL-BYYR, Hertfordshire County Council, Education Department, County Hall, Hertford, SG13 8DF, or by email to:

[education.planning@hertfordshire.gov.uk](mailto:education.planning@hertfordshire.gov.uk)

**Consultation**

The decision to consult on the closure of the School was taken by Cabinet on 20 September 2021. A consultation letter (appendix 2 (p26) of the [report for Cabinet of 14 December 2021](#)) was sent to all parents/carers of children on roll at the School, governors and staff at the School as well as to all schools in the local area, and other statutory consultees. Copies of the consultation letter were also sent to the following stakeholders:

- a) All residents of Wareside Civil Parish;
- b) Local MP, county councillors, district councillors, parish and town councils and local authority Chief Executives;
- c) Trade Union representatives;
- d) Church Diocese representatives;
- e) NHS representatives;
- f) Parent Governor representatives;
- g) Local mainstream schools in Hertfordshire;
- h) Local pre-schools, playgroups, children’s centres, toddler groups and day nurseries (within 1-mile radius of the School);
- i) Libraries and Citizen’s Advice Bureaux;

- j) Headteacher Forums;
- k) Herts Parent Carer Involvement (HPCI);
- l) Local Family Centres;
- m) Selected officers working for Hertfordshire County Council and Herts For Learning (HfL).

Public consultation on this proposal started on 30 September 2021 and ended on 3 November 2021. A public meeting was held at the School on the evening of 13 October 2021 and was attended by 37 members of the public.