Notes from the meeting held at
Chiltern Edge School on Wednesday 3 May 2017
Regarding the
Consultation into the future of
Chiltern Edge School, Sonning Common

The Panel
Roy Leach (RL) Strategic Lead for Education Sufficiency OCC
Christine Malone (CM) Strategic Lead for Education Quality OCC
Barbara Chillman (BC) Service Manager; Pupil Place Planning OCC
Neil Darlington (ND) Admissions and Transport Manager OCC
Gill Dunlop (GD) Service Manager RBC
Emily Nicholls (EN) Schools Admissions Manager RBC

Oxfordshire County Council (OCC)
Reading Borough Council (RBC)

The Briefing took the form of three separate meetings to different groups of the parent body. Meeting one was for prospective parents; meeting two for parents whose children are currently attending the school in years seven and eight and meeting three for parents whose children are currently attending the school in years nine, ten and eleven.

Meeting One opened at 5.34pm

Pauline Kelly, deputy Head teacher at Chiltern Edge welcomed parents to the meeting and introduced Julie Tridgell, who was appointed as Chair of the Interim Executive Board at Chiltern Edge school (CE) on Tuesday 2 May. Parents were advised by RL that Cllr David Bartholomew was also in attendance but unable to speak due to rules of purdah. The meeting was chaired by RL and began with introductions from the panel.

Roy Leach introduced himself noting his responsibilities cover many areas of education in Oxfordshire. He advised this meeting for parents is to enable OCC to impart information, but mainly to invite questions and ensure all relevant information and facts regarding the consultation process are available.

Barbara Chillman introduced herself as Service Manager for Pupil Place Planning at OCC, and advised that her primary reason for being present on the panel is as lead officer for the Consultation. BC advised those present that the meeting would not cover the option of the school becoming an academy as this process is not within OCC’s remit; finding a Sponsor Academy is undertaken by the Regional Schools Commissioner (RSC). The process of finding a suitable sponsor runs in parallel to the consultation to gather information about the possibilities of closure. The role of OCC within the process is to gather information to consider whether to propose a recommendation for closure and what it should contain. A proposal for closure has not yet been determined. The consultation process runs for seven weeks and at the end of which OCC determine whether to propose closure. Should a closure notice be published on 24 June, a four week period of formal consultation then follows. At this stage a full picture of where pupils of Chiltern Edge would be placed will be available. BC urged parents to respond to both this initial consultation and the formal four week consultation (should it arise) noting that comments are not automatically transferred as they are two different processes. Responses can be made online, via email or in writing. A final decision will be published on 19 September and until this time a proposal for closure can still be rejected. Throughout this period the RSC will investigate Sponsored Academy options.
Christine Malone introduced herself as Strategic Lead for Education Quality at OCC. She advised that when a school is placed in Special Measures following an OFSTED report it is her responsibility to work with the school regarding the steps towards school improvement; in this case the implementation of the IEB.

Neil Darlington introduced himself as Admissions and Transport Manager at OCC. He advised parents that whilst the option to consider alternative schools is always available, OCC is not encouraging parents to do this at this time as to do so may undermine the future of CE. One hundred and fifty one pupils are due to join the school in September 2017 and no alternative arrangements are in place; there are no places for admission into year seven at Gillots or Langtree and no immediate plans in place to increase their admissions numbers. Options to increase pupil numbers at these schools will be considered during the consultation process. Should parents wish to consider alternative schools, they should contact the admissions teams in either RBC or OCC – dependent on where the school they wish to go to is located.

Gill Dunlop introduced herself as Service Manager at RBC. She advised that RBC are not encouraging active removal of children from CE at this time as there is no assumption that CE is closing, however information is available on the RBC website for parents who wish to consider their options. Parents were invited to contact RBC with their comments to enable their views to be incorporated into a full RBC response to the consultation.

Emily Nicholls introduced herself as Schools Admissions Manager at RBC. Parents were advised that the admissions process continues to run in accordance with the normal procedure and if parents are seeking an alternative school place, representation must be made to the local authority where the school they wish to move to is located. Places will be allocated in accordance with the standard over-subscription criteria; places cannot be held for pupils from Chiltern Edge. GD confirmed that they are liaising with Reading schools to understand options available in the event that CE closes.

**RL invited questions**

**Q:** In view of the literature available regarding closure, it seems extraordinary that you’re not assuming closure is inevitable. What can we make of this as parents? What about the RSC and the Sponsored Academy process?

**A:** It is simply a separation of responsibilities. OCC have responsibility for the consultation and are here today to ascertain if there is scope for closure. The RSC is responsible for seeking a sponsor and today issued an Academy Order which is the formal trigger for seeking a sponsor. In the event that a sponsor is found, OCC are responsible for the process of converting the school to a Sponsored Academy. (BC)

**Q:** What are your comments about possible closure, given the assumption against the closure of rural schools?

**A:** There has been a long-standing presumption against the closure of rural schools. The option is only now being discussed explicitly because of the legal process activated in the event that a school is given an *inadequate* judgement by OFSTED and put in Special Measures. (RL)

**Q:** What about the safeguards in place against the closure of rural schools?

**A:** OCC is required to undertake impact assessment including any detrimental impact on specific groups; a Social and Community Impact Assessment will take place. The benefits of closure versus the disbenefits will be considered as part of the consultation process.

**Q:** RBC, if Chiltern Edge closes it is not acceptable to send our children across the river to go to school. Where are they going to go?

**A:** We are working with all local schools however is has been determined that there is not sufficient places at Highdown for all children affected by a CE closure. All options are being considered and RBC will be making
Q: Parents are panicking. How are you managing the panic?
A: We are not pre-judging the process. A continued interest list in alternative schools is growing and arrangements have been put in place to ensure that the inevitable increase in enquiries can be responded to. We expect parents to worry, but are not encouraging children to move before any decision has been made as we do not want to damage CE’s future. Arrangements to accommodate children will be put in place in the event of closure and will be done in conjunction with RBC. (ND)

Q: What is required to fix the situation to avoid closure at all and to get the school out of Special Measures?
A: The legal position is that there are only two options available; consultation on closure or conversion to a Sponsored Academy. However there is an inspection report with recommendations and OCC takes its responsibility to the children seriously. We are therefore funding and supporting additional support by paying for the chair of the IEB for one day a week to support governance as well as assisting the school leaders by commissioning other head teachers to provide support and guidance. (CM)

Q: If a decision to close is due to be made by 19 September 2017, what about the children who start at CE in September 2017?
A: If closure takes effect it will be at the end of a full academic year therefore those starting in September 2017 would have one full year in school; there would be plans for a managed transfer of these children. At present there are not sufficient places for all 500 CE children in alternative schools. Prior to any closure there will be detailed planning to identify schools that could take additional pupils. This may require investment of capital funds to extend buildings in alternative schools. Places for September 2017 are still there. (RL)

Q: How does the date of 19 September 2017 impact any process or decision of the RSC?
A: The consultation timetable has been driven by a recommendation from other local authorities to proceed as quickly as possible to minimise uncertainty. OCC are focused on making a decision as quickly as possible. The government sets out guidance for the consultation process, stipulating an initial 6 week informal consultation, followed by a formal four week consultation; both of which must avoid school holidays. A decision is required within two months of the consultation closure. The timetable has therefore been driven by marrying speed to ensure certainty with the statutory regulations in place. There was also a desire to make a decision prior to the deadlines for September 2018 admissions. There is no direct relationship between this process and the process being taken by the RSC which runs in parallel. (BC)

Q: You say that there are plans to build the school up; does that mean money is there to invest in improvement? Can we use the money from the sale of the school playing fields to build the school back up again? The school is £500,000 in debt. How can that be dealt with?
A: Legally, any money received from sale of land can only be reinvested in the school’s capital fund, not its revenue funds. Therefore there is no scope to use the money towards payment of accumulated debt or teachers. Although money from the sale of land could be spent to improve the physical environment, this would not begin to improve the issues identified in the OFSTED report. (RL)
A: OCC pays for the Chair of the IEB and for other head teachers to assist current school leaders; any further investment in school improvement must come from the school’s own budget. (CM)

Q: If there’s no money, how are you going to bring the school up to standard? Is closure the only option?
A: Bringing the school up to standard is clearly a significant challenge and closure is an option. The school has overspent in year and the over spend cannot continue. Getting schools out of Special Measures is expensive and achieved by bringing in more expertise and investing in resources. There is a very real
challenge in bringing the school up to standard with the funds available. However, the IEB has been put in place and there is confidence that the work undertaken will make efforts to improve as much as possible. (RL)

Q: Who would the Academy Sponsor be? If a sponsor is found is closure off the table?
A: It is not the role of OCC to find a sponsor; this is the role of the RSC. OCC is able to comment and make recommendations to the RSC but it puts a sponsor in place. If a sponsor is found in a timely manner, it is the best route as we recognise that closure of the school is not desirable, however identifying an appropriate sponsor is out of OCC’s hands. We have experience of a school that has been in Special Measures for over a year and a sponsor has still not been found. OCC will not wait indefinitely as this will have a detrimental impact of the education of the children. (RL)

Q: Who is challenging or who can challenge the OFSTED report?
A: Prior to a report being published it goes to school leaders for fact checking, and this did occur in this instance. There is no process to challenge the judgement of the inspectors once a report has been published. A county council does not have a role in challenging the outcome of a report. (CM)

Q: The consultation process is significantly damaging the school’s reputation. For a closure to be viable, you need to be able to offer alternative places. Your own paperwork suggests there are no viable options, so why continue with the process?
A: There are not 500 spare places in alternative schools at the current time either in Oxfordshire or Reading, however we are not saying it is not possible to create additional places. With the appropriate capital investment, there may be scope to create additional places in other local schools. For example, Gillots have a yearly additional intake of 180 pupils, however in the current years 10 and 11 there is a whole form of entry fewer pupils. With appropriate capital investment, additional capacity may be created here. Some expansion may also be possible in Reading. The earliest possible closure has been determined as September 2018 to allow time for these considerations to be made and a well-managed transfer of pupils coordinated. There had been no planning for the closure of Chiltern Edge prior to the publication of the OFSTED report so as yet there has been no formal consideration of the alternatives. This is now occurring as part of the consultation process. The effects of closure must be considered. At the moment there are not enough places; maybe in the future there could be. (RL)

Q: We know there is an additional bulge year coming through and more houses being built locally, it doesn’t seem to make sense.
A: Highdown is not the only school being considered. Responses from parents indicating their preferences are required to help inform the considerations. Parents are encourage to respond to RBC. (EN)
A: Within the Sonning Common area, numbers are fairly stable. There is a bulge in Henley and Woodcote but there is not sustained growth. OCC is taking careful note of the staging of new houses commission, both houses that have already been built and permissions granted in existing core strategy and local plans. In order to generate a form’s worth of entry, it takes approximately 800-900 new houses. This is not the scale of housing growth in Sonning Common. Information will be collated from all affected areas prior to decisions being made. (BC)

Q: We are three primary head teachers from the Caversham and Emmer Green area, and it is a big reality that in a year’s time, from my school, we will have ninety children that require a secondary school place and they come predominantly to Chiltern Edge or Highdown. The picture is very real that that there are not enough places at secondary level. The prospect of not having Chiltern Edge is unimaginable.
A: We will be addressing this with South Oxfordshire and how to plan for these numbers. Highdown has just increased its Published Annual Number from 220 to 250 however we cannot say at this time there are
sufficient places in Caversham. We have two new schools opening in Reading; The Wren and Maiden Erleigh, Reading. (EN)

Q: I am not prepared to send my eleven year old to the other side of Reading, taking two buses. If this is the only option, will you be providing transport to other schools? Also, neither of these schools have been inspected by OFSTED yet, how do we know they are good schools? It could take an hour to complete this journey in traffic.
A: School transport policies must be followed and we will be liaising with the transport department in RBC. It is my understanding that transport is available if travel is over three miles (two miles for low-income families), but until the consultation has been completed, there is no formal answer regarding transport provision. Enquiries can be directed to the Transport Manager. There are national guidelines regarding an appropriate distance for children to travel. (EN)
A: We are working very closely with the transport manager as we have to plan for places in the event that CE closes (GD)

Q: You spoke earlier that if the school closes investments may be made in alternative schools to increase places. Is there anyway investments can be made here to keep the school open?
A: To accommodate more children in alternative schools capital investment is required. This can be achieved by selling off part of the site here. National expenditure guidelines mean this money cannot be used to fund school improvement activity and local authorities must comply with them. Funding for additional teachers which will be required in other schools if their number increase comes with the children by way of the national funding formula. Any debt following closure is picked up by OCC. There is no longer any money available for school improvement from county council as there are considerable constraints on local authorities in this regard.

Q: We understand the consultation for closure is separate to the academisation process. At what point do you talk to each other?
A: We talk constantly; there is ongoing dialogue between the RSC office and ourselves to make sure the conversation is joined up.

Q: How much influence does RBC have in the process given that it’s an Oxfordshire school?
A: We will be contributing to the consultation process and we clearly have a vested interest in keeping the school open.

Q: The RBC website is actively encouraging parents to make applications to alternative schools. There are three schools with places; two have been judged to be inadequate and one is in Special Measures, where is the duty of care to the children?
A: We are encouraging parents to apply to get an idea where places are needed. All applications must be considered in accordance with each school’s oversubscription criteria. We need to coordinate the process as before. Applications are encourage to allow us to gather valuable data. (EN)
A: If questions are directed towards RBC, please email the school’s admissions team. (GD)

Q: Considerable time is required to improve schools. Parents and children are panicking. If we are to choose Chiltern Edge we need guarantees about what will happen with our children when they join the school.
A: A brisk response is important. An IEB was put in place immediately. We understand that the best possible education for your children in the circumstances is required.

Q: We understand the legal process OCC must go through and sympathise that budgets have been cut, but as a Caversham parent who was not offered any local primary school in Reading, we are in the same
situation with secondary schools. What are RBC doing? What are you doing to help Oxfordshire turn this school around? RBC need to be supporting and working with OCC to keep this school open.

A: OCC is responsible for this school and RBC are not in a position to offer money to OCC to support it. There are Reading schools that need improving. We are working closely, but OCC must take responsibility. (GD)

Q: Reading needs the school more than Oxfordshire. This is a special circumstance and more needs to be done.

A: We have only very recently become aware of the circumstance and we are working with OCC and RBC senior leaders and politicians regarding how we can cooperate and will be making a full response to the consultation and looking at how we can cooperate with Oxfordshire.

Q: We don’t want short-sightedness. Please don’t close and then need to re-open due to insufficient places elsewhere.

A: If a decision is taken it will be with confidence that alternative school places are available. We have a statutory duty to ensure that every child has a school place. If a decision is made to close, it will not be a short-term decision. (RL)

The meeting closed at 6.34pm

Meeting Two opened at 6.43pm

Introductions were made as in meeting one. Following this, questions were invited.

Q: The OFSTED report was clear that OCC had failed the school by offering insufficient support to the leadership team. What is currently being done to help improve the school for the future and helping it to stay open?

A: When a school is judged *inadequate* there are only two options for the future which are set out by government; the local authority must consider closure and the RSC should investigate the school becoming a sponsored academy. In the OFSTED report OCC were noted as having offered insufficient support and acting too slowly. It is clear we were unaware of the depth of difficulty and should have acted sooner. As soon as the situation was understood, support for leaders in school was enacted by placement of a paid chair of the IEB to support governance and commissioning education experts to work with the leadership team, by way of head teachers from other schools offering leadership support. The council is obligated to write a Statement of Action to address the areas identified in the report and a plan of action will be created within ten days of publication of the report on the OFSTED website to outline how the areas of weakness identified in the report will be addressed. (CM)

Q: The Facebook group *Save Our Edge* would like to know who to contact to find out information regarding the process for finding an Academy Sponsor.

A: The Regional Schools Commissioner is responsible for seeking a sponsor; Martin Post is the RSC for North West London and South Central England. OCC work closely with the RSC office, but the responsibility for the process lies outside of the council’s remit. (CM)

Q: How are OCC working with RBC to maximise collaboration to find a solution?

A: We are all at the table together, however it is the statutory duty of Oxfordshire. Scope for alternative places will be considered in both Reading and Oxfordshire. If there is not sufficient potential to fund alternative school places, the school cannot close. The decision making sits securely with Oxfordshire. (RL)
Q: Chiltern Edge was chosen by many parents due to its support for children with Special Educational Needs. How will other schools ensure the same level of support for their children?
A: It is clear that there was much to be valued at CE and the school classes that benefited children with SEN have been noted. However these small classes and high teacher numbers contributed to the school’s debt. The current way the school provides support cannot be sustained; provision in CE will have to change as the level of staff is not sustainable within a balanced budget. There is a current deficit of £300,000. All children’s needs will be met, however change here or elsewhere is inevitable. (RL)
A: Schools have a responsibility to meet the needs of all children. The SEN team at RBC will work closely when considering alternative schools to ensure their needs are met.

Q: As part of the parent body working with the Save Our Edge Facebook group, where can we address questions when they arise?
A: chilternedge@oxfordshire.gov.uk is set up specifically for the consultation and is the best place for questions. Responses to the consultation should ideally be completed via the online form. (BC)
A: Queries to RBC should be addressed to admissions.team@reading.gov.uk. The FAQs will also be updated as new questions are asked. Please contact us as we are keen to get a full understanding of parents’ views to enable us to formally respond to the consultation. (EN)

Q: The main concern I have is how quickly this is happening. Why not take longer to assess the situation and try and improve the school in the first instance? Let’s implement the new regimes and processes to assess the viability before closure? Can we not go into the Autumn term before the end of the consultation? (Parent of Year 7 child)
A: There are legal stipulations with the consultation process, but I would like to emphasise this is just a consultation not a proposal for closure. We are keen to limit uncertainty as it is clear that uncertainty about a school’s future makes daily operations much harder. There is also a desire to make a decision before the children due to start secondary school in September 2018 begin their application process. (BC)
A: We are required to act quickly with regard to school improvement whenever a school goes into Special Measures. Support needs to be put in as quickly as possible. There is a requirement for the RSC process to accelerate once an OFSTED report is published. (CM)

Q: Why were we emailed instead of a meeting? We heard information from the press. It took years for the school to come to this stage. Why did we not see action taken sooner? Where were the Governors? Is the deficit this year’s deficit? Is this due to insufficient intake? Where are financial controls; checks and balances? If there is substandard education, what additional support will be provided? If it’s not definite that the school is going to close, why are we not being given a scenario if the school stays open? (Parent of Year 8 child)
A: We were working closely with the school to get the information out to parents, but it is clear the media were informed very quickly. Governance was criticised in the OFSTED report. There is a reduced role now for local authorities regarding school improvement, particularly with schools judged as good or outstanding. The assumption is good schools are responsible for their own self-improvement and if they identify weaknesses they should secure the support they need. This did not occur. There is an accumulated debt of approximately £500,000 that has built up over a number of years and forecast in year deficit this year of £300,000. We have employed a consultant to work with the school to work to a budget with a small in year surplus to enable the debt to be reduced over time. We have so far been unsuccessful at reaching an agreement with school staff in this matter which may not be unconnected with some of the concerns raised in the OFSTED report. At the moment there are not sufficient places in alternative schools to enable all parents to move their children; the school will be open on September 2017 and will have approximately the same number of children as it does now. (RL)
Q: What is Julie Tridgeill’s role?
A: The IEB will be chaired by Julie Tridgell for one day per week. Employment of a professional chair for an IEB has proven to work well to improve governance. This is an addition to usual paid staff and voluntary governors. (CM)

Q: It seems that the advice from RBC is to put in for an in-year transfer now as you have advised that spaces will go, however there aren’t places available in local schools; only on the other side of town. Many of these schools aren’t doing well either. (Year 8 parent)
A: We have a duty to allocate spaces in accordance with the over-subscription criteria, and we want parents to be fully aware how places are allocated. We cannot reserve places, nor can we ask schools to allocate places that would result in them going over their Published Admission Number. All this is embedded in the School Admissions Code. (EN)

Q: If my child chooses his options in Chiltern Edge, he will then have to do his GCSEs in a different school that may not offer the same subjects.
A: There is no duty for other schools to offer the same subjects offered in the original school and we understand this is a problem. (EN)
A: We will not proceed with the statutory consultation regarding closure if we are not confident that places are available at the point of closure. This might mean that capital investment is required in alternative schools. Investment from selling the school site is a capital receipt that can only be used on buildings; not for staff, repayment of debt or as part of the annual budget. It is not allowed under local government accountancy laws. (RL)

Q: If the decision is made not to close the school, does the IEB continue indefinitely? I am aware that with the financial status of the school, finding a sponsor can be difficult.
A: The intention of an IEB is that it exists for a maximum of one year. There has been examples of delays finding sponsors and in this case an IEB continues for longer. (CM)

Q: Why isn’t Mr Sadler here?
A: He is unwell (RL)

Q: If funds obtained from selling part of the land are invested in school buildings, could money be raised from a lettings income?
A: It is unlikely that a figure of £300,000 would be generated by letting facilities. (RL)

Q: If no Academy Sponsor is found and the decision to close is made, am I right in thinking that additional places will be created at other local schools? (Parent of Year 7 & 8 children)
A: If no Academy sponsor is found and there are not sufficient places at better performing school then the school will not close. We will work with the school, but we only have a limited budget and therefore weaknesses would be expected to persist. (RL)

Q: There are not enough places in RBC. RBC needs to implore OCC to keep the school open.
A: We are looking at where places could be created if required or where there are sufficient places. We are at the very early stage of this process. (EN)

Q: Would they be local schools? It is not acceptable to send our children across town on a bus.
A: It would be across all Reading schools; we cannot create another school in Caversham. Parents are encouraged to let us know where they would like their children to go, however the only assurance we can give is that there would be a place in a Reading school. As a small borough, all the area is deemed travelable. (EN)

Q: Is it fair to make our children go across town? Not all of our children are capable of this. This will have a significant impact on the mental health on many of our children.
A: We understand the impact on children and that it is a very hard situation. (GD)
A: Any decision to close the school would be made by OCC. (RL)

Q: Will the proposal for closure state how many school places there are and where? (Parent of year 7 child)
A: Yes (RL)

Q: Is the Statement of Actions a public document? Are we able to see what plans have been made to improve the school?
Q: It is a plan for improvement. Whilst it isn’t formally a public document, there is no reason why the plan to address the areas identified for improvement by Ofsted cannot be made available to parents. (CM)

Q: It is clear that you’re saying there are only two options available? Why not three? Why is there not an option to improve the school to get a good judgment?
A: There is a legal framework after a school has been put in Special Measures to seek an Academy sponsor and consult on closure. Whilst this process is underway, OCC will work with the school to improve the standard of education available. There used to be a third option to work with a school in Special Measures to improve to a good inspection outcome but this is no longer an option open to us. (CM)

Q: What are the parameters regarding communication during the process? Will we be told how the decision has been reached?
A: Information will be provided setting out why we took one course of action or another course of action. This is an open process in terms of decision making. (RL)
Q: The system has really let the school down, from a financial perspective and school improvement. You should be looking at yourselves.

Q: My child has special educational needs, he’s not statemented. Who is going to be responsible for making sure he gets to a school across town? He is not capable of doing this. (Parent of child in year 7)
A: This is a very good point. It is too early to answer specific questions regarding how vulnerable learners will be accounted for. Janet Johnson leads on vulnerable learners in Oxfordshire and we will work closely with teachers’ teams in the council to support those with SEN. Colleagues will work with us to prioritise this situation. All school have a duty to care for all vulnerable children. (CM)

Q: Chris, you said that OCC were slow in responding to some of the issues, it is my understanding that had OCC been doing their job properly we wouldn’t be here.
A: Schools are responsible for their own quality and improvement. Local authorities no longer have large teams that support schools and the responsibility for school standards lies with the governing body and senior leaders. When things go wrong, measures can be put in places which was done as soon as it became apparent. (CM)

Q: What would happen if we were already an Academy?
A: The RSC would be expected to find a new sponsor.
Q: Is this just an opportunity to offload a school that doesn’t support Oxfordshire children?
A: No, we are required by law to consider closure. There are only 2 options available by law. (RL)

Q: Are other schools duty bound to let potential parents know that they may also be struggling? That is a risk that really needs mitigating. (Parent of year 8 child)
A: The schools on this side of the boundary (Gillots and Langtree) are rated highly and there is no reason to believe they do not provide the standard of education judged by OFSTED. There is no obligation to air any concerns they may have. (ND)
The meeting closed at 7.44pm

Meeting Three opened at 8pm

Introductions were made as in meeting one. Following this, questions were invited.

Q: I’m representing the parent committee and have questions raised from the whole committee. How is OCC working with RBC to maximise cooperation to find a joint solution to retain the school? Why set a date to advise of closure in the middle of September? What impact does this have on the school census funding? What measures will be put in place to ensure that current year 9 children will be able to continue with the same GCSEs that they have already started. (Parent of child in year 9)
A: Timing was driven by the publication of the OFSTED report. OCC is required to consider closure in line with the statutory guidance. If there are not alternative places for children to go to; this school will not close. At the moment, there are not alternative places available. We are working with RBC because the majority of children are from Reading. Funding is received for the next financial year based on numbers counted in October. Any pro-rated unspent funds would be sent to a receiving school. There is scope to do this. We understand the concerns of year 9 parents and the consultation will have to ensure there are robust plans in place in the event that closure is proposed. We recognise there may be some gaps; but there may also be opportunities. We understand the specific concerns for the crucial year 9 pupils and plans for them would be detailed in any proposal. (RL)

Q: I have two children with autism; the SEN provision at CE is excellent. My eldest son will need considerable support in the event of transfer. What educational and emotional support will there be for children during what will be a very unsettling time?
A: I have been referring to social media during this process and have seen that parents of children with autism are particularly supportive of the work done by the school. Janet Johnson leads the care for children with SEN at OCC and her team will work closely with families in the event that transfers are required. It is too early to say what this support will look like, but it is high in the list of priorities. (CM)
Q: It is not too early for us and we need some answers. My child is very upset and parents and children need to know sooner rather than later.
A: No decision has been made to close the school. We cannot advise on finalised provision when no decision has been made. The OFSTED inspection has triggered this process and plans will be put in place to accurately identify specific needs once, and if, this requirement has been confirmed. We are working with the school to address the areas of concern raised in the inspection. (CM)

Q: Parents are surprised by the OFSTED judgement. Our children are doing well here. Why is this such a bolt from the blue? We feel this is a financial problem for OCC, not a school problem. OCC should be supporting this school financially.
A: The reality is, this school has consistently overspent. If there were more children on roll, there would have been more money. If the school closes or becomes a Sponsored Academy OCC must fund the money to cover this debt. Previously, money was available to support failing schools but this is no longer a reality and local councils are restrained. (RL)

Q: It’s very tragic that this school has become a toxic brand. Is there any precedent for an Academy taking on a school with a similar deficit? How is the IEB going to ensure there isn’t a drift of teachers away from the school? How are better teachers going to be presented? (Parent of child in year 10)
A: The accumulated debt would be covered by OCC, but it is true that the in-year deficit is unattractive to an Academy Sponsor. Nationally, schools in poor financial situations find it hard to find a sponsor. Finding a high-quality sponsor is a concern. (RL)

Q: How do we stop teachers moving away from the school?
A: While there is uncertainty we know this is a concern. We are working closely with other Oxfordshire secondary schools and buying in the time of other head teachers and Senior Leaders so that during this period of uncertainty plans are in place so that staffing gaps can be filled in the immediate future. The IEB started yesterday and it is the challenge of this body to address these concerns. (CM)

Q: As parents, we chose this school because we like it. There is too much unease; this is particularly devastating for teenagers. What will happen to the land if the school closes? If there are houses built, what school will these new families attend? (Parent of year 9 child and incoming year 7 child)
A: The decision to close is not one that will be taken lightly. We have a responsibility to ensure all pupils get a better deal. This is not driven by finances; if it was purely a financial matter we would have considered closing the school years ago when its financial difficulties were identified. If the school closes, OCC will seek to get approval from the Secretary of State to sell the land and funds received will be invested in the buildings in receiving schools. (RL)
A: The Sonning Common Neighbourhood plan does include plans for 37 new homes on part of the school site. If the school were to close, OCC would seek to dispose of the rest of site, but we cannot say what would be done with the rest of the site; that is a matter for the local planning process. (BC)

Q: We know that the land will be built on. This school is really good for our children and we need you to understand this.
A: We do understand that you’ve chosen this school and want your children to be able to stay here. In terms of the school site, it’s a matter for SODC to approve any planning application. The Neighbourhood plan is an evolving document but the panel is aware that it is likely permission would be granted for housing on the land where the school site is; the field may not be identified for development due to its position on the edge of the village. Funds obtained following a sale would be used for any extension needed at receiving schools to enable additional pupils to be accommodated. (BC)

Q: There are no places in Reading. If you can you find places in twelve months’ time, why can’t you find them now? Children cannot be asked to move in the middle of GCSEs and learn a new subject in one year.
A: We cannot say where places may be created. We need to assess demand for places which is why we are encouraging people to apply to enable us to determine if places can be created where they’re needed and when they’re need for. If you want to transfer to permit your child to sit their GCSEs in one school, indicate this at the time of application to assist us in identifying demand. Schools will hold a waiting list to enable RBC to assess demand. (EN)

Q: Our children do not understand the OFSTED report; they do not feel it reflects the school they attend.
A: We do not have anyone on the panel from OFSTED. It is the council’s role to respond once the report has been published.

Q: You said teachers will come in from other schools. I’m a teacher and I don’t see teachers in my school doing this. There is an opportunity for the school to ask OFSTED to review the report again. Did this happen?
A: The school responded with a factual accuracy check as they are permitted to do. There is no opportunity to challenge the judgement. The Oxfordshire Teaching Schools alliance enables schools to work together to support each other. We are commissioning head teachers to spend time in CE: this is happening and has proven to work well in the past. CE is getting support from other head teachers. The IEB is in place and it is
their responsibility to ensure there are sufficient teachers in post. They act as the Governing Body and they must be given the opportunity to do this.

Q: Teachers won’t want to come to work here.
A: There is a difference between applying for a job here and coming to spend time here to support existing teachers.

Q: What does this support look like? How often are other heads and teacher in school?
A: The IEB are looking at this and will be able to respond to this once they have been in the school a little longer. The head teacher at Icknield School is working closely with the SLT already. Further provision will be put in place by the IEB

Q: What communication is there with parents regarding the steps being taken to improve the school?
A: The IEB will be able to respond to all enquiries next week. (Confirmed by Julie Tridgeell) (CM)

Q: Did you call us here to tell us the school is closing? Why does one OFSTED report close a school?
A: No decision has been taken to close the school. When an OFSTED report judges a school to be inadequate there is no option but to consider scope for closure. There is no scope for discretion. All points raised in these meetings and via the consultation are used to inform the consideration to close. At this stage, nothing is known. OCC are working to gather information and make a decision as quickly as possible to minimise uncertainty.

Q: The John Madjeski Academy and Reading Girls’ School are performing badly. Why aren’t they closing?
A: (From a member of the audience) I have a child at Caversham Primary and did not receive a letter saying this. This has not come from Caversham Primary.

A: RBC have never sent any letters suggesting this and strongly refute the assertion. There has never been an attempt to deter Caversham parents from choosing CE. (GD)

Q: We have heard that RBC staff were telling people not to go to CE as they were aware there were problems. Caversham Primary School told their families not to choose Chiltern Edge.
A: (From a member of the audience) I have a child at Caversham Primary and did not receive a letter saying this. This has not come from Caversham Primary.

Q: Did OFSTED talk to children during the inspection? Children have excelled here and teachers are excellent. My children are mixed race and have never suffered abuse; we do not recognise the concerns identified in the report. This is the only school that is suitable for my children.
A: No decision has been taken to close the school. When an OFSTED report judges a school to be inadequate there is no option but to consider scope for closure. There is no scope for discretion. All points raised in these meetings and via the consultation are used to inform the consideration to close. At this stage, nothing is known. OCC are working to gather information and make a decision as quickly as possible to minimise uncertainty.

Q: My children have done well here. There are some excellent teachers in this school. What is your commitment to the teachers at the school?
A: We cannot redeploy staff in the event of closure, although they are of course able to apply to receiving schools in the event of any vacancies being created by additional pupil numbers.

Q: OCC is negligent. You must have been concerned about the school but did nothing about it. Generally everyone is happy with the school. Parents are dazed by the OFSTED judgement. Where can we complain? We are extremely upset.
A: We understand your frustration. It is clear that the parent body does not accept the OFSTED judgement and that there is much that is good about the school. However, as a local authority that maintains this school, we are absolutely required to consider the scope for closure. There is no choice about it. The RSC has initiated the process for the school to become a sponsored academy. These are the only two options.
Q: Why is the closure being pushed so quickly? Why isn’t there time being given for a sponsor to be found?
A: Every other school that has been judged inadequate, has been assessed for the scope for closure. The reality is that there may be scope for closure at CE as it may be possible to move children to better performing schools. Today there are not sufficient places for 500 children in better performing schools, but that does not mean that there is not the possibility to create these places. If there are not enough places after investigation, the school will not close. We understand that you many of you would prefer for your children to stay at Chiltern Edge. It is the local authority’s responsibility to ensure all children are educated in schools that are judged to be performing well by OFSTED. (RL)

Q: Where will the funding come from?
A: Capital funding cannot be used to fund school improvement. (RL)

Q: Most of the children here are from Reading. You cannot wash your hands of these children. The catchment area of this school was changed to include lower Caversham, so you must take responsibility for these children.
A: The school will not be closed unless we are confident that places can be secured in better schools in either RBC or OCC. There will not be children without places. (RL)

Q: The timing of this is awful. This will have a terrible effect on our year eleven pupils. Children love this school and their hearts are broken. When are the deeds coming back to this school?
A: OCC diverted the legal team to academy conversion. The necessity to consult on closure will mean that the transfer of deeds will be prioritised. Closure cannot be allowed to frustrate the legal transfer, however I cannot give you a confirmed date. You are assured that the school will advise you when the process has been completed. (RL)

Q: Is there a way to get the OFSTED judgement reviewed?
A: As a parent body, you can contact OFSTED, however the judgement cannot be changed. (CM)
Q: If a parent body raise a case of wilful negligence against OCC, will this prompt an OFSTED review?
A: The Governing body and school leaders are responsible for the quality of education. (CM)
Q: There could be a case of wilful negligence regarding the finances of the school, not just with regard to the deeds. The letter from the governors suggested OCC had neglected this school when there were indicators of poor leadership and financial difficulties. If we approach the court with a case of legal negligence would that force a review of the report? I cannot accept the apocryphal nature of this report when everything else in the public sector is subject to review.
A: I suggest you take legal advice as to whether there is a facility to seek judicial review. Regarding the finance, arguably there was a failure by OCC for allowing the school to continue living beyond its means for as long as it did. A loan was made to the school to get over previous financial difficulties, which was repaid, but the school continued to accumulate debt. Maybe OCC should have intervened over the finances, however the consequences of OCC addressing the school’s overspend would have reduced the amount being spent on children, probably reducing the money available for staffing.

Q: We now know that OCC were aware of the funding difficulties but were they aware of the teaching concerns? My son has had a number of different teachers and we now hear there are a pool of super teachers able to help out. There were problems; why was nothing done? There has been a very quick turnover of staff and results have not been good.
A: I think we’ve already covered why we didn’t intervene earlier. The school has not been set up to fail. (CM)
Q: What has happened in the school since the OFSTED report was published to support our children? We need a detailed plan of what is happening by tomorrow.

A: We recognise this is a very difficult time for staff. Support has been provided to staff; we have sent people in to support and converse with the senior leaders. The IEB will provide detailed information of what will be done very shortly, but we cannot commit them to do this to the timetable you are demanding.

A: A dedicated email address is available at both OCC and RBC and we encourage those whose questions have not been addressed in these meetings to contact us directly. (RL)

The meeting closed at 9.07pm