



Saving the world one village at a time...

Gamlingay Environmental Action Group

Group Co-ordinator: Brycchan Carey, 18 Mill Street, Gamlingay, Cambridgeshire, SG19 3JW
Telephone: 01767 651141 • Email: brycchan@brycchancarey.com • Web: www.geag.org.uk

Suzanne Nelson
Children and Young People's Services
Box No. CC1209
Castle Court
Shire Hall
Cambridge
CB3 0AP

24 May 2011

Re: Proposed Closure of Gamlingay Village College

I am writing with the detailed response of Gamlingay Environmental Action Group (GEAG) to the consultation document *Education Provision in Gamlingay: Planning for the Future* (April 2011).

GEAG is an active local group with a substantial membership among Gamlingay residents. We work with local organisations and individuals to raise awareness of environmental issues, to support sustainable development, and to protect local and global environments. We are an independent group, and are not affiliated to any other organisation.

We discussed the Gamlingay Village College (GVC) proposals at our meetings on 20 April and 18 May 2011. The GEAG members present at those meetings were unanimously opposed to any proposal to close GVC. In this letter, I would like to set out our reasons why.

First, however, I should explain why GEAG has an opinion on this matter since the fate of GVC may appear to be an educational matter only. Our view is that would underestimate GVC's importance to the wider community and to the wider environment. We do of course agree with the Council that the 'main aim is to secure and sustain high-quality educational provision for all children and young people in the Gamlingay area' (*EPG*, p. 3). We nevertheless believe that this aim should be met in a way that is consistent with protecting the environment and building a strong local community. GVC is a major institution in a relatively small community such as Gamlingay. Its facilities are used not only by parents and students, but also by clubs, organisations, and individuals making use of sports facilities. It is also at the centre of the annual Gamlingay Show. Clearly, its closure is an issue for the whole community, and not merely students and parents. Likewise, as the largest building in the

village, the one that generates the largest number of journeys, and, arguably, the one that has the greatest impact on environmental awareness, its fate is without doubt a green issue.

One of our major concerns, therefore, is that neither the environment nor the wider community have been taken into account in this consultation document. There is no mention of the impact of the three proposed options on the wider community anywhere in the document. There is only one mention of the environment: the document confirms that, in a previous review, the option of expanding GVC's catchment area was rejected because 'the PDG did not feel that it could support the transportation of large numbers of children from Cambourne to Gamlingay, for both cost and environmental reasons' (*EPG*, p. 5). It is not clear to GEAG how the same journey in reverse could be more environmentally sustainable. It is not clear, indeed, how the longer journey from Gamlingay to Bassingbourn (13.5 miles) could be more environmentally sustainable than the journey from Cambourne to Gamlingay (9.5 miles). It is clear from this inconsistency that the environment has not been adequately considered in this consultation document.

Overall, it is our position that such a profound change to the village as closing the GVC cannot justifiably take place without a very detailed investigation into the wider social and environmental impacts as well as on the effect on the students' education. This thirteen-page document is wholly inadequate for the task. In the remainder of this letter, therefore, I would like to set out some of the possible impacts that must be considered before any serious proposal could be put before the public for consultation.

1. National and Global Environmental Concerns

- a) We can see that there may be an argument that combining schools may lead to lower energy and material consumption and thus lower carbon emissions. However, this almost certainly only holds true if the site of the closed school is returned to nature, which is not likely. If there is any kind of development on the site then those environmental savings are lost. In any case, before a decision could be taken, the extent or otherwise of these savings would need to be quantified.
- b) The extra fuel burned transporting hundreds of children to a school perhaps 13.5 miles away almost certainly far outweighs any savings that might be made by more efficient buildings. As well as the extra bus journeys, there will no doubt be many more car miles from parents ferrying children to and from extra-curricular activities. All this will lead to substantial additional carbon and particulate emissions. Again, the extent of these additional emissions would need to be quantified before a serious proposal could be presented to the public for consultation.

2. Local Environmental Concerns

- a) Closing GVC would inevitably produce many additional journeys both from buses and cars. The roads would become dirtier and less safe as a result. This impact would affect several communities on the route between Gamlingay and the new school, for example, Hatley St.

George. The potential increase in road traffic would need to be quantified before a serious proposal could be presented to the public for consultation.

- b) Young people would no longer have the option to walk or cycle to school, further entrenching a car culture and damaging their health. The impact on child health would need to be considered before any decision could be taken.
- c) Closing the GVC raises important questions about what would happen to the school site. Gamlingay is already growing faster than many of its inhabitants would want. Closing GVC and building houses in its place, a likely scenario, would increase demand for village facilities and services, while at the same time decreasing the availability of those facilities. This would again force people into cars to seek out services elsewhere. Likewise, the alternative of moving the First School to the GVC site raises the question of what would happen to the First School site. Before any decision can be reached on the fate of GVC, the Council has a duty to explain to the village what would happen to the existing school sites, since both are major components of the local environment.

3. Building a Stronger Community

- a) Gamlingay currently has a mix of people of all ages and personal circumstances; such diversity is the hallmark of a strong community. Closing GVC will make the village less attractive to families and is likely to hasten the transformation of the village into a socially homogenised dormitory town. The impact on the social structure of the village would need to be assessed before a serious proposal could be offered for consultation.
- b) GVC is at the heart of many village organisations. The school's green spaces are used for recreation and for events for all the community. The Council needs to show how provision for community engagement will be sustained if GVC is closed.

4. Looking to the Future

- a) Proposed developments at Green End and Station Road will at least balance any decline in the numbers of children born in the GVC catchment area, and may lead to substantial extra demand for school places. The scale of these developments is currently unknown. No responsible decision on the future of GVC can be taken until the true scale of these developments is understood.
- b) In the medium to long term, rising fuel prices associated with peak oil are likely to make transport costs considerably less affordable. To increase resilience, communities should be strengthening local institutions rather than closing them down.

In sum, therefore, we feel that that the current consultation document is by no means adequate to the task. Considerably more work will need to be done to convince GEAG that the impacts on the environment and the wider community of closing GVC have been appropriately considered. Our view is that, if these impacts are properly taken into account, options 2 and 3 in the consultation document will be seen to be damaging both to the environment and to the local community.

Environmentalists believe that before we discard something, we consider reusing it, recycling it, or repairing it. The same is as true of village institutions as it is of household items. GVC has had difficulties in the past; no-one would deny that. Nevertheless, it is our view that, with appropriate support, GVC can be 'repaired'. It would not be the first school in the country to have been placed in special measures and to have emerged as a stronger institution at the end. Our understanding is that the GVC Governors have advocated a closer relationship between GVC and Stratton School in Biggleswade. It seems to us that this solution meets the challenge of providing an excellent education for local children while both strengthening the wider local community and minimising impacts on the environment.

Along with the majority of Gamlingay residents, therefore, GEAG is calling on the Council to reject options 2 and 3, and to keep the school open.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of several overlapping, sweeping strokes that form a cursive, somewhat abstract shape.

Brycchan Carey
Co-ordinator, Gamlingay Environmental Action Group.