

Proposal to amalgamate Downs Way School and St. Mary's C of E Junior School

Summary of Consultation

The consultation process ran from 1 November 2016 to 13 December 2016. On 16 November 2016, two distinct consultation meetings were held in sequence, one at each of Downs Way School and St. Mary's C of E Junior School. At the meeting, the following issues were raised and discussed:

- Admissions (i) – a general query was raised regarding how admissions would work in the new school. It was confirmed that the proposal would be to retain the current admissions policy for Year 3. For Year R, this would be adapted to mirror the criteria for Year 3, with the added stipulation that faith-based admission criteria will only apply to those pupils *for whom the new school is the nearest Church of England school*, as measured from their place of residence, thus ensuring that the new school continues to serve its local community. Amalgamation of the schools would mean that pupils entering at Year R would be guaranteed a place through to Year 6.
- Admissions (ii) – a specific query was raised with respect to what would happen to pupils entering the school at Year R, whose family subsequently moved out of the local area. It was confirmed that such pupils would continue to hold a place at the school; this is required by the relevant legislation.
- Admissions (iii) – a specific query was raised with respect to whether the proposed alternations to admissions arrangements for Year R would affect the eligibility of non-church-goers to attend the new primary school. It was explained that the intention of the added requirement for the new school to be the nearest Church of England school for faith-based criteria to apply should ensure that admission is secured to provide for local need.
- Admissions (iv) – the question was raised as to which Downs Way year group would be the first to benefit from automatic transition to Year 3 in the new school. It was confirmed that this would be for pupils presently in Year R.
- Levels of Demand – it was asked whether there would be County funding for empty places if classes were not filled as a consequence of the proposed expansion at Year 3. It was confirmed that the primary school would be expected to function as any other and that, as such, vacant spaces would naturally arise at times, which could not be covered by vacant place funding by the County, as this would not be in line with the overall policy. It was explained that the County Council has a statutory duty to provide sufficient pupil places to serve local demand and that this necessitated a certain amount of surplus being built into the system to accommodate spikes in demand, parental preference and in-year admissions. Furthermore, although a small amount of surplus places are forecast, it should be noted that this does not take account of the additional houses projected to be built under the Tandridge Local Plan that is currently

being consulted upon. As such, any forecast surpluses are only likely to reduce in future. A related query was made with respect to whether this increased demand might lead to a future expansion of St. Mary's. It was confirmed that there are too many variables at this stage to predict what might happen in terms of future expansion proposals, although there were natural limits on how much any individual school could be expanded within the confines of its existing site.

- Other Church of England Schools – a common query was raised with respect to whether other Church of England infant schools in the area would be disadvantaged by the proposed changes, with respect to the fact that the fact of automatic transition to Year 3 would incentivise applications to the new primary school and disincentivise applications to nearby infant schools. It was explained that requirement for the new school to be the nearest Church of England school for faith-based criteria to apply at Year R was added, in part, to protect the intakes of other Church of England schools. In addition, the expansion of St. Mary's at Year 3 will reduce the pressure on entry at this point and, therefore, rates of oversubscription. This should serve to allay some of the concern regarding the perceived advantage of entering the new primary school at Year R.
- School Ethos – concern was raised about the potential for the new school to lose some of the nurturing elements of a smaller school. It was confirmed that the principle of community and all teachers knowing all pupils, with a view to nurturing confident and secure pupils, would remain at the core of the new school's ethos. Work is already underway in considering examples of how other schools have successfully managed this in a larger school environment.
- Teams – concern was raised about the potential for pupils missing out on opportunities to participate in teams, with the additional competition for places that would be brought about by a larger school. It was responded that a larger school would provide more opportunities for pupils, in terms of the fact that it would be able to sustain a greater number of teams and, indeed, augment the viability of further clubs and societies being established. It would also enhance the scope for intra-school competition.
- New Build (i) – a general query was raised with respect to whether consideration had yet been given to the form that any new building would take. It was confirmed that this had yet to be considered and that it was standard procedure for the education consultation to be decided prior to significant expenditure/commitment being made towards a built solution, as this would be seen to be pre-empting the outcome of the consultation process. It was confirmed that the built solution would be the subject of a separate statutory consultation process, within which all interested stakeholders would be provided with the opportunity to have input. Whilst no guarantees could be provided about the building being granted planning permission, Surrey County Council has an excellent track record of delivering workable solutions on school sites that are sensitive to the needs of the local area and thereby secure planning permission.

- New Build (ii) – a specific query was raised with respect to the health & safety of pupils during the build process, as well as the arrangements for adherence to fire regulations. It was confirmed that the project team that is ultimately charged with delivering any project at the school will have had experience of delivering similar schemes before and will be conversant with the need to provide for the health & safety of pupils onsite, both during the build period and in terms of the design/layout of any new buildings.
- New Build (iii) – a question was raised as to whether there would be a contingency plan, should the building project overrun. It was confirmed that, if the proposal were to proceed, sufficient accommodation to provide for an increased intake in 2018 would certainly be provided, whether that be in the form of the final new build agreed, or of a temporary building located onsite for the duration of the build period.
- Traffic and Parking – concern was raised about traffic and parking around the school during peak pick-up and drop-off times and the potential for this situation to be exacerbated as a consequence of the proposed expansion of junior provision. It was confirmed that the School Travel Plan would be updated as part of any planning process for expanded provision, with a focus improving the delivery of Golden Boot Weeks and consideration of the potential for a walking bus. The school also does work with a parent group, with a view to improving driving and parking practices around the school.

In addition, interested parties were invited to return responses to the consultation via a formal Consultation Response Form, included at the end of the Consultation Document, as well as in an online form. In total, 100 such formal responses were received. The breakdown of category of respondents is provided below¹:

Respondent Category	No.
Parent of child attending Downs Way	56
Parent of child attending St. Mary's	32
Member of staff at either school	21
Local resident	21
Parent of a child that may attend either school in future	14
Parent of a child attending another school	3
Governor at either school	2
Other	5

Of the responses received, 93 agreed with the proposal, 3 disagreed with the proposal and 4 classified themselves as “don’t know” in this respect. There were no discernible patterns in terms of the category of respondents that typically

¹ It should be noted that a number of respondents fitted more than one category, making the overall number greater than the 100 distinct respondents.

agreed/disagreed with the proposal, except for the fact that all current members of staff and governors at the schools agreed with the proposal.

Among the responses that agreed with the proposal, there was a general consensus that the amalgamation “made sense” and was a “natural progression”, due to the proximity of the schools; their cohesive ethos; and the existing partnership arrangements, from which respondents could see clear benefits emerging. Furthermore, these respondents were clear that the proposed amalgamation had the potential to bring mutual benefits to both organisations, such as effective/efficient use of resources; encouraging good staff to stay; and the sharing of knowledge. A number of respondents also mentioned the direct benefit to families, in terms of smoothing the transition between key stages and eliminating the need for an application process at entry to junior, for those pupils starting at the school in advance of that. There was also general support for the proposed expansion of Key Stage 2 provision, with the perception being that this would help in ensuring that local families could secure a place at the school, in the context of local population growth.

However, it should be noted that, even amongst those who supported the proposal, there was still a common concern about the implications of the proposed expansion at Key Stage 2 in relation to the potential for this to increase traffic movements at peak drop-off and pick-up times. Road safety and issues with parking were identified as particular issues in this respect and these concerns were echoed by all three of the respondents who disagreed with the proposal. Potential solutions offered within the responses included:

- The provision of a dedicated school shuttle bus;
- A park and ride scheme;
- A walking bus scheme;
- The provision of a school crossing patrol officer;
- A dedicated parent car park; and
- Traffic regulations stipulating a one-way road system around the school at peak drop-off and pick-up times.

One respondent did, though, point out that traffic issues may be ameliorated by the amalgamation, as it had the potential to reduce the number of local parents travelling outside of the immediate area for infant provision. Whilst parking and traffic are not strictly relevant concerns in relation to the evaluation of this education consultation, the above concerns and potential solutions could be fed into the design process and reformulation of the School Travel Plan, if it was decided to proceed with the proposed amalgamation and expansion. Certainly, any design process would involve a Highways Assessment to determine the impact of traffic movements and potential means of amelioration. As a consequence of the above feedback, St. Mary's C of E Junior School has worked with a group of parents to start a walking bus scheme. It is

hoped that this will serve to ameliorate some of the identified issues, as well as act as a starting point for the development of more sustainable travel patterns to and from school.

Within the responses that agreed with the proposals, the following areas of concern were also highlighted:

- School Ethos – a number of respondents were keen to stress that they would not want the infant provision to lose the nurturing ethos currently provided by Downs Way School. As stated above, this is something that the school is actively looking at, with respect to the consideration of other successful examples. In addition, one respondent wished to stress the importance of the amalgamation not leading to a fall in the standard of teaching at St. Mary's. It is not felt that this will be an issue. Conversely, it is believed that the greater opportunities for the sharing of resources and knowledge will enable the effectiveness of education to be improved even further in a fully integrated school.
- Admissions (i) – one respondent stated that they would prefer for there to be automatic transition into Year 3 for pupils currently in Year 1 at Downs Way. Unfortunately, this is not legally possible, as under the current proposal, the schools would not be amalgamated at the point at which applications for Year 3 in 2018 were being taken. Automatic transition between Year 2 and Year 3 would only be possible from 2019.
- Admissions (ii) – one respondent was also concerned about the potential for non-church-going families to be prevented from attending the infant provision, with the amended admission criteria. The respondent understood that the added requirement for the new school to be the nearest Church of England school for faith-based criteria to apply should safeguard against this. However, they were keen to stress that the school should be mindful of maintaining this safeguard, in view of future demographic and policy-related changes.

Of those who classified themselves as “don't know” in respect of the proposals, the following distinct concerns were raised:

- Admissions (i) – one respondent was concerned that pupils presently attending Downs Way, but who are residing outside of the Oxted area would receive an automatic place in the junior provision at an amalgamated school. This concern was also echoed by one of the respondents who disagreed with the proposal. As confirmed above, the offer of automatic transition for such pupils (starting with those pupils currently in Year R) is a requirement of the relevant legislation.
- Admissions (ii) – one respondent queried why the current Admissions Policy of St. Mary's C of E Junior (which would be retained for junior admission under the amalgamation proposal) included the parish of Hurst Green as an applicable area for Criterion 2 (faith-based admission), but not for Criterion 4 (sibling-based admission). It was felt that there was no justification for this imbalance and that consideration should be given to including Hurst Green under Criterion 4 within

any review of the admissions procedures. The Governing Body of St. Mary's discussed this matter, although it was ultimately decided not to amend Criterion 4, on the basis that there are infant and junior schools within this parish. These schools do not offer faith-based education, meaning that the inclusion of this parish within Criterion 2 was still relevant.

- Admissions (iii) – one respondent, acting on behalf of a local infant school, requested that consideration be given to providing this school with feeder status to the junior phase at any new primary school. The perception outlined in the response and the associated letter was that the proposed amalgamation had the potential to disadvantage pupils attending this infant school, relative to pupils in the infant portion of the new primary school, with respect to the latter group having assurance of junior transition. It was felt that this could result in some parents choosing to send their children to the all through primary in preference to the infant school, even if the latter were to be their preferred choice for Key Stage 1 provision. The respondent therefore requested that feeder status be considered for their school, with a view to retaining parity of access to junior provision for pupils at this infant school, relative to those pupils who would form the infant provision within the amalgamated primary school. The Governing Body of St. Mary's discussed this matter, although it was ultimately decided not to change the admissions criteria to include any feeder schools. The proposed expansion of junior provision would serve to align Oxted's junior and infant PAN, thereby ensuring that all pupils currently in infant school will be able to secure a junior place in the Oxted area. Additionally, it was felt important to maintain parity of access to junior entry for pupils attending the other infant schools in the Oxted area.
- Alternative Options – one respondent was concerned that Holland Junior School had not been considered as an alternative for expansion of Key Stage 2 provision in the area. The preference for the expansion of Holland Junior was also echoed by one of the respondents who disagreed with the proposal. In fact, this option has been actively considered by Surrey County Council and both expansion schemes have been evaluated against one another in a Balanced Scorecard exercise. Ultimately, it was decided to proceed with proposing St. Mary's C of E Junior for expansion, principally on the grounds that the infant provision at Downs Way had recently been expanded and the natural transition for this increased cohort was into St. Mary's, especially in view of the proposed amalgamation.

Among those who disagreed with the proposals, the following distinct concerns were raised:

- Educational Capacity – one respondent felt that, whilst St. Mary's was strong at providing for pupils at the higher and lower end of the academic spectrum, the needs of those in the middle were overlooked. The respondent was concerned that if the proposals were to go ahead and a single, larger school were created, this could exacerbate this issue. However, there is no statistical basis for the

single view expressed here. RAISEonline has consistently shown that St. Mary's pupils in all groups perform better than their peers nationally. The school's Ofsted report in 2015 confirmed the high quality of teaching and support for children of all abilities. The school's recent SIAMS inspection emphasises how every child feels known and supported. Consequently, the school is confident that its professional approach and school ethos – which is to help each individual reach their full potential and have access to the widest possible range of experience – would continue whatever the size of school.

- **Building Capacity** – one respondent raised concerns regarding the perception that the existing hall and catering facilities were not large enough to accommodate the proposed expansion. Naturally, there will be a building project associated with the expansion of Key Stage 2 provision, which will not only consider classroom space, but also ancillary facilities such as catering and dining space, with these being measured against the national guidelines set out in Building Bulletin 103.
- **New Build (i)** – one respondent felt that the planning process for the new build should be run alongside the school expansion consultation and that agreement to expand the school in education terms should not be agreed in advance of planning approval for the new build being approved. As set out above, it is standard procedure for the education consultation to be decided prior to significant expenditure/commitment being made towards a built solution, as if the Council were to incur the significant expense of developing the scheme design to the planning stage, there would be reasonable grounds for assuming that the Council had a vested interest in approving the education expansion, making consultation effectively meaningless. This is a situation that the existing process avoids. Moreover, if a scheme were not realisable through the planning process, there is always scope to revoke any school organisation decision, should that be the position agreed amongst the parties concerned.
- **New Build (ii)** – one respondent felt that a new build would be unrealisable in time for the proposed expansion of the school in 2018 and, further, that temporary buildings would be disruptive to the operation of the school. At the present time, in the absence of survey data and an agreed design, it is impossible to comment on the achievability of 2018 for the delivery of new, permanent buildings. However, the County Council has extensive experience of the successful deployment of temporary accommodation and, if this should be required, there are no grounds for concern that this would be disruptive to the education of pupils onsite.
- **Alternative Options** – one respondent, acting on behalf of a local junior school, agreed with the overarching proposal to amalgamate the schools, but objected to the proposal to expand Key Stage 2 provision. The primary concern was that this expansion would result in surplus junior places being created in the area, which would result in vacant places that would affect the funding position of the schools concerned. As set out above, the County Council has a statutory duty to provide

sufficient pupil places to serve local demand and, when working in terms of 30-place classes it is impossible to precisely align the number of available places with the pupil place demand. In line with this statutory duty, it is always necessary to over-provide, rather than under-provide and, since the proposed over-provision is projected to be less than 30-places within the forecast horizon (to 2025/26), it is felt that this proposed expansion is entirely justified.