



Business and Children's Policy and Scrutiny Committee

Date:	12 th June 2023
Classification:	General Release
Title:	Decision to amalgamate St Stephen's and St Mary Magdalene's CE Primary Schools
Report of:	Sarah Newman, Bi-Borough Executive Director of Children's Services
Cabinet Member Portfolio	Cabinet Member for Young People, Learning & Leisure
Wards Involved:	Bayswater and Westbourne
Policy Context:	Vibrant Communities: Children and young people to have the best start in life, be well cared for and attend excellent schools that promote achievement
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1. Executive Summary

This report informs the Committee of the decision made by the Lead Member for Young People and Learning to proceed with the amalgamation of St Stephen's and St Mary Magdalene's CE Primary Schools with effect from 1 September 2023. The decision follows a six-week period of public representation between 28th March and 5th May 2023. This is in response to the Council issuing a statutory notice on the proposal as recommended by the governing bodies of St Stephen's and St Mary Magdalene's CE Primary Schools following an informal four-week consultation. This was led by both governing bodies, with parents and staff between 16th January and 10th February 2023.

The decision has been called in for debate, reasons presented as questions have been provided.

2. Key Matters for the Committee's Consideration

Question 1: Further examination of costs to the local taxpayers

Local residents, via the Council will be left to pick up the bill for the £400,000 deficit of the St. Stephens school site when it closes. This is because of possible ongoing contract commitments at the point of closure, and possibly more agency staff are needed if permanent staff leave before closure. We want to know:

- What detailed help was given to reduce the school's deficit?
- Did it have a licensed deficit recovery plan in place and if so when did this start?

Response

The school went into a small £15,000 deficit at the end of March 2021 and planned to come back into balance by the end of March 2022. By September 2021 it was clear the school would not be able to recover their deficit before March 2022. Regular meetings were held with the school to review all budgets including the staffing structure. Unfortunately, despite making cost savings, support from a Finance Manager at the Council and support for a number of staff reorganisations it was not possible for St Stephen's to produce a viable 3-year budget plan including a deficit recovery plan.

Roll reductions have continued going from 142 in October 2019 to 76 in October 2022. As over 90% of school funding is based on pupil numbers, the school's funding has reduced significantly and the school has become financially unviable. It was not able to reduce costs further without compromising the quality of education and the curriculum on offer, leading to a significant worsening of the deficit increasing to £256,000 at the end of March 2023 and estimated to be about £400,000 on 31st August 2023, the date of proposed discontinuation (as part of the amalgamation). The London Diocesan Board for Schools was also involved in the discussions with the Council and the school.

The amalgamation proposal offers the best opportunity to secure not only the current, but the long-term sustainability of high-quality primary education for current and future pupils at both schools.

- Did it have a licensed deficit recovery plan in place and if so when did this start?

St Stephen's was not able to produce a 3-year deficit recovery plan, mainly due to its low school roll as over 90% of school funding is based on pupil numbers. Consequently, the two governing bodies approached the Council and the London Diocesan Board for Schools about an amalgamation proposal they had developed in order to deliver a sustainable educational offer for children at both schools at the St Mary Magdalene's site from September 2023 onwards.

Question 2: Lack of future plans for educational use in St, Stephen's school site

There appears to have been very little consultation on the future educational use of the school site once it closes. When St. Vincent de Paul and Westminster Cathedral schools were amalgamated in September 2022, detailed plans were agreed to retain Westminster Cathedral school site for educational use – and service the special needs provision in Westminster, especially in the South of the Borough.

- What detailed plans are in place to safeguard the continued educational use of St. Stephens?

Response

The trustees of St Stephen's Church are the landlords of the St Stephen's CoE school site. Given that the planning permission for the site is currently for educational use, the St Stephen's buildings were inspected earlier this year in collaboration with the Council to assess their suitability for other educational uses such as alternative provision or special educational needs. It was concluded that the configuration of the buildings, consisting of three adjoining structures on multiple levels with limited street or vehicular access and no disabled access facilities, made them impractical for the delivery of specialist, as opposed to mainstream, education. The cost of adaptation and backlog maintenance were also likely to be prohibitive.

There are ongoing discussions between the Council and the diocese to discuss the future use of this and any other sites where pupil numbers on roll are very low. We understand that there have been some informal discussions with three separate education providers about leasing the St Stephen's building but the marketing of the school to comply with Charities Act requirements cannot commence until the closure of the school site has been confirmed. It is understood that in the short-term the amalgamated school will continue to use the building for some educational activities, including after-school provision.

If you have any queries about this Report or wish to inspect any of the Background Papers, please contact Report Author:

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BACKGROUND PAPERS

Cabinet Member Decision