

INFORMAL CONSULTATION

Proposal to amalgamate St Stephen's Church of England Primary School and St Mary Magdalene's Church of England Primary School

Background

In recent years there has been a steady decline in the number of primary-school aged children in many inner-city areas, including Westminster.

There are several factors which appear to be contributing to this reduction:

- A falling birth rate.
- Benefit caps and pressure on social housing has led to families being rehoused in other areas outside Westminster.
- Reduced levels of inward migration, either as a result of Brexit or other economic or social forces, is leading to fewer families moving to London.
- Significant numbers of traditional multi-occupancy houses in the private rental/ownership sectors have reverted to single family occupancy.
- The affordability and scarcity of family housing means that increasing numbers of families choose to move out of central London as their children get older.
- Competition from the independent sector means that more affluent families are choosing to educate their children privately. This is a growing trend.
- Increasing levels of vacancies in primary schools in other Inner London boroughs supports increased movement of primary-aged pupils across LA boundaries.
- Research has shown that the demand for primary school places within Westminster is predicated to continue to decrease.

Here, in this north-west corner of the borough there are eight state primary schools within walking distance of each other. The shortfall in the number of children will have serious consequences for the schools' future viability.

St Stephen's CE Primary and St Mary Magdalene's CE Primary are one form entry schools both experiencing falling numbers on roll. St Stephen's in particular has seen a substantial decrease in pupil numbers. As at January 2023 at St Stephen's there were 74 pupils on roll (excluding nursery) representing 35% of the school's capacity of 210. At St Mary Magdalene's there were 133 pupils on roll (excluding nursery) representing 63% of the school's capacity of 210.

Government funding is on a per child basis (currently around £5,000 per child). Fewer pupils results in a reduction in funding. Since the appointment of a joint Executive Headteacher in September 2021, the two schools have increasingly shared resources in a bid to cut costs and manage under a reduced budget allocation without detriment to the quality of education of our children. This has extended to pupils and staff from each school engaging in more activities together (e.g. joint church services, joint summer party, joint sports day, Inset days, joint end-of-term party for staff). For the summer term St Stephen's Reception was based at St Mary Magdalene's which worked well.

Both schools follow the same curriculum, share curriculum subject leads and the staff jointly participate in various training sessions. Staff and parents have been kept regularly informed by the EHT as to the financial rationale for the schools sharing resources in this way and to the positive impact this has had on the quality of teaching and learning experienced by our pupils.

Nevertheless, and despite our best efforts, there continues to be significant financial pressure on our schools.

Regrettably this means that at current and projected pupil numbers, St Mary Magdalene's Primary School and, in particular, St Stephen's Primary School may, in the view of Governors, the diocese and the Local Authority (Westminster City Council), be financially unsustainable for the foreseeable future.

The Proposal

The Governors of St Stephen's Primary School and the Governors of St Mary Magdalene's Primary School, together with the Executive Headteacher, the Director of Education from the London Diocesan Board for Schools (LDBS) and our joint LDBS Primary School Link Adviser, have spent much time in discussion and prayer to determine the best way forward. The welfare and education of our pupils is key to providing them with a secure future. The following proposal has been made to ensure we offer the most sustainable and beneficial educational environment and continue to positively support pupils and parents.

The Governors of St Stephen's and St Mary Magdalene's CE Primary Schools are proposing to amalgamate (also referred to as merging) the two schools to form a 30 place (one form) entry primary school for 3 to 11-year-olds. The proposal is supported by the LDBS and by Westminster City Council.

However, it should be noted that this is a **proposal**. Parents play a key part in our school community and your feedback is important to us. The Governors of both schools are seeking parents' views on this proposal, together with the views of staff and pupils (details on how to share feedback are provided later in this document).

An amalgamation will create a single primary school from 1st September 2023 on the site of St Mary Magdalene's School, likely to be called St Mary Magdalene's and St Stephen's Church of England Primary School.

If the proposal goes ahead, St Stephen's School will close its doors on 31st August 2023, although consideration is being given for it to be used by the combined school for after school clubs or simply as additional space if needed.

There are many benefits to becoming a single primary school including greater investment in facilities and more effective use of funding to better support our pupils' needs and provide further enrichment activities.

Why are we proposing the change?

Our two schools do not have sufficient numbers of children to fill two forms of entry from September 2023 and we have vacancies across all year groups. For example, the average class size at St Stephen's excluding nursery is currently approximately 11 pupils per class, and 19 pupils per class at St Mary Magdalene's.

(It should be noted that nationally the average class size for KS1 in 2021-22 (including Reception) was 26.7 pupils and the average for KS2 was 27.6).

As our pupil numbers fall, each school's budget allocation falls, resulting in less money being provided to educate our children, pay salaries and manage the upkeep of our buildings.

The Governors of both schools are clear that now is the right time to move to becoming a single primary school in order to secure sustainable and high-quality education for our children now and into the future.

What are the benefits of becoming a single primary school?

By running only one school site, funding can be used more efficiently to provide an appropriate educational environment, rather than in having to stretch budgets to maintain two school buildings which take financial resources away from the children and staff. Projections show that pupil numbers are likely to continue to decline. By amalgamating, we would create stability for pupils, parents and teachers to focus on delivering the best educational outcomes.

By amalgamating into one school, we will be able to allocate more funding towards extra-curricular options and enrichment activities for pupils and their families, both before, during and after school.

There will also be more continuous professional development opportunities for staff – which will benefit the children - such as shared training and the chance to work more closely across the curriculum in order to gain experience and understanding of all key stages.

By becoming a single primary school there will be the opportunity for the communities from both schools to keep improving and moving forward, and to be part of an exciting new future together.

What will it mean for our children?

The objective is for all children currently attending both schools to be together on the St Mary Magdalene's School site. St Stephen's School was funded and built by St Stephen's Church in 1858. The church is committed to exploring and maintaining ongoing educational and community use at the site, with the support of the Local Authority and the diocese.

It is very much a priority for us to ensure that children and staff can safely be accommodated. The two school communities are already familiar with each other, and amalgamation provides an opportunity for the whole school communities to stay together.

It will mean that:

- investment in the facilities at the merged school on the St Mary Magdalene's School site will create excellent accommodation for all the children;
- children from both schools will have the opportunity to make new friends in a school which has a sustainable future;
- because the two schools already share a curriculum and many activities, arrangements in the merged school will feel familiar to the children. The differing needs of each age group will continue to be met;
- the Christian ethos, which is a strength of both schools, will remain paramount. The merged school will be the parish school for both St Mary Magdalene's and St Stephen's, with weekly shared collective worship in school, taken alternately by the Vicar of St Stephen's and the Vicar of St Mary Magdalene's, together with shared Church assemblies for the main festivals alternating between the two churches.

Who will be Headteacher?

Mrs Tonnie Read will continue as Executive Headteacher of our two schools. Mrs Read is an extremely effective Executive Headteacher who has been invaluable in establishing the successful partnership between our two schools and St John's Highbury Vale.

The Head of School at St Stephen's, Mrs Kate Daly, will continue until her contract ends on 31st August 2023. After the amalgamation, the combined school will come under the Headship of Ms Carol Gold, the current Head of School at St Mary Magdalene's. Ms Gold already knows St Stephen's School well and the Governing Boards from both schools are confident she and Mrs Read will provide stability and continuity in leadership through the period of change.

What will it mean for the staff?

A new staffing structure will need to be developed as part of the planning for September 2023 if a decision to amalgamate the schools is taken. In both schools, staffing changes have already been made because of falling numbers of children.

The exact structure for the future cannot be clear until we know whether the schools are amalgamating, the numbers of children and, therefore, the numbers of staff required.

Staffing structures for September 2023 will be clarified once numbers of children are known, and will, initially, be based on the staff structure required to support the numbers of children from each school. Existing staff at both schools will have an equal opportunity to apply for posts at the amalgamated school on the St Mary Magdalene's site.

As part of the consultation process, Governors will work with the Local Authority, our LDBS HR Adviser, Staff and their Unions to determine the best ways to manage any changes needed. The LA, LDBS and Governors are committed to avoiding compulsory redundancy.

Consultation meetings for staff will be held during the Spring term and throughout any agreed change processes.

Amalgamation provides greater protection for staff because more posts will be retained than would be the case if one school closed without being part of an amalgamation.

Consultation process

There are two stages to the consultation process. Firstly, the 'informal consultation' which will run for four weeks from January to February 2023.

If, following this informal consultation, it is agreed that the proposal will move to the next stage, there will be a statutory notice published by the Local Authority with the 'formal consultation' open for four weeks from the beginning of March before a final decision is taken on the amalgamation.

If we open as a newly formed school in September 2023, the Governors of both schools would like to mark the commencement and will be seeking your ideas and suggestions on launching the new amalgamated school. For example:

- How best to recognise the coming together of the two schools including a commemorative event for St Stephen's School
- A plaque celebrating the coming together of the schools
- Other ways in which the history and unique character of the two schools could be preserved

- A new school uniform (Note: A grace period would be facilitated to align pupil uniforms/implement a new uniform which would be provided in the first year of amalgamation at no charge to parents/carers).

Admissions

If the proposal is agreed, a single primary school would be created on 1 September 2023 and the following would apply:

- Children at St Mary Magdalene's CE Primary School will be automatically enrolled at the newly amalgamated school and receive a guaranteed place.
- Children at St Stephen's CE Primary School will be automatically enrolled at the newly amalgamated school and receive a guaranteed place.
- First admissions: Children who have applied for reception or nursery places at St Mary Magdalene's or St Stephen's for September 2023 would be offered places through the standard admissions process.
- Children with siblings at St Mary Magdalene's or St Stephen's School would be given sibling priority for September 2023 and subsequent years.
- Belonging to either parish of St Mary Magdalene's or St Stephen's would carry equal weight in the admissions criteria.
- After all other criteria have been considered if there are further applicants requesting places, a distance criterion would need to be used in a tiebreak. St. Mary Magdalene's School entrance would be used to measure home-school distances.

The Governors, the LDBS and the Local Authority strongly recommend that children remain at St Mary Magdalene's School and St Stephen's School and join together in the newly merged school on the St Mary Magdalene's site as we believe this is the least disruptive move for our children. However, in the event of any parent preferring to send their child to another school, places can be applied for through the termly In-Year Admissions process.

Why are we consulting you?

The Governing Boards, the LDBS and the Local Authority cannot simply decide to make changes to schools without first seeking the views of parents, staff, and other stakeholders. There is also a legal process which must be followed before changes can be made, and it is important that the Governing Boards, the LDBS, and the Local Authority hear your views before deciding whether and how to proceed.

We value your thoughts highly and want to gather your views because you are part of our school community.

We are organising opportunities for parents, carers, and other stakeholders to share views at meetings of both schools.

At St Stephen's CE Primary School (for StS parents)	At St Mary Magdalene's CE Primary School (for StMMParents)
Date: Monday 23 rd January at 4.30pm	Date: Tuesday 24 th January at 5.00pm
Date: Tuesday 31 st January at 9.00am	Date: Monday 30 th January at 9.00am

Information will also be

- published on the school websites;
- publicised at the schools;
- shared via newsletters sent home with children over the next few weeks;
- available at the school offices (available either by phone or in person).
- available at St Mary Magdalene's Church and at St Stephen's Church

What happens next?

The informal consultation period begins on Monday 16th January 2023 and ends on Friday 10th February at 3.30pm.

An Informal Consultation Response Form can be found at the end of this document for you to share your feedback on the proposal.

Completed forms should be returned to the consultation boxes in your school's reception area. The same form is also available on the school websites and, when submitted, will be forwarded to the Governors.

Following the consultation process, a steering group, including Governors, will review your feedback and use it to make a response to the Local Authority on whether or not it recommends proceeding with the school amalgamation proposal.

The full Governing Board of each school will also consider your feedback in its representations if the Local Authority decides to move to a formal statutory notice consultation in March 2023.

If the Local Authority decides to proceed, a public notice will specify details of the final proposal and there will be a period of at least four weeks when representations can be made during March 2023. This will be the final opportunity to make any comments on the proposal.

It is then anticipated that a final decision on whether to amalgamate the schools will be made in early April 2023.

How can I get more information on the proposal?

St Stephen's parents are warmly invited to visit St Mary Magdalene's School. Further details will be provided about open mornings at the school when you will have the opportunity to visit.

We understand that parents from both schools may have concerns and queries and we will be happy to answer your queries, which can be posted in the consultation boxes in each school's reception area.

We respectfully ask that you direct any questions or feedback as outlined in this document, and not by questioning school staff, who themselves are being consulted in a similar way.

The Governors of both schools are committed to giving parents, children, and staff as much information as possible and will update you regularly. However, please note that we may not be able to answer some questions until after a decision is made.

This document, and other information, is also available on both school websites:

St Stephen's: www.st-stephensprimary.co.uk

St Mary Magdalene's: www.st-marymagdalene.westminster.sch.uk

If the Local Authority decides to publish a public statutory notice, further details of this proposal will also be available in the Consultation sections of the council's website.

Feedback from the statutory consultation will also be published on the council's website during the Spring Term.

How do I respond?

You can either complete the Informal Consultation Response Form on the following page and return it to the consultation box in your school's reception area, or you can complete it electronically and email it to:

office@st-stephensprimary.co.uk (St Stephen's parents)

office@st-mm.co.uk (St Mary Magdalene's parents)

Your views and feedback are important to us and we would encourage you to come along to one of the meetings (details provided earlier in this document).

Thank you for taking the time to consider our proposal, we look forward to hearing your perspective.

Pauline Hudson-Evans
Chair of Governors
St Stephen's
CE Primary School

Felicia Asiedu
Co-Chair of Governors
St Mary Magdalene's
CE Primary School

Matthew Champkin
Co-Chair of Governors
St Mary Magdalene's
CE Primary School

INFORMAL CONSULTATION RESPONSE FORM**Proposal to Amalgamate
St Stephen's Church of England Primary School and
St Mary Magdalene's Church of England Primary School**

Our proposal is to bring St Stephen's and St Mary Magdalene's Church of England Primary Schools together as one merged primary school from 1st September 2023 at the St Mary Magdalene school site.

We welcome your views on this proposal. Please fill in this form and return it to the school office no later than Friday 10th February 2023. You can also download the form online and email it to the relevant address given above.

- 1) Do you agree with the proposal to amalgamate our two schools to become one school?

Please circle/ delete as appropriate:

YES

NO

- 2) If you like the proposal, please say why you think it is a good idea:

- 3) If you dislike the proposal, please tell us why you are concerned:

Any other comments, issues, or questions? (Please feel free to use the back of this form if you need more space)

	St. Stephen's	St Mary Magdalene's
I am a child attending	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I have child/ren attending	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I am a staff member at	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I am a Governor at	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other (please describe)		

Please note: If you are completing this form jointly, or for more than one role, please tick each box that applies so that your views are included within each group you are part of.

Your Name (Optional) _____

Please return this form to the relevant school by 3.30pm on Friday 10th February 2023 Feedback from question one will be summarised numerically. Comments will be typed-up and anonymised. This information will be made available to the public (via the school website), but all respondents' comments and information will be anonymised.