

**Public Consultation Meeting on Proposal to Merge Dunston Park  
Infant School and St Mary's CE Junior School**

**St Mary's CE Junior School**  
Monday, 12th July 2004, 7.30pm

Minutes of Meeting

**Independent Chair:** Andy Green, Chairman of Governors, Hampstead Norreys CE Primary School

**Attendees:** Approx. 50 Parents and Members of Local Community  
Ian Pearson (IP), Head of Education Service, West Berkshire Council  
John Powell, Service Development Manager Access  
Gordon Joyner, Oxford CE Diocese

**Chairman's Introduction**

Andy Green explained that the meeting was being held in order that the LEA could set out their proposals and give an opportunity for questions from both parents and the local community.

**West Berkshire Council's Proposals**

Ian Pearson set out the Council's proposals. There are three different consultations looking at three pairs of schools. He emphasised that each consultation was separate.

He explained that there was a need for good, sustainable schools in communities serving the needs of children well. The DfES/Audit Commission have highlighted the need to remove surplus places within schools nationally, to better utilise limited resources. There is a need to look at the future as well as the present situations. He explained that primary school numbers were dropping nationally because of lower birth rates, this is uneven across the authorities because of housing developments etc. A review has been carried out across West Berkshire and in some schools there are a significant number of surplus places. Pupil numbers are falling over time and the projection is that they will continue to do so.

The proposal to amalgamate Dunston Park Infant School and St Mary's CE Junior School was presented to the Council's Executive on 17<sup>th</sup> June. Prior to this evening's meeting, meetings had been held with staff, governors and the Diocese. Any savings would be "ploughed" back into the new school.

The proposal is to merge the two schools as this is the best arrangement to safeguard staffing. The proposal is for 1 ½ forms of entry (45 pupils), creating a school similar in size to Birch Copse, Hungerford and Whitelands Park. The status of the new school was proposed as community or CE Voluntary Aided. However, Voluntary Controlled would also be feasible. There will be one head, a single governing body and one staff group. The new school would

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have a nursery and be on the same site serving the same catchment area and same linked secondary school. At the beginning of its creation it will be based in the existing buildings and the LEA would wish to engage the school, community and diocese in discussions as how to redevelop the new school in the best way.

The process is now in the middle of the consultation period, the public meeting giving an opportunity for the community to discuss the proposals. The Executive will need to consider the outcomes of the consultation process, and councillors will either agree to proceed or otherwise. If the merger is approved then public notices will be published, giving a period of time for objections to be lodged. The process will be considered by the School Organisation Committee and, if agreed, would have a target implementation date of September 2005.

The LEA is not seeking to put down a blue print but in the event of agreement a plan would be put together to give good quality reconfigured buildings for children to learn in. In addition, it would have provision for community use.

Consultations have taken place with staffs and their union representatives. A temporary governing body would be formed to appoint a new head in the first instance. Staffing appointments would be made throughout the new school. The new headship would be offered to the existing heads in the first instance. Overall the children will number the same as at present so teaching and classroom staff would be able to be slotted into the new structure.

### **School Comments A**

Nicky Hillier, Chair of Dunston Park Governing Body

The governing body have met to discuss the proposals and feel they owe a future to the community to offer the best to all children. This must be at the heart of any decision to be taken. The governing body are in agreement with the proposals in principle.

### **School Comments B**

Carolyn Peel, Chair of St Mary's CE School Governing Body

As a governing body they agree in principle with the proposals as being in the best interests of all children. They would also like to encourage an improved community usage.

### **Questions from the Floor**

- As far as surplus places were concerned, there are already two very large schools in Thatcham – Francis Baily and Parsons Downs. Could not these schools be made smaller and numbers be redirected to Dunston Park and St Mary's.

A Although this was a very good point, notice needs to be taken of travelling distance. In terms of reducing numbers in popular schools it would be very difficult to get School Organisation Committee agreement. A annual return is made and in 2003 in the Junior School there were 32 surplus places but this had grown to 69 in 2004. As far as the Infant School is concerned the surplus stands at approximately 30%.

- The questioner felt that the graphs shown as part of the presentation were misleading when compared with the figures.

A Projections have trends built in but exaggerate possible take up of places.

- How would the one head be appointed?

A The new head will be appointed by the temporary governing body. Any governing body formed needs to be balanced (i.e. drawn from both existing bodies and hopefully new

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members). It will be up to the existing heads if they wish to apply. Inevitably one head will not be appointed and it is possible that the new governing body decide neither existing head would be appropriate and appoint from outside through a national advert.

- What are the potential savings? Why is only community and VA status being considered?

A It has been considered between schools and diocese and agreed that legally there are three options:

- Community – as the Infants is at present
- CE Controlled – as the Juniors is at present
- CE Aided – Director of Education (Diocese) felt CE more comfortable if new school formed was to be voluntary aided. The Diocese was supportive of the merger, but would prefer any new school to be a church school.

A As far as savings are concerned, in revenue terms there will be savings by removing duplicate posts e.g. headteacher. The budget for any new school would be protected at the sum of current separate budgets for the first three years.

Any capital projects costs wouldn't impinge on revenue budgets.

- At present the junior school is voluntary controlled. Is it correct that the new school couldn't stay as a VC school because the Government doesn't want new VC schools created?

A When options for the new school were discussed with the Diocese the feeling within the Diocese is that they would rather not create new Controlled schools but there is nothing legally to prevent this happening if it was the preferred wish.

- What assurances are there that children won't be "squashed" into the new school if it is going to be built for 315 when a number of 366 is projected. What guarantees are there to ensure there will be sufficient space.

A It is felt that the figures are over-estimated based on undershooting previous forecasts. It is felt that there will be sufficient space to accommodate the catchment and parental choice. The LEA has consistently built classrooms physically bigger than government guidelines suggest.

1 ½ class intake won't be based just on existing buildings but on a redesign. It hasn't been decided on which site the new classrooms will be built. New space would be created for the community, after school clubs and holiday use.

- Some VA schools give priority to children of church-going parents. The admissions criteria is up to the governing body to agree. What assurances are that children will not be "penalised" if their parents are not regular churchgoers.

A There are good quality community schools with "church" labels. The LEA would not want schools to put in place an admission policy that would restrict admissions. Policies have to be approved by the Admissions' Forum.

- If admissions' policy is worded properly there is nothing the authority can do to prevent admissions.

A A church school governing body would have to take views of local people and the views and advice of the diocese.

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A show of hands indicated that only three people in the audience were in favour of a merger of any kind.

- Have the diocese given any clear views of which way they would prefer the new school to go.

A (Gordon Joyner) The Diocese would prefer a new school to be VA but if there were strong views of going VC then VC it could be. The Diocese has representation on the Schools' Organisation Committee and they would make their feelings known at the appropriate time.

- My daughter is 21 and attended the schools. She believes that the community is frightened that the new school would be too big and particularly so with disability issues. The links are good between the two schools with two good schools existing side by side. What will happen to Dunston Park? In summing up she doesn't believe the merger to be a good proposition unless the "little people" are kept separate.
- The Vicar of St Mary's – The Junior school is an important part of parish life carrying the name of the church. It does what every Christian school should do – serves community. If the merger goes through he would be delighted that the new school would continue to work and serve the community and do it as best as it can. The VA route would be the preferred way and easier to serve the community. The first priority is to have a school serving the community with a Christian ethos.
- The questioner was concerned that VC option was left out of the consultation document.

- Have employment levels within the area been considered?

A Population flows have been considered from council tax data, health data.

- What about any future housing plans?

A These are constantly under review and it would seem unlikely that any further significant development would be built in the catchment area.

- Two schools at the moment. Has consideration been given to how the children feel changing schools?

A Understanding about the thought of changing schools at the age 7 but many parents like the idea of their children going through one school from 5 – 11.

Dunston Park School is built on church land and it is not the intention of the church to sell any land. The Diocese would need to sit down with all interested parties to discuss possible future uses of the land.

- What if any money was given by the developers of Dunston Park estate to the two schools as has happened in Hermitage.

A As there were spaces at the two schools it was not necessary for the developers to donate capital for extending.

A PRU is being built on the old reserve school site.

- What about the nursery? Wouldn't want my nursery-aged children to attend a primary school.

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A Quite a large number of primary schools have successful nursery provision. Nursery provision tends to be set up separate from the majority of children with a separate entrance, secure area etc.

Benefits can be derived on a range of fronts. Savings can be used to enhance existing facilities and would hope to provide enhanced successful and sustainable facilities over time. The funding would be similar to other schools of similar size. Many schools do operate separate playgrounds for different reasons. Nurseries tend to have completely separate areas.

The Chair encouraged everyone to complete their response forms and return to the LEA.

- Doesn't believe the schools would be better after period of disruption
- The questioner wanted a good educational reason for the merger and can't see one.
- Doesn't mind the thought of the proposed merger or remaining the same. However, can't understand the difference between the government driving decisions or the council deciding what's best.

A Following the government statement on surplus places the LEA looked at all schools across the authority. Theoretically, village schools could be closed, but this would have a huge impact on their communities. The alternative was to look to retain and improve existing schools. The consultation will consult with the community, parish and town councils and area forums. The results will be presented to the Council with recommendations – no decision has been taken. With Dunston Park/St Mary's there is an added dimension because of the church connection. If objections are lodged by the Schools' Organisation Committee the proposals will go to The Adjudicator. The aim is to create better facilities and an improved learning environment. Greater co-ordination and consistency across Early Years, KS1 and KS2. Continue to drive up standards.

- It is the general feeling that the merger will go ahead regardless of views expressed. Will the schools remain as they are if the merger doesn't go ahead? It was also expressed that it was believed to be a government initiative to reduce numbers.

A No decision has yet been taken – we are in the consultation phase.

The government has pronounced on infant class sizes (maximum 30) which limits numbers which can be admitted. As far as small classes are concerned there is an issue of affordability. The present funding formula needs 27 in a class for it to be run economically. Some classes can be run efficiently on larger numbers to enable small classes to operate.

If the merger doesn't go ahead the problem of surplus places and options would have to be revisited. The LEA believes a good school would be formed from the merger proposal.

- If the school merger goes ahead and numbers continue downwards what happens.

A The judgement is that a plateau would be reached.

- Cost of surplus places

A Surplus places cost money in differing ways:

In terms of lighting and heating and classes not needed – capital cost in formula funding. Number of staff needed to teach numbers may not be the most economic. The cost of educating a child at Dunston Park is significantly higher than the average.

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### **Chair's closing thoughts**

Please let your thoughts be known to the LEA and Councillors. The closing date for comments is 18<sup>th</sup> August.

Meeting closed at 9.04pm