

Informal Consultation Report

Guardian Angels and St Anne's Catholic Primary Schools

December 19th 2019

Report compiled by Dr Helen Jenner, Independent Consultant, Tower Hamlets Primary Review.

Introduction

This report summarises the planning undertaken to lead to a public consultation, and the responses to that consultation, regarding the possible amalgamation of Guardian Angels and St Anne's Catholic Schools.

The consultation was held during the second half of the Autumn Term 2019, and concluded on December 13th 2019. Parents were advised of the forthcoming consultation on 28th October, and received detailed Consultation papers on 8th November.

Background

St Anne's Primary School has been included in the Primary Review since June 2018, because of falling rolls in the Bethnal Green area, which have meant lower numbers joining St Anne's School over the last 4 years.

St Anne's is judged to be a "good" school by OFSTED. Leadership and governance are both reported to be strong. The governors and Headteacher have ensured that good financial management has enabled them to remain financially viable, and continue to improve their school, during a period of falling numbers of local children, and financial austerity.

Guardian Angels Schools is judged as "requiring improvement" by OFSTED. In Spring 2019 Guardian Angels School Headteacher and Chair of Governors resigned and an agreement was made for St Anne's School Headteacher to support the school during a difficult period. Guardian Angels School Governing Body became aware during the Summer Term 2019 of a significant issue with their budget, from the previous year which had not been addressed. The Local Authority have provided additional financial, and HR support, to help address some of the anomalies and to establish a true budget position. This work is ongoing but it became apparent by the end of the Summer Term that a deficit of around £300,000 has been accrued.

The Local Authority is not able to agree to funding schools running in deficit, particularly where falling numbers would indicate that a loan may not be repayable. The Diocese and Local Authority agreed that Guardian Angels school should be included in the Primary Review process, because it was no longer financially stable.

The Tower Hamlets Primary Review has commissioned an Independent Consultant, Dr Helen Jenner, to work with schools they had identified as being at risk due to demographic change in the Borough. As well as working with the schools, Dr Jenner was asked to produce a public report “Future Ambitions”¹ setting out principles for developing school relationships for resilience and excellence. This document was shared with all Headteachers, Unions and Governors in March 2019. Regular updates on the Primary Review have been included in the termly Director’s Report for Governors.

The Summer Term edition of “Family Matters” included an article about the Primary Review. In July 2019, a letter was sent to all parents in Tower Hamlets, by the Director of Children’s Services advising parents of the primary review and the need for significant change in school organisation.

Governors Planning

Supporting documents for governors’ meetings and communications with parents are available in the attached appendices.

Governors at both schools agreed in September that a Steering Group consisting of Chairs, Deputy Chairs and the Headteacher from Guardian Angels and St Anne’s schools, supported by the Catholic Diocese and an Independent Consultant should lead the work on considering the implications of the review for the two schools.

They have met, in various groupings, regularly since the Local Authority first agreed both the schools as being “in scope” for review, in September 2019. All documents shared with governors, parents and other stakeholders have been signed off by this group, and agreed by the Local Authority.

The Guardian Angels Governing Body met on 12th September to be briefed on the Primary Review, the falling rolls, and the deficit budget. They met again on 8th October to consider the possible options moving forward. Staff at both schools were informed of the discussions on 8th October, and a letter was sent on 10th October to parents from both schools, informing them of the work.

An Extraordinary Joint Meeting, followed by Individual Governing Body meetings on held on 17th October, to consider moving to consultation on a proposal to amalgamate the two schools. This meeting agreed that consultation should take place between 4th November and 13th December. It was also agreed that consultation information should be carefully drafted and information letter would be sent to all parents, at the same time in both schools, immediately after half term, so that staff would be on hand to address any concerns, and reinforce the available consultation opportunities. The consultation documents were circulated on 8th November.

The consultation process

¹ The Future Ambitions Report is available on the Tower Hamlets Primary Review Website.

The consultation document² was prepared, and agreed with the Local Authority and the Catholic Diocese. This was given in paper copy to all parents, circulated to Tower Hamlets Headteachers, through the Headteachers' Bulletin, emailed by the Local Authority to staffing unions, and the Local Authority has also notified the Secretary of State of potential changes.

Information about the consultation was also placed on both schools' websites. A consultation feedback box was displayed at the reception of both schools and email addresses were created to enable online responses.

The following consultation opportunities were provided for parents.

Parents Meetings

Guardian Angels	13 th November 5.30pm	20 th November 8.45 am
St Anne's	14 th November 8.45 am	20 th November 5.30 pm

For the second of these meetings a powerpoint presentation was prepared, (see supporting documents) addressing the issues raised in the first meetings and providing more background data information.

The first meeting at Guardian Angels was understandably emotional, but did raise very important parental concerns. All meetings since then have been more measured. The school staff at both schools should be congratulated for the hard work they have put into supporting parents and children's concerns as what is a significant change.

Coffee mornings

Guardian Angels	27 th November
St Anne's	28 th November

Posters advertising the Local Authority "Future Ambitions Drop In", held on December 11th 2019, were displayed at the entrances to both schools.

The consultation document sent to all parents included a consultation response form. At every meeting with parents they were encouraged to return the form, and any other comments they wished to make using the consultation boxes. Parents were also invited to reply by email to specific consultation email addresses.

Staff meetings regularly discussed the implications of Amalgamation.

Meetings with trade union representatives were held at both schools on November 13th (Guardian Angels) and 14th (St Anne's). Staff from Guardian Angels provided a very useful set of questions which will be responded to by the start of the Spring Term.

The proposal was explained to children in Assemblies and they were given the opportunity to discuss in their classes.

² Included in Appendix "Supporting Documents"

Staff, children, parents and other stakeholders were all invited to respond to the consultation and to raise questions. A box was provided in the school office so that responses and queries could be easily and anonymously made if people wished.

Governors agreed responses from the different forms of consultation should be summarized in a report for Governors, to be considered at a further joint meeting on Monday 16th December. The independent consultant agreed to compile the report.

Consultation Responses

There was good attendance at all meetings.

The figures below are the numbers of people who signed in at meetings.

Guardian Angels Meetings	St Anne's Meeting
13 th Nov – 23	14 th Nov – 19
20 th Nov – 14	20 th Nov – 8
28 th Nov – 12	27 th Nov - 9

No parents or governors chose to attend the Local Authority “Future Ambitions for Primary Schools” event on December 11th. It was promoted with posters at the entrance to both schools and two members of staff attended.

47 written responses were received from Guardian Angels School, and 32 from St Anne's School.

The majority of responses, both in meetings and in writing, at St Anne's School, were very positive.

Parents at Guardian Angels School are understandably more anxious, and many would prefer that their school did not close. However, a number of those parents have also commented that they understood why this might need to happen, and wanted transition planning to be considered as part of consultation processes before Cabinet reach a decision next February. There were positive views about the amalgamation expressed at both schools.

Questions raised at the meetings, and in writing, have been summarized and logged to ensure they could be responded to in a “Frequently Asked Questions” format moving forward. Some points were raised as statements rather than questions, these have also been included as “Statements and views”. Key points have been included in a joint feedback letter to parents and staff from both governing bodies. A “Top 10 Frequently Asked Questions” document will be shared with parents in the Spring Term. A draft of this is attached as Appendix 1 more detailed log of all questions and statements made during this stage of consultation will be available on the school website.

Notes from meetings, and individual forms, are available from the Headteacher.

Key messages are summarized below:

Parents felt that strong reasons for supporting the move to an amalgamation were – more sustainable finances, increased staff and other resources, increased potential for school improvement and increased play space. They feel that this is a good way to protect quality Catholic education in Tower Hamlets. They were hopeful that bringing both schools together would also increase the range of specialist skills their children could access - for example there might be a wider range of curriculum experts on the staff. They are also keen to meet children and parents from the two schools to increase friendship and support opportunities.

Most parents at Guardian Angels would prefer not to see their school closed. They are however, mainly, pleased that they are guaranteed a place at St Anne's which most recognize is a good Catholic School, they would however prefer it to be nearer. Some are disappointed that they cannot be guaranteed a place at their school of choice, because other schools are full.

Main concerns focused on the distance between the two schools, whether transport would be provided, school uniform changes, after school and breakfast club provision and the impact and insecurity for their children and school staff.

Some parents are under the impression that Guardian Angels School was a more successful school than St Anne's, this does not tie in with the OFSTED reports for the two schools. Some parents are concerned that they have heard that the surrounding area at St Anne's is less safe than at Guardian Angels. Those parents who have visited St Anne's have been much less anxious since their visits.

Those parents at Guardian Angels who were positive about the amalgamation proposal referred to the maintenance of good Catholic education, and had visited St Anne's and seen for themselves the quality of provision, and the pleasant local environment.

A number of Guardian Angels parents have been sufficiently anxious about the proposals to have decided to move their children to other schools immediately (approximately 23 are expected to leave at the end of this term).

Parents at St Anne's and Guardian were clear that they wanted the impact of changes to be minimized. There are some questions that they would prefer to have answered immediately, for example which building would their children be taught in, would friendship groups be maintained, will there be uniform, school name and school logo changes. They do understand that some cannot be addressed until the Local Authority have reached a decision on whether to proceed with the amalgamation.

Parents at both schools expressed a wish to meet the parents from the other schools. This is being addressed through joint coffee mornings planned for January and February.

Some parents, particularly at Guardian Angels School, are concerned that a decision has already been taken. They also wondered whether all options had been fully considered,

including the possibility of a phased amalgamation, amalgamation with other schools or closure. Not all parents were aware of the significant financial deficit at Guardian Angels School. Some were concerned by the sudden departure of their previous Headteacher, who had been there for many years and did not understand why St Anne's had been asked to help support the school. This has meant that some parents had heard rumours and are unclear about what is fact and what is not.

A petition, with some inaccurate information has been circulated through the Change.org website. This has been signed by 748 people (at 14th Dec 2019), but has not been formally raised or reported to governors as yet. The petition includes some factual inaccuracies. The key points it raises have been included in the Questions and statements log, available on the school website.

Overall, the efforts to keep parents involved, listen to their concerns, opportunities to visit St Anne's School have increased confidence that the leadership and governors from the schools will ensure they are kept well informed and concerns will be addressed.

The importance of maintaining a high standard of education was seen as crucial to any change being successful.

Staff feedback positive reasons to support Amalgamation. They are concerned that falling numbers and amalgamation may impact on staffing structures, and that there may be job losses. They feel that the family visits, football match and day visits for Years 3, 4 and 5 have been positive and are pleased that relationship building has begun, even though there has been no decision made. They recognize there would be a need to work together as a single team to prepare for change, but also feel that a relatively quick move is less unsettling for everyone than a slower time scale.

Initial upset, particularly at the notion of closing the school and the way in which some parents had heard about the consultation (not as planned by governors) has been well managed by school staff, which is reducing anxiety somewhat at Guardian Angels School. After an understandably emotional first meeting with parents at Guardian Angels School professional discussion, and strong engagement from staff, parents and children with the process, and the positive response to feedback received puts both schools staff and governors in a strong position to responding positively to the proposals, as well as continuing to be mindful of the anxieties the significant change can raise. Governors and staff see the change as protecting quality Catholic education, most parents at St Anne's School and a few at Guardian Angels School recognize this. The activities organised by the staff are gradually increasing that understanding.

Responses to the consultation form are summarized in a PDF³ which has been shared with governors. Individual Response Forms are available for viewing on request to the schools. They will be kept for 1 year.

³ See Appendix "Feedback from Response Form"

Although not formally raised at any of the meetings, or included in any written feedback parents at Guardian Angels, and some other schools, have reported being asked to sign an online petition, set up by a grandparent from Guardian Angels School. The petition wording itself does contain misinformation, but has over 700 online signatures. Comments made include concern at closing any school, concerns from those attending, past attendees and those with friends or family attending at a school they care about closing and that the provision of places in faith schools is being undermined. The petitioners state that it will be sent to the Education Secretary, the Mayor of London and “Gavin Williams”. The Local Authority are aware of the petition and have been asked to provide a response for the likely recipients. The misinformation elements have been addressed in meetings (without reference to the petition) and will be included in the FAQs/ statements and views information section. As part of the information for the petition recipients, and as information for parents the Guardian Angels OFSTED report, an analysis of the percentage of Catholic primary school places and vacancies in the Borough, and further information on the school’s financial position have all been referenced.

One response from the local PRU raised the possibility of the Guardian Angels school site being used as a possible Primary PRU, particularly because the site is quite central, with bus routes from around the Borough converging at Mile End.

Recommendations

No issues have been raised by staff, parents or children that would suggest that would preclude progressing to issuing statutory notices, particularly given the financial position at Guardian Angels and the low numbers of children applying. Stakeholders are keen to see a decision reached quickly so that, depending on the decision, planning can progress to the next stages.

The publishing of statutory notices as soon as possible is recommended. If the proposal to amalgamate the schools from September 2020 were to be agreed, there is a need for staff and governors to start work on detailed transition activities to reduce uncertainty and build change resilience to support the create of one school team, with a single ethos, ready for the Autumn Term.

28 of the written responses (out of 58 in total) recorded a preference that the amalgamation should not go ahead, predominantly because respondents did not want Guardian Angels School to close. Of these, 12 raised travel as a major barrier, and indicated that if this could be addressed they recognize amalgamation, and the opportunity to move to St Anne’s together as a positive solution in difficult circumstances. If the Local Authority and governors were able to offer some assurance around the exceptional provision of transport, given the forced relocation of children (as they might if a school needed to be temporarily re-located).

The Local Authority admissions team have undertaken an analysis of distance to school from Guardian Angels home addresses.

Rec - Year 2		
Distance to school	Guardian Angels	St Anne's
Less than 2 miles	50	26
Greater than 2 miles	5	29
Total	55	55

Year 3 - Year 5		
Distance to school	Guardian Angels	St Anne's
Less than 3 miles	80	72
Greater than 3 miles	4	12
Total	84	84

41 pupils would be eligible for travel assistance under the LA's Travel Assistance policy should they move to St Anne's, as the distance they would be travelling would be more than 2 miles for Key Stage One children and 3 miles for Key Stage Two. The Local Authority should take this into account and let governors and parents know how they would address this as soon as possible. Governors may also wish to consider whether they wish to support the travel arrangements for a wider group of children.

The governing bodies and school staff should continue to work with Diocese and LA to address the questions raised by parents, and to continue to plan activities between the two schools. This work is seen as positive for the two school communities and is building expertise between the two schools, regardless of whatever decision is reached.

If the proposal does go ahead, I would recommend an additional joint INSET (In-service training) day for the schools. The Guardian Angels school building would need to be cleared and tidied and preparations for additional children would need to be made at St Anne's Schools. These arrangements may require additional school closure days (perhaps 2 at Guardian Angels and 1 at St Anne's).

The scope for using the Guardian Angels site should be explored. The PRU have expressed an interest. The Guardian Angels community would prefer that it is not sold off to create luxury flats.