

Stage One Consultation Feedback Report St Matthias School

October 20th 2020

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

Introduction

This report summarises the planning undertaken to lead to a public stage one consultation, and the responses to that consultation, on whether or not St Matthias Church of England Primary School Governing Body should support the Local Authority to formally consult on the closure of St Matthias School, through the publication of a Statutory Notice (stage two). An earlier version of the report was sent to governors to support them to reach an informed decision at their meeting on October 8th 2020.

Background

St Matthias School Governing Body and the London Diocesan Board for Schools (LDBS) were prompted by the Tower Hamlets Primary Review¹ to consider the sustainability of St Matthias C of E Primary School, given its vulnerability to falling rolls. The Governing Body reluctantly reached the conclusion that to close the school and relocate children to other nearby schools would be the best solution to optimising educational provision in the area.

The Tower Hamlets Primary Review 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”² setting out principles for developing school relationships for resilience and excellence. This document was shared with the Diocese, 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, and discussed by the Primary Review Action Group (PRAG), on which the Diocese and Headteachers are represented.

Governors Planning

The governing body have met on several occasions, including directly with the Local Authority, LDBS and with the Lead Member for Children’s Services to consider the future of the school. They also sought the advice of an independent finance consultant, to explore

¹ Tower Hamlets Primary Review

https://www.towerhamlets.gov.uk/ignl/education_and_learning/schools/Primary_Review_for_parents.aspx

² The Future Ambitions Report is available on the Tower Hamlets Primary Review Website.

options. They have been supported by LDBS, the Independent Consultant and Local Authority staff to review the implications for the school, and to undertake a pre-publication consultation.

Governors and the Headteacher have met, in various groupings, regularly since the Local Authority first identified the school as being “in scope” for review, in July 2018. There have been several changes in Chair of Governors since that time, and three Headteachers. In June 2020 it was agreed that Julian Morant, the Headteacher at Christchurch would be Executive Headteacher at St Matthias, when the Acting Headteacher left to take up a post in another school.

A Governing Body meeting with governors was held on 26th May to discuss the Primary Review, the Future Ambitions Report, and the best responses for the school. The governing body agreed arrangements for informal (pre-publication) consultation on the possible closure of the school, to run from 8th June – 30th September.

Summer Term Activities

A consultation document³ was prepared, and agreed, with the Local Authority and the London Diocesan Board for Schools. This was given in paper copy to all parents, circulated to Tower Hamlets Headteachers, through the Headteacher’s Bulletin; emailed to Trade Unions, and the Secretary of State has been notified of potential changes.

Information about the consultation was also placed on the church website, because the school website was not working in the Summer Term. The link was sent to all parents. The website included a letter to parents and staff from the Chair of Governors, a copy of the consultation document, and 3 short videos explaining the situation.

Because of coronavirus open meetings were not held in the Summer Term, however a range of ways to feed into the consultation were organized:

1. A box was set up in the playground at the entrance to the school, where people could leave comments, response forms and any questions.
2. A response form (or any other written format) at the end of the consultation document to record views was able to be emailed, posted, or handed to the school.
3. A special email address was set up for comments
4. Personal phone calls were offered.
5. The Local Authority consultant was available for 1 to1 socially distanced questions/feedback on July 8th
6. Virtual “Zoom” meetings were also set up for staff and parents on July 8th

An update report was provided for the LA, Governors and LDBS on July 22nd.⁴ It also made recommendations for further consultation activities.

Autumn Term Activities.

³ Available on request to the school

⁴ Available on request to the school

Julian Morant took over as Headteacher at the start of the Autumn Term 2020.

In meetings with the Headteacher and Chair of Governors it was agreed that there should be more face to face opportunities for parents to feed into the consultation.

The following opportunities have taken place during September

1. To actively engage the parents on 8th and 10th September parents were spoken to at the school gate.

This led to discussions, questions and comments engaging 24 parents on Tuesday and 26 on Thursday. These have been included in the attached Frequently Asked Questions summary.

2. A further opportunity to attend a zoom meeting (14th September) was taken up by 4 parents.
3. Staff were offered the opportunity to attend a further zoom meeting, no-one chose to do so
4. A playground briefing meeting for parents was held Friday 18th September, at 9.15 am, attended by 14 parents and 4 staff members, and a second briefing was held on September 28th, at 2.45 pm, which was attended by 13 parents.

Questions raised in these meetings have been addressed in the attached Frequently Asked Questions summary.

5. The Headteacher has also had regular discussions with staff, and all staff have had a 1-1 meeting, with the Headteacher, to discuss their individual concerns and plans. An optional staff meeting will also be arranged for staff to hear the feedback from the pre-publication consultation.
6. Groups of parents have also visited nearby local schools.
7. SENCOs and Headteachers from the 3 closest schools have had meetings to discuss transition.
8. Parents and staff were reminded that they do have the opportunity to submit written responses.

In addition, a large number of individual queries have been addressed by Pupil Services, the Parent and Family Support Team and the Independent Consultant about admissions processes. These are not detailed in this report because they are not questions pertaining to St Matthias School. They are, however, an indicator of the anxiety that parents are feeling, despite messages of re-assurance and the guarantee of a good local school place in September 2021, if the decision is taken to close the school.

Written Responses Received

5 forms were received, all from parents, in the Summer Term.
A further 20 were received in the Autumn Term (1 parent submitted 2 forms)
8 from staff members
8 from parents
2 from members of staff who are also parents
1 Other (not specified)

5 responses accepted, or partially accepted the proposal; 1 was unsure and 18 did not accept the proposal. One parent submitted 2 forms but this has been counted as 1 response.

Of those who said no, they did not accept the proposal, reasons given were:

Children doing well/ Good school 13
Other schools too far away 4
Affect on education 7
Wasn't expected 2
Too short notice 4
Upsetting for child 5
Don't like the idea of partnership 2
Will SEN needs be met 3
Accessibility of building 3
Concern that decision is being taken because "money talks" 1
Job concerns 2
Strength of staff team 2

Across responses a number of other specific points were made:

2 said Christchurch partnership is appropriate for location reasons and because its C of E
3 felt the partnership with Christchurch is quite limited
3 asked that good support be given if children have to move school
1 asked for the proposal to be reconsidered
2 felt the decision had already been taken
1 suggested that William Davis should be closed rather than St Matthias
I felt that communication with parents has not been clear enough over last 2 years
3 were concerned that visits to local schools may have created anxiety, rather than reduced it.

In one to one discussions and meetings with parents strong support for the school has been voiced.

Parents and staff are sad that the school may close, and parents appreciate the quality of education their children have received.

Parents understood that numbers of children attending St Matthias had fallen, and have heard rumours about the future of the school, for many years. Some parents felt that communication has not been transparent, and wondered whether more could have been done in the past, although they do recognise that other schools in Tower Hamlets and across London are facing similar challenges.

Some parents wondered whether it would be possible to close other schools, rather than St Matthias, or to amalgamate schools.

Parents sought clarification on whether they should move their children now. Re-assurance was given that there are sufficient places across the 3 closest schools (William Davis, St Anne's and Christchurch) for all the children and that the Local Authority recommends that children stay at St Matthias as a decision has not yet been made. If the decision is taken to close the school children will be fully supported with a transition programme, in the Summer Term, so that they are well prepared for new schools.

Overall there is a strong commitment to the school, and sadness that it may close, however, there is also an understanding that this may happen and a desire to ensure children have the best possible year at St Matthias, and are well supported to transition to new schools, if that is required.

Feedback to stakeholders

It is recommended that this Consultation Summary and the Frequently Asked Questions document (attached) be posted on the school website and be emailed to parents, staff and other stakeholders.

Parents and staff would like to be regularly updated on next steps.

Governing Body next steps

St Matthias governing body met on September 28th to consider the feedback so far, and to raise any points they wish to include. In the consultation. In this meeting they considered the key messages from parents and staff, and the range of opportunities that have been given for feedback. They were re-assured that sufficient feedback opportunities had been given and felt that the level of response was acceptable, but this was partly because many parents were resigned to the idea, and because of the impact of coronavirus. They recognised that rumours over some time may have impacted on parents' views. They also reflected on the work they had put into considering various options over time, to make sure there was no sustainable alternative plan for the school's future.

At their quorate governing body meeting on 8th October they considered an earlier draft of this report and whether they are recommending that the Local Authority move to publish statutory notices. They unanimously concluded that they *'reluctantly agree to the LA statutory notice of closure' of St Matthias.* *"They were clear that whilst they are not in favour of closing the school, they understand that it is no longer viable and there is no alternative.*

This report will be shared with governors, the LDBS and the Local Authority.

It is recommended that it is also available for staff and parents and St Matthias to read.

A decision will be made regarding whether to progress to statutory notices (stage two consultation) at the Council Cabinet meeting in November 2020. Parents, staff and the LDBS should be kept up to date as matters progress.

If a statutory notice is published the decisions regarding the closure of the school would be made at the Council Cabinet meeting on March 3rd 2021. The statutory notice would recommend a closure date of 31st August 2021.

St Matthias Frequently Asked Questions

20th October 2020

The questions below reflect the range of issues raised by parents, staff and other stakeholders over the period of pre-publication consultation regarding a proposal to close St Matthias School from August 31st 2021.

The consultation was open from June 8th – September 30th 3 pm.

1. Why is the proposal to close St Matthias being made?

There are too few children in the West of Tower Hamlets to fill local schools. The numbers of families choosing St Matthias has fallen so that there are now not enough children to fund the school so that it can continue to provide the quality of education and care that we have all come to experience and expect. There are other Church of England Schools close to the school so that parental choice to receive a faith education can still be met. There are also sufficient places in nearby schools for all the children to transition in Summer 2021 to schools that have higher numbers and can offer a wider range of activities and resources.

St Matthias School is not large enough to accommodate children from another school, if another school were to close.

2. When will the decision be taken?

Deciding to close a school is taken very seriously, and the decision has to be made by the Council following a statutory consultation process.

The final decision will not be taken until March 3rd 2021.

The school cannot close before August 31st 2021. It will only close then if the Council Cabinet reaches a decision to do so after it has considered all the feedback from stakeholders.

3. What arrangements will be made for our children to move schools?

If the decision is taken to close the school parents will be supported to name the schools they would prefer their children move to in the Summer Term 2021. There will be plans in place to help children transition to their new schools. The Pupil Services Team will work with parents to help them with this process, if the decision is taken to close the school.

4. Can I move my child to another school now?

Parents have the right to move their children to other schools at the end of every term. If you are considering this you need to talk to the Pupil Services Team at Mulberry Place. The Local Authority recommends allowing your children to finish this year at St Matthias, so that they can be part of a well planned transition to their new schools, and can celebrate the education they have enjoyed at St Matthias.

5. Which schools can my children go to if the school closes?

The Pupil Services Team know which schools have vacancies and in which year groups. There are sufficient spaces for all the children currently attending in St Matthias across the 3 nearest schools – Christchurch, William Davis and St Anne's.

6. What happens if there are no spaces at the school I want my child to go to?

Just like applying for Primary or Secondary School you are able to name more than 1 school. The admissions criteria will be applied. If your child does not get a place at one of your preferred schools Pupil Services will talk to you about your options.

7. Can I visit schools to see which I like?

Yes. Open days were arranged at the 3 nearest schools. It is a good idea to go along to see what the school is like. We suggest that you go to these rather than listen to other people's opinions.

The dates for these were:

William Davis Tuesday 15th and 22nd September

St Anne's Wednesday 16th and 23rd September

Christ Church Thursday 17th and 24th September

There will be further opportunities for visits later in the school year. These visits were planned to be early so that parents could see the quality of the places available and would hopefully be re-assured that there is no need to panic. A good local school place is available for every child.

These visits have been set up so that you can see there is no need to worry about moving your child now – the schools are good schools and there will be sufficient places across the schools for you to make a choice if the decision is taken to close St Matthias.

8. Will St Matthias children get priority?

Children can only move into schools where there are vacancies, but Pupil Services are prioritising their support for children from schools that may be closing. They will help make sure that siblings are able to stay together.

9. Do I have to go to one of the nearest schools?

No. Parents can apply to any school where there are vacancies. If the decision is taken to close the school the Pupil Services Team will meet with parents to support them to name school preferences in the Summer Term. If parents wish to find out about options before then they will need to contact Pupil Services, themselves.

10. Do you have to be Church of England to go to Christchurch, or Catholic to go to St Anne's?

No. Both St Anne's and Christchurch have large numbers of children from a range of faith backgrounds. Applications are welcome at all 3 nearby schools whatever your faith/background.

11. Will there be particular support for children with Special Educational Needs?

Yes. If your child has an Education, Health and Care Plan there will be an annual review meeting during the year where you can discuss with the SENCO where would be the best school to meet your child's needs, if there is a decision to close St Matthias. For each child with a plan a specific transition plan will be put in place, if needed.

12. What will happen to staff?

There will be an HR process to support staff during the closure period. Tower Hamlets and the London Diocesan Board work hard to reduce compulsory redundancy so will talk with staff, and their unions, about voluntary redundancy and redeployment opportunities.

13. When will staff know whether they have jobs from Sept 2021?

The decision on whether to close the school or not will not be taken until March 3rd 2021. The School Reorganisation Process will be put in place so that all staff will have confirmation about their future from May 31st 2021, at the latest.

14. Is the population data robust?

The data used to predict future needs comes from the Greater London Authority, but is also informed by local knowledge. We know that there have been too few children to fill school in the West of Tower Hamlets for more than 5 years, and that the birth rate in the area is not expected to go up. St Matthias has not been full in all year groups for several years, and has less than 20 children in lots of classes. Although this can seem lovely, it means the school would not be able to run individual year groups because it does not have enough children to pay for the staff needed.

The reasons for population change are complex but they include – reduction in birth rate, the impact of housing benefit caps, increasing housing costs so that families cannot afford local rents and mortgages, Brexit meaning families are not able to move to the UK easily and most recently, some families wishing to return home because they would rather be close to family during coronavirus.

It is difficult to predict exactly what the future will bring but there have always been too many spare places in the Bethnal Green area.

15. Have all funding avenues been explored?

The funding rates for schools are set by national government. They include a set amount for each school, an amount for each pupil and some additional grants to support need. The rate of the grant means that unless there are about 25 children in a class schools struggle to have enough money to provide everything they should. The Local Authority no longer has its own funding to support schools, and is not allowed to do so for more than 3 years. Governors have looked carefully at finances and brought in external help to see if there are other alternatives. The sad fact is there are not enough children in the local school for St Matthias costs to be met.

16. Is Home Schooling an option?

Parents are able to choose to home school their children if they wish. Once children return to school fully you must put in a formal notification that this is your intention and should expect that, at some point, you will receive a visit to make sure the quality and range of provision is meeting your children's needs. The school will no longer have capacity to support you with this because their role is to teach the children attending school. More information can be found at:

https://www.towerhamlets.gov.uk/lgnl/education_and_learning/parental_support/home_schooling/home_schooling.aspx

Most children love going to school and if you are considering this option we would advise you to research the implications very thoroughly.

17. Will there be further meetings for parents?

Yes. The Parent and Family Support Team will support the school to arrange meetings (within coronavirus restrictions) to keep parents updated, and there will be regular updates in the school newsletter.

18. Will there be further meetings for staff?

Staff will be kept informed through staff meetings. The independent consultant will attend at least one of these each term so that staff are kept updated and have the opportunity to ask questions if they wish.