

Appendix 7

Analysis of the Responses to the Statutory (Public) Notice on the Proposal to close Shapla Primary School

(Published from the 16th November – 16th December 2020)

Stakeholders Consulted

London Borough of Tower Hamlets (LBTH) consulted the following stakeholders and interested parties directly to inform them of the publication of this statutory proposal:

- ✓ Secretary of State
- ✓ Parents, Carers and Pupils of Shapla Primary School
- ✓ Staff at Shapla Primary School
- ✓ Diocese of Westminster (Roman Catholic)
- ✓ London Diocesan Board for Schools
- ✓ LBTH Admissions Forum
- ✓ Children and Young Peoples Voluntary Sector Forum
- ✓ Headteachers of all LBTH schools
- ✓ Local MPs
- ✓ All LBTH councillors
- ✓ All neighbouring boroughs local authorities
- ✓ Parents Carers Forum
- ✓ Parent Champions
- ✓ Young People Forum
- ✓ Somali Community Association
- ✓ Collective of Bangladeshi Governors
- ✓ East London NEU
- ✓ Council of Mosques
- ✓ Published on LBTH website / social media accounts
- ✓ East London Advertiser
- ✓ General Public

Responses

By the close of the statutory notice representation period, the following written responses were received:

Total number of responses	Agree with proposal	Do not agree with proposal
3	1	2

Respondents identified themselves as:

- Parents of Shapla pupil
- Local Resident
- Local Headteacher

Within the three written responses received, there were 11 issues raised, within four broad themes:

1. Reason for amalgamation

- It is difficult to argue with the case for closing the school, given its falling pupil numbers in an area of Tower Hamlets where the number of new pupils is not set to rise for several years. Nevertheless, I am disappointed at the local

authority's decision to disperse the Shapla children in September 2021 and feel that this decision was made without due regard for alternative courses of action.

Shapla School has a dedicated community and a distinctive ethos that has endured for many years. It is my firm belief that the best location for the Shapla pupils is Shapla school, and the children should remain in this setting for as long as possible. The decision to disperse these children in September 2021 seems to be a purely financial decision that does not consider the social and emotional cost to the wellbeing of the Shapla community.

LBTH Response

Thank you for your view of the need to close Shapla School but raising concern regarding timescales and exploration of different courses of action. It is good to know that neighbouring schools have the concerns of the local Shapla community at heart.

The Local Authority has been working with Shapla School to consider future options since early Summer 2018, and was also closely involved with the school from 2015 to 2017, during a period when the outstanding provision (OFSTED judgement 2006) had unfortunately shifted to Requires Improvement. Considerable improvements were made and the school returned to Good, late in 2017.

The new Headteacher took up his role with enthusiasm, and governors, supported by an independent consultant employed by the Local Authority, explored a wide range of options. These ranged from considering becoming part of a Multi-Academy Trust, to establishing a bilingual Spanish school and included hard federation, amalgamation or closure. A number of these options were explored in meetings facilitated by the independent consultant that included neighbouring Headteachers.

The Shapla Governors and the Local Authority had to weighed up these alternatives over several meetings, including an analysis of all options. However, they concluded that only feasible option would be to consult on closure.

2. Pupil Numbers and admissions

- Will there be enough places for children, including family groups?

Consultation document response:

The LA analysis shows that there are sufficient places, based on pupil's home addresses for all children to be accommodated within 0.7 mile from their homes (0.6 mile from Shapla).

In the consultation document, the local authority seem confident that there are enough places in surrounding schools. There are two problems with this. Firstly, the data on pupil places in surrounding schools was collected a year ago. A number of pupils have been admitted to local schools since those figures were produced. Therefore, there is a strong possibility that this assertion is no longer reliable. It is incumbent on the local authority to provide more accurate data, before this decision is made. Secondly, I do not believe that those figures adequately take account of family groups within the Shapla community. The number of spare places in local schools, as calculated at the time, correlated very closely with the number of pupils in Shapla School. Even if the figures are still correct, there is very little wriggle-room to enable family groups to be moved to the same local school.

LBTH Response

A detailed analysis of available local places (using Summer Term 2020 data, the very latest data available) showed that there would be sufficient places in local schools (within 0.6 of a mile) of Shapla, for families to attend. It took into account the particular need to ensure that children within the same family group would not be disadvantaged. This exercise was repeated in January 2021.

It is apparent that no single school site would be able to accommodate all the Shapla pupils (Hermitage School, if it became a 2 form entry, would have the greatest space capacity to do so).

The Local Authority and Shapla Governors do not feel that a phased closure would be beneficial to the children's wellbeing over time, nor that it would be straightforward to sustain high quality education. The view was that children should be offered the opportunity of a really exciting final year at Shapla with strong support to transition to the communities of their local schools.

3. Impact on the community

- I would like to say how sad I feel about the school closing, I really feel like it is an amazing school and my children have received excellent care and an excellent education here. The staff are lovely and kind and have a warmth which is lacking in many schools.
- I hope that our children are looked after well during this transition. And not an afterthought in their new schools.
- I don't agree to the closure of Shapla Primary School. It has been at the heart of the local area as we were growing up. I have always been a Tower Hamlets resident and have seen how corporate the area has slowly become.

LBTH Response

The Local Authority is acutely aware that the process and decision for school closure is difficult and disappointing for all. This proposal is in no way connected to standards or a lacking in pastoral care. Shapla's standing as a School in the community is recognised as being strong and well regarded.

However, the decline in pupil numbers, alongside the financial challenges, now means Shapla is no longer sustainable. This situation has reached the stage where the school does not have the necessary resources to invest in a recovery and improvement plan, so the consideration of its closure is necessary.

The transitioning of the children into new schools will be carefully planned with particular attention paid to the most vulnerable and or those with special educational needs.

- I am very sad you are planning to close this school. This will affect a lot of local residents. People who happily sent their kids to Shapla will now be forced to uproot and send them elsewhere. It is a lovely school and focuses a lot on the pupils. I am concerned that by closing this school, this will just be a ploy to bring up statistics, without caring for individual pupil's needs. Is there not another option, perhaps maybe merge with another school, or try to secure more funding?

LBTH Response

The decline in pupil numbers, alongside the financial challenges, now means Shapla is no longer sustainable. This situation has reached the stage where the school does not have the necessary resources to invest in a recovery and improvement plan. The financial challenges at Shapla means that it would require significant and sustained investment over a number of years. This is not possible given the central government changes to how local authorities can fund schools with financial deficits.

Shapla Governors and the Local Authority had to weigh up a number of alternatives before coming to a decision on the way forward. This was reached over several meetings and following a thorough analysis of different options. These alternatives were explored in meetings facilitated by an independent consultant with options ranging from considering becoming part of a Multi-Academy Trust, to establishing a bilingual Spanish school. They also included hard federation, amalgamation and the proposal for school closure.

- I object to these plans, as I am sure you will find not only does it affect residents like us, it affects parents' and their future choices. It affects the community, but most importantly it affects the pupils. At the same time, I'm sure you will find it also affects the teachers although they may not publicly object to this huge change. I do hope you will reconsider these plans, as these changes are implemented it will inconvenience and affect a whole community.

LBTH Response

Changes in provision of education is always contentious, especially when closure is proposed. Consultation at an early stage with both staff, pupils and parents has been carried out, and views listened to. The Local Authority has considered carefully transition plans for children and staff to ensure that should the school close, there will be clear and comprehensive processes in place to facilitate ease of transfer to new provisions.

- Dispersal of the current pupils will deposit many children into unfamiliar settings amongst children and staff with whom they are unaccustomed. It will split friendship groups built up over several years; it may even split families. Children with SEND or SEMH may find it particularly difficult to settle so that it affects their cognitive and social development. The feelings of alienation and uncertainty they experience will come at a time when the school community is likely still to be recovering from the disruption wrought by coronavirus.

My preferred option would be that an amalgamation with St Paul's School be considered for a period of, say, three years. There would be no further intake at Shapla School from September 2021, as per the consultation proposal. Children in current years 3, 4 and 5 would be allowed to complete their education as distinct Shapla pupils (in years 4, 5 and 6 respectively). Children in years below year 3 would be assimilated into St Paul's School, or other local schools, if their parents/ carers desire, as places become available.

- Shapla is a good school, surely the closure could take place over several years rather than 1 year?

Consultation document response:

Experience has shown that once consultation starts staff, parents and children start to consider their future. We know that being part of a declining school with children and staff leaving each term is not a positive experience.

I am not convinced that this would hold true, instead parents and carers could take confidence in the knowledge that their children's future is secure for the next three years.

A preferable strategy might have been a tapered closure, with no new admissions from September 2021, but with the school kept open whilst the current cohorts saw out their time. I believe that John Musgrave-Bolanos, Shapla's Headteacher, and Mark Campbell, Chair of Governors, discussed this with the LA. The idea was certainly mooted by Helen Jenner in a meeting back in October 2019, with the thought that Harry Gosling School might consider an arrangement, such as an amalgamation, with Shapla School in order to facilitate a more nuanced solution. I made it clear, in that meeting, that St Paul's School would be happy to step in, if Harry Gosling School was unable to help.

- Could St Paul's School look after Shapla?

Consultation document response:

Although St Paul's is right next door and would be willing to help this would not solve the problem of the costs of running a building and having too few children in each class.

On 6th November 2019, Darren Rubin, our Executive Head of Schools, and I were invited to a meeting with Christine McInnes and Terry Bryan, where we were asked to consider an amalgamation between St Paul's and Shapla Schools. We said we were interested but would like to have the LA's proposal set out in writing with roll predictions and financial information. Terry Bryan, Head of Pupil Services, promised to provide that information in 'a couple of weeks'. That information was not forthcoming, so it is difficult to gauge the basis of the financial underpinning of the local authority's preferred solution, and whether the governors of St Paul's School (part of a federation with St John's, Bethnal Green) could pursue the proposal.

Because the local authority has not shared its financial projections it is difficult to comment directly about the costs, however amalgamation would enable the reduction in running costs associated with keeping Shapla School open as a stand-alone school. For example, the administrative and premises staff functions could be integrated and areas of the building not in use could be 'mothballed'. It may be possible to absorb some of the costs of the smaller classes by combining these across the schools.

LBTH Response

The Shapla Governing Body and the Local Authority was in agreement that, if the School were to close, it would be in the children's best interests for it to be within a reasonable timescale; and not drawn out over a number of years.

The option of links to other local schools, through amalgamation and or hard/soft federation with a closure over time was explored in meetings with Shapla governors, the LDBS and with the local headteachers. Existing partnerships were also considered - Harry Gosling School is already in a partnership with Stephen Hawking School, and St Paul's is in a partnership with St John's School. In all cases the leadership, and responsibility for the school must rest with a single Headteacher and governing body. This would have meant a partner school Headteacher and governors picking up accountability for financial management and the quality of education at Shapla School.

Unfortunately, the financial position at Shapla has deteriorated over several years. The last year that the school had a positive in year balance was in 2014/5. The school moved into deficit in 2016/7 and the position has worsened since then. In

order to maintain single year groups, to secure educational excellence, costs per pupil have escalated and by 2018/9 were close to £10,000 per pupil (£9882 in 2018/19). Whilst finances are not the only consideration for the Local Authority and governing body it must demonstrate reasonable use of public money. The costs of sustaining quality provision at the Shapla site have become prohibitive. The Local Authority view is that the risk of a single school partnering to take on the financial and educational responsibility for Shapla closing gradually was too much of a risk to ask governors to consider.

The Local Authority has to consider a range of factors in reaching a decision about whether to close a school. These include choice and balance of denominational provision. Many of the parents who chose Shapla School would have had the option of choosing St Paul's School when they applied to start school in reception. Some of those parents may prefer that their children did not attend a faith school and would therefore prefer a community school. The group of schools working together to support children to transition to several local schools was viewed by the Local Authority and governors as giving more options to families, rather than reducing their choice of community to a single school.

The Local Authority is pleased that St Paul's and other local schools, are offering to support the Shapla Community and it welcomes the concern to ensure as smooth a transition as possible. We hope that this response explains why St Paul's and other schools were not, in the end, asked to consider a partnership proposal formally. The Local Authority believes that, through joint working, a smooth transition to excellent new schools and communities is a real possibility for the Shapla children. Otherwise sustaining quality education for a small number of children in the current situation would be a significant challenge.

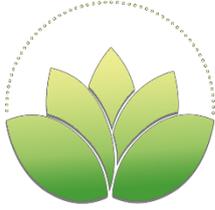
The Local Authority will work with local headteachers to ensure that risks around transition are carefully considered and mitigated through joint planning and partnership working.

4. Other

- I wish this was not all happening during this pandemic, I feel us parents would have been a lot more active in protests and petitions early on if it was possible to do so. But I understand the reason why it is happening.

LBTH Response

It is unfortunate that the consultation has been within the pandemic, however, the LA has carried out a range of alternative methods to fully engage with Shapla community including playground meetings, video presentations, virtual meetings and one to one meetings with parents and staff.



SHAPLA PRIMARY SCHOOL

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25th January 2020

Letter re consultation

To: Christine McInnes

Cc Terry Bryan, Ikwi Mkparu, Helen Jenner, John Musgrave Bolanos

Dear Christine

Proposed Closure of Shapla Primary School

I am writing at the request of Helen Jenner to inform you of feedback from the Governors in connection with the summary responses to the formal consultation which she has shared with us.

The School Closure Steering Committee of Governors of Shapla Primary School has considered carefully and discussed the responses to the Statutory Notice on the proposal to close the school. We are very grateful to all those who replied to the consultation.

While we very much agree with the comments made about the strength of the school's offering both in terms of education and care for our pupils and their families, we remain of the view that the best course of action, given falling rolls in our part of the Borough and the associated financial implications, is to proceed to a closure of the school at the end of the 2021 summer term. We have considered a range of other options, but do not consider any to be viable.

It is, of course, particularly difficult for this process to take place during a pandemic and we recognise the problems that this has caused. However, we believe that the school and local authority have done their very best to ensure that all stakeholders have been given an opportunity to be involved in the consultation procedures.

We are committed to ensuring that all pupils and families are supported during the transition period. In particular, we would welcome being given more clarity on the position within the admissions procedure of children with Education Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) and of children who are currently being considered for EHCPs (and their siblings). We feel that consideration should be given to prioritising those children within the admissions procedure.

Yours Sincerely

Mark Campbell

Chair of Governors
Shapla Primary School

Conclusion

Through analysis of the feedback received during the informal consultation and the statutory consultation period, the Council is able to draw some clear recognition that Shapla School is held in high regard within its community. An alternative proposal was put forward during the consultation period, but subsequent financial modelling and pupil projection analysis determined that this alternative was not viable.

The fall in pupil rolls is the main driver in the need to reduce surplus school places in the west of the borough. The first aim to remove the surplus places at Shapla could not be achieved without seriously impacting on the quality of education. It was therefore necessary to consider the closure of the entire School.

The new financial regulations and diminishing budgets has reduced the flexibility of the LA to support schools in challenging financial positions. Resulting in these schools accruing significant budget deficits, which must be met through the Council's General Fund and thus impacting on the council's provision of services and all schools in the borough

This proposal will therefore remove some of the existing surplus and ensure a more efficient use of resources. It will enable the displaced Shapla pupils to continue to access high quality, sustainable provision in alternative school settings in the local area.