

# First Stage consultation feedback report on the proposal to amalgamate (combine) Old Church Nursery and Marion Richardson Primary Schools.

**2<sup>nd</sup> November 2021**

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, on the agreement reached by Old Church Nursery and Marion Richardson Primary School Governing Bodies at their Nov 1<sup>st</sup>, 2021 meetings, to ask the Local Authority to move to statutory consultation on a possible amalgamation between their schools from September 2022

## **Background**

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” setting out principles for developing school relationships and partnerships 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. In May 2021 that work was extended to include all the Nursery Schools.

Old Church and Marion Richardson Schools Governing Bodies are both committed to maintaining quality early years and primary education for their community. They work in close partnership to support their children and families.

Old Church School Governing Body was prompted by the partnership between the schools to approach Marion Richardson to see if they would consider amalgamation, in order to maintain the top-quality Nursery provision at Old Church Nursery School in the face of falling roles and significantly reduced funding. Marion Richardson Governing Body saw this as an opportunity to cement the work the two schools do to create an outstanding early years provision as part of an excellent 3-11 Primary School.

Both Governing Bodies have reached the conclusion that to amalgamate their two schools is the best solution to optimising early years and 3-11 educational provision in the area.

## **Governors Planning**

A consultation document was prepared and agreed with the Local Authority. This was given to all parents, circulated to Tower Hamlets Headteachers, through the Headteacher’s

Bulletin; emailed to staff unions and governors, and the Secretary of State has been notified of potential changes.

Information about the consultation was also placed on the school website. Parents and staff have been sent regular updates about the proposal and the zoom meetings they can attend to express their views.

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

1. A response form (any other written format was also encouraged) at the end of the consultation document to record views to be emailed, posted, or handed to the school.
2. A special email address was set up at each school for comments
3. A staff briefing and 7 zoom consultation meetings were set up.
4. Governors agreed responses from the different forms of consultation should be summarised in a report for Governors, a draft was sent to the Steering Group, on 22<sup>nd</sup> October. A final version was circulated to governors 25<sup>th</sup> October 2021
5. The two governing bodies met jointly, and then individually, on November 1<sup>st</sup> 2021, where they reached the conclusion that they would ask the Local Authority to move to statutory consultation on the proposal to amalgamate the two schools.

## **Consultation response**

### Zoom meetings

All meetings were attended by at least one of the two Headteachers. The Old Church Chair of Governors attended all Old Church only meetings.

The following meetings were be arranged to collect feedback on the proposal.

1. Consultation meeting opportunities for Old Church parents:
  - 2.15 Wednesday 29<sup>th</sup> September by ZOOM – 7 parents attended
  - 9.30 Monday 4<sup>th</sup> October by ZOOM – 5 parents attendedBoth meetings were well attended and positive. Parents showed their strong appreciation for the outstanding Nursery provision, and quality of provision at Marion Richardson. Parents felt that a transition after reception would be better for the children, making the most of the Old Church site. Parents wanted to protect the provision at Old Church.
2. Consultation meeting opportunities for Marion Richardson parents:
  - 2.15 Thursday 30<sup>th</sup> September by ZOOM – 15 parents attended
  - 9.30 Tuesday 5<sup>th</sup> October by Zoom – 6 parents attendedBoth meetings were well attended and extremely positive. Parents were strongly supportive of the move and value the high quality education their children receive. The use of Old Church site for reception children was viewed as particularly positive.

3. Consultation/briefing meeting opportunities with staff and unions:
  - 3.45 Monday 4<sup>th</sup> October for Old Church  
This meeting was well attended, and staff expressed the view that this was a positive way forward, given that Old Church Nursery School is not sustainable as a standalone Nursery School. – 10 “screens” attended, some with groups. 18 staff in total.
  - 3.45 Thursday 7<sup>th</sup> October for Marion Richardson  
This meeting was well attended and extremely positive - 21 “screens” attended, several year groups of staff. 67 staff in total.
4. Consultation meeting opportunity for all staff/parents/governors/stakeholders from either school:
  - 6.30 pm 5<sup>th</sup> October by ZOOM  
There were 5 parent attendees at this meeting, and it was also extremely positive

### Written Responses

34 written response have been received. (This does not include duplicates and only counts each response once, even if the person replying had 2 roles).

30 responses were positive and viewed the opportunity as being of real benefit for children, and 4 responses felt it was not a positive option. These figures change to 34 positive and 6 not in support if those with 2 roles are counted as 2 responses.

Most parents, and nearly all staff who returned forms, were positive. Old Church parents and staff, understandably, have more anxieties about the potential arrangements. All can see potential positive benefits, particularly given more children more access to wider resources and expertise, protecting outstanding Nursery education and creating a wonderful early years site. Anxieties focus mainly

on whether there will be adequate funding for Nursery education and whether the early years voice could be lost in a larger Primary School.

	Positive	Negative	
Old Church Parents	12 (+3)	3(+1)	(4 Old Church parents have other roles in schools)
Marion Richardson Parents	5	(+1)	(1 Marion Richardson parents has another role in schools)
Old Church Staff	10	1	
Marion Richardson Staff	2		
Others Old Church	1(+1)		(1 “other” has another role in schools)
Totals	30 (+4)	4(+2)	

The Frequently Asked Question summary below includes questions raised as well as anxieties and concerns. Responding to these queries and concerns throughout any agreed consultation process will be essential.

Questions	Responses
Is the proposal a sudden idea?	No, the situation has been developing over several year and early years funding has been declining over time. Governors have considered lots of options before deciding this is the best way forward.
Would like to know more about whole school 3-11 curriculum and what that looks like?	Training and development have already started and there will be more. The schools are working closely to establish the early years curriculum, in the context of the whole school curriculum.
Are the Nursery posts ring fenced or can all Marion Richardson Primary staff apply?	Immediately on amalgamation they will be ring fenced to protect Nursery staff jobs. Moving forward there will be greater flexibility
Please can you explain what amalgamation means	Two schools coming together to become one school. For this to happen one school expands and the other closes.
Will children have to move schools?	Old Church children will automatically become Marion Richardson children. Reception children and Nursery children will be educated on the Old Church site.
Will children need to apply for reception?	Across the country all children have to apply for reception
Will all Old Church staff have new jobs?	Terms and conditions will stay the same because all staff are employed by the Local Authority. Contracts would change to name Marion Richardson. Apart from the role of Headteacher there are no other immediate staffing changes planned. However, as in all schools, there will be staffing changes over time.
What will happen about school dinners?	Change to be confirmed
Will Nursery children still have to pay for school dinners?	Change to be confirmed
Why have numbers decreased?	There are fewer children being born in Tower Hamlets, and the government only funds full time places if both parents are working. More children have part time places now so not as many places are needed.

when will the amalgamation happen?	The amalgamation will be from September 2022 if it goes ahead.
will there be 1 HeadTeachers?	Yes
Do you have to be in Nursery to get into Marion Richardson?	No
Will there sibling priority in the Nursery for Marion Richardson families?	Yes
Will Julia be head of 3 schools	No - it will be 2 schools on 3 sites
Will there be opportunities for the teachers to get to know each other?	Yes - if the Local Authority agrees to move to statutory consultation a programme will be set up.
Will there still be a January intake?	Yes
Will there still be 30 hour places?	Yes
Could there be part-time in the afternoons?	This is something the school reviews each year to see what is affordable.
What will happen to 2 year old provision?	This is something the school review each year to see what is affordable
What will happen to Sarah?	Sarah is taking very well earned retirement in Summer 2022.
How many children will there be?	The school will be 2 form entry throughout, with Nursery figures to reflect that.

Both Headteachers have contributed to the consultation process and have put forward the following summary statements:

Sarah	Amalgamation is a positive and constructive solution to enabling Old Church Nursery to continue to give the children the best education and care that we can. It will build on the existing good working relationship that we have with Marion Richardson School. It is important that we hold on to our excellent early years practice and consolidate this further together. We are delighted that this proposal will bring Reception children together with Nursery children to benefit from our wonderful site.
Julia	Old Church and Marion Richardson have always worked closely together to serve the local community, this work was enhanced when Old Church faced the challenge of a fire and we could support continued Nursery education on the Marion Richardson site. Though the notion of amalgamation has been arrived at as a pragmatic solution in this financial climate we are very excited about the prospect of ensuring the ethos, quality and expertise of the nursery thrives in the context of a 3 – 11 school.

## Feedback to stakeholders

It is recommended that this Consultation Summary, the Frequently Asked Questions Summary and the “Extraordinary Governing Body” power point presentation be posted on the school website and be emailed to parents, staff and other stakeholders, including the Local Authority.

## Governing Body view

Old Church and Marion Richardson Governing Bodies discussed the feedback from consultation meetings when they met on 1<sup>st</sup> November 2021 and confirmed that amalgamation remain the right direction of travel.

They agreed they would ask the Local Authority to move to statutory notices for the schools to amalgamate from September 2022. This would be achieved through the formal closure of Old Church Nursery School and the expansion of Marion Richardson Primary School. The two buildings to be known as “Old Church Site” and “Senrab Street site”.

Governors from both schools are positive about the possibilities that this change brings for their community. They also recognize that there will be challenges as the two school communities come together. They expect the school leaders and the established Steering Group to work through these

challenges systematically, with the support of independent consultants, to arrive at solutions in the best interests of the children and families at the schools.

They identified for key challenges to ensuring the right conditions to enable an amalgamation to progress and to ensure smooth transition-

1. Transparency regarding current and future financial planning, so that future issues and challenges are recognised and planned for before amalgamation.
2. Development of the Marion Richardson Governing Body to take advantage of expertise from Old Church regarding Nursery education.
3. The need to develop a joint early years (Nursery and Reception) vision for the Old Church site.
4. The need to ensure that the Old Church and Senrab Street sites are seen as an integrated school, ensuring that the Old Church site does not become “the annexe” but is viewed as the outstanding provision at the start of children’s school careers at Marion Richardson Primary School.

They agreed that these issues would be worked on with independent consultants during the Local Authority’s Statutory Notice period so that, should the Local Authority decide to progress matters, they would be in the strongest possible position to implement smoothly from September 2022.

### Overview of the independent consultant

Both schools' governing bodies have taken their role in ensuring fair and thorough consultation very seriously and have worked hard to ensure all views are heard, and queries answered.

There is a strong positive response to the proposals.

Governors and staff are disappointed that the proposal has come through reductions in funding for Nursery Schools but are delighted that there will be new opportunities for the children and community.

The support for the quality of Nursery provision, and staff dedication, has been very positive. This should be a strong guide to what parents expect if the two schools do amalgamate – they wish to see excellent Nursery provision in the centre of their children's journey through 3-11 provision at Marion Richardson and believe the amalgamation could support this journey to excellence. Governors are equally positive about the opportunity to optimise the superb Old Church site by extending access to reception children. Creating a first class early years provision as part of the 3-11 Marion Richardson School.

Governors have agreed to start preparatory work to address some of the challenges that are inevitable when two schools are coming together in this way, for the benefit of their communities and a programme to address these will be established, work to be led by the Steering Group. In the unlikely event that either school Governing Body or the Local Authority decided that to progress the amalgamation, was not in children's interests, the work undertaken will have created stronger bonds and understanding between the two schools, so will not have been wasted.

I can see no reason why this proposal would not progress to Statutory Notice.

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