

Consultation information:

Statutory Notice on the proposal for the closure of St Matthias Church of England Primary School

4 December 2020



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Introduction

Notice is given in accordance with section 15 of the Education and Inspections Act 2006 (as amended by the Education Act 2011) and the School Organisation (Establishment and Discontinuance of Schools) Regulations 2013 that Tower Hamlets local authority intends to discontinue St Matthias Church of England Primary School with effect from 31 August 2021.

Contact details

Name and address of Local authority publishing the proposal:

Tower Hamlets Council, Town Hall, Mulberry Place, 5 Clove Crescent, London E14 2BG

Name, address and category of school proposed to be closed:

St Matthias Church of England Primary School, Bacon St, Shoreditch, London E2 6DY

Implementation

Date on which it is proposed to close the school:

Tuesday 31 August 2021.

It is proposed to implement the closure as follows:

Following the closure of St Matthias Primary School, it is proposed for the remaining pupils on roll at that time to transfer to other primary schools in the local area. The local authority has identified sufficient vacancies at local 'Good' or 'Outstanding' primary schools within 0.2 miles from St Matthias, and including places at nearby Christchurch, Church of England Primary School in Brick Lane, E1 (0.9 mile).

There are also vacancies at other schools in the areas to the west of borough, providing St Matthias families with a range of options to secure a suitable school for their child. The local authority will endeavour to meet parental preferences for school places, where possible.

The local authority is already undertaking preliminary work with St Matthias, Christchurch and other schools in the area on the necessary transition planning for children and families, should the Council decide for the School to close on the date proposed.

Reason for closure

The local authority, in partnership with the governing body of St Matthias has reluctantly determined that school should now close due to a substantial decline in

its pupil numbers over an extended period and the associated impact on its educational and financial viability.

Pupil numbers in Tower Hamlets schools are currently falling in the west of the borough where St Matthias School is situated. This means that St Matthias, along with other schools, has not had enough pupil numbers to fill its classes. The school is now well below its capacity in all of its year groups and this is causing increasing difficulty in maintaining a broad and balanced curriculum with enhanced extra-curricular activities.

The fall in pupil numbers has adversely affected this the school's budget, which is now at significant risk. This has required St Matthias to take a number of measures to protect the quality of education, including considering whether it would be necessary to apply to the local authority for a licensed deficit. However, it is clear that should a licensed deficit be required the School would not be able to repay this within the required three-year timeframe, in accordance with the school funding regulations. The local authority is not allowed to continue to fund schools that are not financially viable and, after considering the alternative options available, it was determined that it would be necessary to propose for St Matthias School to close. (see Appendix 1 for the stage one consultation).

Pupil numbers and admissions

The numbers for whom provision is currently made at the school:

St Matthias Church of England School is a co-educational mainstream Primary School for pupils aged three to eleven. The School has a published admission number (PAN) of 30 for each year group, giving a total of 240 places (including nursery places). As at September 2020, the school had 106 pupils on roll.

Displaced pupils

From Wednesday 1st September 2021, the pupils remaining on roll at St Matthias School will have the offer of places at other local schools. There will also be opportunity for parents to secure places at schools within the surrounding areas, including the nearby Christchurch Church of England School.

Current projections for school places indicate that there are enough places for future cohorts following the closure of St Matthias. The local authority will continue to monitor the projected need for future school places and propose changes, if required, to ensure sufficient places are available.

Impact on the community

St Matthias does not currently provide additional services or use of its facilities for the wider community and there are a number of alternative facilities available for hire at other nearby locations. There will therefore be no loss of any enrichment clubs or programmes for local families in the community.

Rural primary schools

Not applicable

Balance of denominational provision

The local authority is under an obligation to consider the impact on the balance of denominational provision in the area before it determines the outcome of school closure proposals. St Matthias is a Church of England school. Were St Matthias to close, then Church of England primary school options would continue to be available in Tower Hamlets at nearby Christchurch and St John's schools. There are also other faith school places accessible in neighbouring catchment areas.

As there are other Church of England schools as well as other faith schools locally and surrounding areas, the proposed closure will have minimal impact on the balance of denominational school provision in Tower Hamlets.

Nursery provision

Children currently attending the nursery provision at St Matthias School will be able to continue to do so until end of the current school year (July 2021). They will then be able to transfer to the nursery provisions at other local schools in the area or to the reception year at these schools, if they have reached school age.

Sixth Form provision

Not applicable

Special educational needs provision

St Matthias School does not provide educational provision recognised by the local authority as being reserved for children with special educational needs. There are 31 pupils on roll (September 2020) who have been identified as having special educational needs (SEN support) and six pupils with an education health and care plan (EHCP). All pupils identified as having special educational needs will have the offer of places at other local schools where their individual needs will be adequately met.

Travel

The approximate distances for home to school travel for pupils from Nursery to Year six currently attending St Matthias ranges from 0.09 to 3.5 miles.

There are enough places at other nearby schools to ensure that the maximum distance any child would travel to school would be no more than 3.5 miles from their home address, unless the families decide to secure places at alternative schools with vacancies further away.

It is anticipated that pupils will walk or use other sustainable modes of travel to alternative schools in the local area and therefore any impact on road traffic would be minimal. There is also sufficient local transport provision to cover the routes from home to school of current pupils.

Finances

When a school closes its finances (any surplus or deficit) is returned to the council. St Matthias' deficit balance will transfer to the Council on the School's last business day, Tuesday 31 August 2021.

Procedure for making representations (objections and comments)

Within four weeks from the date of publication of this statutory notice, any person may object to or make comments on the proposal by email or by post.

Closing date for responses is 5pm, Thursday 7 January 2021.

By email: school.organisation@towerhamlets.gov.uk

By post: School Organisation and Place Planning Manager
Pupil Services and School Sufficiency
Tower Hamlets Children and Culture
Town Hall
Mulberry Place
5 Clove Crescent
E14 5BG

We will not be able to consider any responses received after 7 January 2021.

All responses received during the representation period will be published on the Council's website in early January 2021.

The website address is: talk.towerhamlets.gov.uk/statutory-notice-st-matthias

Appendix 1

Consultation information:

First Stage consultation feedback report on the proposal for the Closure of St Matthias Church of England Primary School

20 October 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 8th October 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 Church of England 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” 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

¹ Tower Hamlets Primary Review

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

consultant, to explore 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 26 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 8 June-30 September.

Summer term activities

A consultation document² 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 one-to-one socially distanced questions/feedback on 8 July
6. Virtual “Zoom” meetings were also set up for staff and parents on July 8th

An update report was provided for the local authority, Governors and LDBS on 22 July³. It also made recommendations for further consultation activities.

Autumn Term Activities.

² Available on request to the school

³ 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

- To actively engage the parents on 8 and 10 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.

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

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

- The Headteacher has also had regular discussions with staff, and all staff have had a one-to-one 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.
- Groups of parents have also visited nearby local schools.
- Special education needs coordinators (SENCOs) and headteachers from the three closest schools have had meetings to discuss transition.
- Parents and staff were reminded that they do have the opportunity to submit written responses.

In addition, many 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

- FIVE forms were received, all from parents, in the Summer Term.

- A further TWENTY were received in the Autumn Term (one parent submitted two forms)
- EIGHT from staff members
- EIGHT from parents
TWO from members of staff who are also parents
- ONE Other (not specified)

Five responses accepted, or partially accepted the proposal; one was unsure and 18 did not accept the proposal. One parent submitted two forms, but this has been counted as one 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
- Effect 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 several other specific points were made:

- TWO said Christchurch partnership is appropriate for location reasons and because its C of E
- THREE felt the partnership with Christchurch is quite limited
- THREE asked that good support be given if children have to move school
- ONE asked for the proposal to be reconsidered
- TWO felt the decision had already been taken
- ONE 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
- THREE 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 three 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 28 September 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 8 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 local authority 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 the 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 3 March 2021. The statutory notice would recommend a closure date of 31 August 2021.