

Stage One Consultation Feedback Report Harry Roberts and Ben Jonson Schools

(March 12th, 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 whether or not Harry Roberts and Ben Jonson School Governing `bodies should agree at their next meetings to ask the Local Authority to move to statutory consultation on a possible amalgamation between their schools from January 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"¹ 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.

Harry Roberts and Ben Jonson 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.

Harry Roberts School Governing Body was prompted by the partnership between the schools to approach Ben Jonson to see if they would consider amalgamation, in order to maintain the top-quality Nursery provision at Harry Roberts, in the face of falling roles and significantly reduced funding.

Both Governing Bodies 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 Steering Group, consisting of the Headteachers, and a governor rep from each school, supported by the Independent Consultant, has led the work on considering the implications of the proposal for both Harry Roberts Nursery school and Ben Jonson Primary School. Other school staff have joined the meetings when appropriate and there has been regular feedback to both governing bodies.

A consultation document² was prepared and agreed with the Local Authority. This was given in paper copy 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.

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

² Included in Appendix "Supporting Documents"

Information about the consultation was also placed on the school website. Parents and staff have been sent regular updates about the proposal and 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 organised:

We organised the following opportunities for staff, parents and carers to share views.

1. A response form (or any other written format) 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. 10 Virtual meetings were set up, including one with Sylheti/ Bengali translation.
4. Staff were provided with a briefing note to respond to any queries from parents.

Governors agreed responses from the different forms of consultation should be summarized in a report for Governors, to be sent to the Steering Group, by the end of March 2021, The Steering Group will consider responses so far on 16th March

Alongside the amalgamation consultation there has also been an organizational change consultation at Harry Roberts School, where staffing reductions have had to be made to address reduced funding and falling roles. The proposed staff changes are not as a result of the amalgamation process.

Consultation Response

Zoom meetings

Zoom meetings were available for staff and parents to attend. Three meetings were available for Harry Roberts, 3 for Ben Jonson and 3 for participants from either school.

A summary of the 9 meetings held to date (2,3 and 4th March) is available in Appendix "Responses". This outlines the range of issues raised, the number of responses received, the queries raised and includes initial responses to those queries.

Attendance at zoom sessions:

Numbers at each zoom meeting

		Staff	Parents	Governors	HT	Independent	
2nd March	9.15	1	3	1	1	1	HR
	2.30		1	1	2	1	HR
	3.30	15		1	1	1	HR
3rd	9.15	1	8	2	2	1	BJ
	2.30	1	4	2	1		BJ
	3.30	10		2	1		BJ
4th	8.15			2	3	1	Open
	12.30	2		1	2	1	Open
	18.00			1	2	1	Open

Those meetings shaded light green were positive about the proposal. Those that spoke at the meeting shaded yellow expressed significant reservations. Several people attended more than one meeting.

The overall numbers of participants were:

Total attendees

Numbers	BJ	HR
Staff	10	15
Govs	2	1
Parents	11	5
HT	1	1
Overlappers	1 Gov/parent 2 parents children in both 5 parents experience both	

Those groups shaded green were positive about the proposal, of those that spoke in the meetings those shaded yellow expressed significant reservations.

The responses have been analysed, using thematic coding, key themes are -

- The majority of participants in the meetings felt that the amalgamation would be in children’s interests, although a small number worried that the outstanding Nursery provision might be challenging to maintain in a Primary School.
- Many participants recognised the potential for the two schools to be “more than the sum of their parts” if they came together.
- School staff particularly recognised the opportunity to share expertise across their schools.
- Parents particularly recognised the benefits their children had from attending Harry Roberts Nursery School and feel that amalgamation would support transition to Primary School and could give a really strong start to school.
- Many participants recognised that the amalgamation could be a strong way to ensure quality early education is protected, against a backdrop of reduced funding.
- Some staff raised anxiety that in a large primary school the importance of early years education might be overlooked.
- Several participants sought re-assurance over premises and organisational issues moving forward.
- A few people considered that the loss of Nursery Schools will significantly reduce the quality of early years education.

Written Responses

Eleven written response have been received.

	Governors	Staff	Parents
BJ	5	1	1
HR	2	4	1
	Just GB 4	5	2

1 parent also a governor
2 staff members are governors

8 responses were strongly positive and viewed the amalgamation as a real benefit for children, two felt the amalgamation was the best option in difficult circumstances, and one felt it was not a positive option.

One response raised concerns about the staffing reductions being made at Harry Roberts and the impact this would have, and whether parents were aware of the staffing reductions this response flagged the concern around loss of Nursery Schools as centres of excellence.

Several responses flagged the importance of maintaining quality early years education through a positive child centred amalgamation.

The funding reductions that have led to the need to reduce posts at Harry Roberts were also raised by two respondents.

Both Headteacher's have contributed to the consultation process and have put forward the following summary statements:

Alex	Amalgamation is a positive and constructive solution to enabling Harry Roberts 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 Ben Jonson School. It is important that we hold on to our excellent early years practice and consolidate this further together.
Monica	Harry Roberts and Ben Jonson have always worked closely together to serve the local community. 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 and the "Amalgamation Feedback Summary" be posted on the school website and be emailed to parents, staff and other stakeholders.

Governing Body next steps

Harry Roberts and Ben Jonson Steering Group, informed by the views of their respective governors, met on March 16th to consider this feedback report and whether they are recommending that the Local Authority move to publish statutory notices.

Harry Roberts Governing Body discussed the feedback from consultation meetings at their 4th March 2021 meeting and confirmed that despite the reservations of some members of staff at Harry Roberts, amalgamation remains the right direction of travel. Some members of staff appeared to be continuing to confuse the necessary staffing reductions at Harry Roberts as being a consequence of amalgamation, rather than caused by falling rolls and funding. This needs to be reclarified in future staff sessions regarding the staffing re-organisation. They supported Steering Group members and agreed that, provided there were no significant new responses received the Steering Group should recommend moving to statutory notice.

The Steering Group have considered the responses and feel that it would be appropriate for the Local Authority to move to statutory notices on the proposal. They recognise that some staff at Harry Roberts, in particular, remain concerned about the amalgamation. This is compounded by the need to reduce staff at Harry Roberts, regardless of the amalgamation. Whilst the presumption of protection of Nursery Schools is recognised the potential amalgamation with Ben Jonson is the only financially viable alternative to preserve quality Nursery education for the community.

Ben Jonson Governing Body met on March 25th and confirmed their commitment to the Local Authority moving to Statutory Notice.

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.

Overall, there is a strong positive response to the proposals, although Nursery school staff, and Nursery parents, are saddened by the impact of reduced funding and numbers on levels of staffing at the Nursery School.

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 Ben Jonson and believe the amalgamation could support this journey to excellence.

I can see no reason not to progress to Statutory Notices.