

Consultation Report Bishop Challoner Boys' and Girls' Catholic Schools Amalgamation Proposal

November 3rd 2022

Report compiled by Dr Helen Jenner, Independent Consultant, appointed by Bishop Challoner Federation Governors, to support the consultation process.

Introduction

This report summarises the planning undertaken to lead to a public consultation, and the responses to that consultation, which considered a proposal that Bishop Challoner Boys and Girls Catholic Secondary Schools should amalgamate to become a single mixed school. The proposal to move to consult on this possibility was agreed by governors in July 2022 following extensive discussions during the Summer Term 2022.

The two schools are currently part of a Hard Federation with a single governing body and a single Headteacher, Mr J.P. Morrison.

Background

Bishop Challoner governors have been aware of the impact of changing demographics on the school's population over several years. Brexit, house prices and COVID have all contributed to a fall in the number of Catholic families attending Catholic Schools. In addition, improvements in the quality of education in neighbouring non-faith schools have increased choices for parents seeking the best school for their child. Bishop Challoner governors were fortunate in recruiting Mr Morrison as Headteacher for the school and he, with governors support, has established a strong school improvement programme ensuring high Catholic moral values and educational expectations are firmly re-established at the centre of the Bishop Challoner culture.

Despite this forward trajectory the financial position of the two schools remains precarious largely due to funding two administrative and leadership structures, one for each school, when numbers across the school would only require one such structure. This distracts funding from front line educational provision for children.

In addition, because the school has run its curriculum as two schools there are occasions when individual boys' and girls' groups, for examination options would be too small to run. The school has increasingly combined boys' and girls' groups in some of these subjects with positive results.

Unusually, for separate schools, the boys and girls are used to mixing as they move around the school and at lunchtime, and teachers work across both schools.

Governors believe that transition to an amalgamated school will help maximise resources that support children's learning, will increase the schools popularity and that, with careful planning the transition should address concerns but move forward smoothly, with no loss to

the schools values or Catholic purpose and that the amalgamation will support the school improvement journey, leading to higher outcomes for both boys and girls. A mixed school would also better prepare our young people to lead their adult lives in the mixed world they will be joining, encouraging respect, modesty and understanding between the genders.

The Governing Body have considered equalities issues and concluded that there would be no significant impact for any particular group. They are mindful that some children with additional needs or disabilities may need additional support to understand the proposal and the implications. As children in the school already mix there is unlikely to be any difficulty for individual children or vulnerable groups. Some sports and PSHE sessions will remain single sex as will changing facilities. The school has recently introduced headscarves as part of school uniform, this has been a popular change.

The Governing Body for both schools reached the conclusion that to amalgamate the two schools is the best solution to optimise provision and stabilise financial planning.

Governors Planning

Governors began discussions of the possibility of moving towards a single amalgamated school at meetings during the academic year 2021/2. The Headteacher also raised the matter with the Local Authority, Tower Hamlets, and Westminster Diocese both of whom were supportive of the school considering consultation about the possibility.

Parents were informed during the Summer Term¹ of the possibility of a consultation during the Autumn Term. The Local Authority Secondary Transition Booklet was updated so that prospective parents were informed of the possibility.

A consultation document² was prepared. This was given to all parents, circulated to Tower Hamlets Headteachers, through the Headteacher's Bulletin; emailed to staff unions and governors, circulated to other stakeholders 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 meetings they can attend to express their views.

¹ Website link for letter:

<https://www.bishopchallonerfederation.towerhamlets.sch.uk/attachments/download.asp?file=38&type=pdf>

² Website link for consultation document:

<https://www.bishopchallonerfederation.towerhamlets.sch.uk/attachments/download.asp?file=57&type=pdf>

The consultation document explains a variety of ways for parents, staff and other stakeholders to contribute their views on the proposal:

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 the school for comments amalgamation@bishop.towerhamlets.sch.uk
3. A meeting was held for parents on Weds October 5th, 2022
4. Regular staff briefings were held, and a proposal specific meeting on 13th October
5. A “zoom” link meeting was set up, incase anyone wanted to talk with the Independent Consultant on 11th October.³
6. Governors agreed responses from the different forms of consultation should be summarised in a report for Governors, a draft was sent to the Chair of Governors, on 19th October. A final draft version was circulated to governors for discussion on 2nd November 2022.
7. Parents were sent a further reminder of the need to comment on the proposal on Tuesday 18th October.
8. A copy of the consultation report was sent to Unions, DFE, and local Faith groups. It was circulated to Headteachers and Governors by the Local Authority.

³ Bishop Challoner Amalgamation Consultation
Time: Oct 11, 2022, 05:00 PM London
<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/85625470205>
Meeting ID: 856 2547 0205

Consultation Responses

Parents meeting

The meeting was attended by 48 parents, 5 secondary age young people and 5 primary age children. The Headteacher, Chair of Governors, 3 school staff members and the Independent Consultant attended. Notes were taken by the independent consultant.

Mr Morrison, speaking to a presentation outlined the governors' rationale in proposing an amalgamation of the two schools. He made three key points

1. The values, morals and outcomes of strong Catholic Education would not be compromised.
2. Bringing the two schools together as one would maximise the amount of funding focused on learning and increase the future financial resilience of the school.
3. Many other schools have changed to become mixed schools because this gives greater opportunity to prepare our young people to develop into men and women who respect and value each other as they share an understanding of how Catholic values and education can positively shape their adult lives.

He stressed the importance of feedback from parents to help the school with its improvement journey and to manage change positively. He invited parents to make comments and responded to them fully. Where further discussion was needed he recommended parents either speak to him after the meeting or contact him separately.

A number of issues raised were not to do with the amalgamation, these have been noted and addressed but are not included in this report.

The key comments made during the meeting were as followed:

Parents welcomed the opportunity to be part of the planning and discussion on this. They recognised that positive new leadership was encouraging more parental involvement.

Parents understood the need for change but asked that time could be put into planning carefully for transition. Mr Morrison thanked them for this and explained that meetings such as this are a good opportunity to hear from parents to help the school with this planning.

Parents were concerned to know how the impact of changes would be monitored. Mr Morrison outlined the role of senior leaders, governors and OFSTED. He reminded parents that the school welcomes feedback from them.

Some parents were concerned that there could be an impact on behaviour and/or modesty. Mr Morrison said standards of behaviour in the schools is already good and improving. There would be no lowering of expectations and, in his experience, co-educational schools can help improve boys' attitudes to learning.

Some parents recognised that mixed classes were working well for their children, others were particularly concerned that quieter children may become even more quiet in mixed classes. Mr Morrison highlighted the fact that much of the school is already mixed and the school caters carefully for all children. Any parent with concerns for their child was encouraged to let the school know so that those concerns can be addressed.

Parents were concerned that class sizes might change, they prefer lower numbers. Mr Morrison outlined class size expectations and finances. Class sizes overall are not expected to increase, the size varies depending on the needs of individual children and the curriculum.

Parents felt that staff wellbeing and support should be considered because keeping good staff is essential for a thriving school. Mr Morrison told parents that staff appeared to be overall in favour of the amalgamation, many had experience of working in mixed schools and support would be offered for those who needed it through the established professional development systems.

Parents asked that children should be involved in discussions and recognised that different age groups might have different views. Mr Morrison said that age appropriate discussions were taking place.

One parent (Year 8) raised that they had accepted a place in a single sex school and felt the changes should not happen whilst their child was at the school. Other parents felt that since the change was beneficial for children this was not a problem. Parents of older children have already experienced mixed classes allowing their children to take A level options that would otherwise not be available. A parent of a Year 7 child pointed out that all their children had been progressing well in mixed classes throughout primary school.

An FAQ feedback form has been created, based on questions raised at the meeting, and/or in writing, so that the school community are all able to see responses to these questions whether or not they were able to attend. This will be added to the school's website with this report.

Staff Briefings

As well as being briefed in staff meetings before the Summer Holidays and in advance of the public consultation staff were invited to a "question and answer" session with the Headteacher. 19 staff attended the session.

Staff appear to be in favour of the change, which they consider makes educational economic sense.

Due to the falling rolls they are concerned about future roles and the number of staff needed at the school. Both they, and local unions, understand that amalgamation will not cause job losses, and will bring future financial sustainability.

They understand that the current re-structures (which are also being consulted on) are not part of the amalgamation proposal.

Emails received to amalgamation email address

Only one email has been received at the amalgamation email address. This was from the parent of a girl who is not in favour of the amalgamation.

The Westminster Diocese also responded to the consultation stating “the Diocese and Trustees have considered this proposal at both their Education Commission Meeting and the September meeting of the Trustees, with both approving the proposal for the establishment of one mixed secondary school from the current federation from September 2023.”

Response Forms

Two consultation response forms have been received. Both from parents of boys. One in favour of the amalgamation, the other not in favour.

Feedback to stakeholders

It is recommended that this Consultation Summary, the FAQs and the “Amalgamation Feedback Summary” power point presentation be posted on the school website and the link be emailed to parents, staff and other stakeholders, including the Local Authority.

Governing Body View following consultation.

Bishop Challoner Governing Board discussed the feedback from consultation meetings when they met on 2nd Nov 2022 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 2023. This would be achieved through the formal closure of Bishop Challoner Catholic Boys Secondary School and the expansion and renaming of Bishop Challoner Girls Catholic Secondary School to become Bishop Challoner Mixed Catholic Secondary School. The Governing Board and Headteacher will not change as they are already operational across the two schools and will remain as the Governing Board and Headteacher for the newly amalgamated school.

Overview of the independent consultant

The schools’ governing board has taken their role in ensuring fair and thorough consultation seriously and considered all views are heard, and queries answered.

There is a positive response to the proposals. For example, after the parents meeting parents approached me individually to comment on how positive they felt this change was for the school and that they felt the atmosphere in school was more purposeful under new leadership. 2 were parents of boys, and two of girls. They were held the view that as children mix before after and during school anyway there should not be much distraction.

Parents are clear that the school has been through a lot of change and expect this change to be well managed and carefully monitored. They would like feedback to parents and welcomed face-to-face meetings.

The parents meeting, and two written response show there are some parental concerns about the impact of the changes, senior staff and governors have responded to these and committed to monitoring and responding if there are negative impacts, these are not expected. Parents appear confident to raise their concerns and committed to continuing to do so.

Staff and unions have not raised concerns, nor have linked stakeholders. The Diocese of Westminster have discussed, and are supportive of, the proposal.

Governors have taken careful consideration of key concerns from parents, and equalities impact considerations, and established a clear process for monitoring the effectiveness of the transition to ensure there is no negative impact from the change and to monitor that values, vision and outcomes improve further to guarantee the best possible Catholic Education for the community.

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

Dr Helen Jenner
Independent Consultant
Supporting Bishop Challoner Catholic Federation Governing Body