

LONDON BOROUGH OF HARROW
SCHOOL ORGANISATION COMMITTEE

18 January 2005

**PROPOSED CLOSURE OF ST JOHN'S CE FIRST SCHOOL AND ST
JOHN'S CE MIDDLE SCHOOL, STANMORE AND THE OPENING OF A
NEW ST JOHN'S CE COMBINED FIRST & MIDDLE SCHOOL**

**RESPONSE FROM THE GOVERNORS OF THE ST JOHN'S SCHOOLS
AND THE LONDON DIOCESAN BOARD FOR SCHOOLS TO
OBJECTIONS RECEIVED DURING THE STATUTORY NOTICE PERIOD**

INTRODUCTION

1. During the Summer Term 2004 the headteacher of St John's First School indicated to governors that she would be leaving the school at the end of term. The Governors discussed the options available including the recruitment of a new headteacher and the possibilities of amalgamating with the St John's Middle School. The Governing Body agreed to set up a small working party that would consider the options in detail and report back to the full Governing Body.
2. When the working party reported back to the full Governing Body on its consideration of the options, attention was drawn to the London Borough of Harrow's Amalgamation Policy for First and Middle Schools. The policy indicated that there were various 'trigger points' when governing bodies of separate first and middle schools should consider combining schools and one of these is when a headteacher vacancy occurs in one of the schools. In the light of this, the governors of St John's First School agreed that informal discussions should take place with the Middle School governing body.
3. During September 2004 both governing bodies met separately to consider the issue of amalgamation and both agreed to consult on the possibility of amalgamation of both schools. A Steering Group was established with governors and headteachers from both schools as well as advisers from the London Borough of Harrow and the London Diocesan Board for Schools (LDBS).
4. The Steering Group devised the informal consultation process which consisted of separate meetings for parents and staff, 'drop in surgeries' for staff and parents and the opportunity to complete a questionnaire. The consultation involved parents, staff, schools in Harrow LEA and adjoining local education authorities.

5. Both governing bodies met together on 3 November to consider the results of the consultation. They received a presentation analysing the responses and which highlighted key issues raised by stakeholders. All governors were committed to addressing any concerns that were identified. Both governing bodies then met separately to vote on whether to proceed to a formal statutory consultation. Both governing bodies voted for amalgamation and to commence the formal statutory consultation. Statutory Notices were published on 25 November and the consultation period finished on 5 January 2005.
6. For information, the chronology of events leading up to the meeting of Harrow School Organisation Committee (SOC) on 18 January is provided as an Annexe.
7. The governors of both schools were clear that the proposal for amalgamation should be considered on educational grounds and that, above all, the benefits to pupils must be paramount. The educational advantages are seen as:
 - A combined school will promote greater continuity and consistency through the primary years and between the key stages
 - Pupils' achievements will be tracked across the whole of the primary age range to ensure consistency of monitoring approaches
 - It will alleviate any 'dip' in attainment sometimes experienced by pupils when changing schools
 - In an all-through school there can be greater opportunities for pupils to take responsibility
 - Parents and the local community will be able to relate to a single school. (In addition, there will be a single admission application).
 - There will be increased professional opportunities for staff, e.g. subject leadership, management and career development
 - The amalgamated school's values will be based firmly on the current schools' Christian foundation

OBJECTIONS TO THE PROPOSALS

8. By the end of the Statutory Notice consultation period two objections had been received, one from Mr A Gadsby and the other from Mr R Sainsbury. The responses by the Governors of both schools and the LDBS are noted below.

Mr A Gadsby

9. This is a detailed and lengthy objection and the response attempts to identify key areas raised by Mr Gadsby and to provide the views of the governors and the LDBS.

10. Finance

Mr Gadsby argues that the governors failed to undertake any comparative funding analysis and did not have 'any confirmed/substantiated figures from Harrow LEA of any comparison of income, as evidence, to show that a restructured amalgamated school would have more finance available to pupils'. As the letter from Johanna Morgan (Group Manager, Project Management and Development, People First) of 26 October to Mr Gadsby noted, a combined school will be funded in accordance with the agreed LEA formula and will vary from school to school depending on context. In its early discussions, the Steering Group received detailed advice from a member of the education finance team which showed that transitional funding would be available if the amalgamation went ahead. The information given was sufficiently detailed for the governors to be assured that the financial viability of a combined school would be secured. Of course, governors could not, at this early stage, know exactly how much funding would be available as this would be reliant, principally, on the number of pupils in the school, as well as other factors such as special educational needs. Foremost in governors' thinking were the educational benefits that would accrue if the amalgamation went ahead and to this end they were able to take advice from the LEA, LDBS and headteachers. Several of those who advised the governors were either serving or former headteachers of first, middle and combined schools.

11. The consultation

Mr Gadsby considers that the consultation period was too short. The governors gave careful consideration to the length of time of the informal consultation and felt that it was sufficient. It was in line with other school amalgamation consultations which were discussed with the governors. In drawing up the schedule for the process the governors were able to draw on the experience of the LEA and LDBS advisers and were assured that the consultation process satisfied the expected procedural and legal requirements. The consultation period (see Annexe) allowed for both a meeting for parents as well as two 'drop in surgeries' for parents and staff. Issues raised at the parents' meeting on 13 October were discussed in a letter to parents from both governing bodies on 18 October. The governors were also aware that possible amalgamation had been discussed by governors and parents on several occasions in the past. The governors, LEA and LDBS sought to provide all appropriate information.

12. Mr Gadsby suggests that the return date of 1 November, an INSET day, 'was engineered by Governing Bodies so that teachers could be used to collate only limited responses'. No teachers were involved in analysing the responses. This was undertaken by a governor who has extensive professional experience of designing, analysing and reporting on market research surveys and who produced a report which was considered by the governors of both schools.
13. It is suggested by Mr Gadsby that many parents felt exasperated that the consultation was a 'whitewash'. This was not the intention of the governors, the LEA or LDBS and there was no evidence of this at any of the consultation meetings and no overall evidence from the written responses to support this.
14. The matter of the LEA's educational rationale is raised. This was outlined by LEA officers who attended the parents' meeting on 13 October. They were also available to answer parents' questions at that meeting.
15. The First School site
Mr Gadsby is concerned that 'any future major projects would be eventually funded by the disposal of the First School site'. It is correct that, if amalgamation were to proceed, there would be a review of the use of the current accommodation. This would be carried out in order to ensure the best use of existing resources. There has been no discussion of plans to sell the First School site. This was stated at the parents' meeting on 13 October in response to a question. The Diocesan Board for Schools has been involved in two recent amalgamations of infant and junior schools sharing the same site and no school or part of the sites have been earmarked for sale. This does not preclude any future development of a combined school for which grant aided finance would be sought and this was also noted at the 13 October meeting.
16. Federation
When examining all the options available, the governors did consider federation but felt that the advantages of amalgamating the two schools outweighed the more limited effect of retaining two schools albeit with a single governing body. Federation would not deliver the advantages as noted at the head of this response.
17. Information unavailable
It is suggested that the minutes of the First School governors' meetings were not available to interested parties. It is correct that some were not available as they had not been confirmed by a full governing body meeting. With reference to Part II confidential minutes, Regulation permits non-disclosure of matters discussed that the governing body considers confidential, for example information relating to an individual. There was no deliberate attempt on the part of the governing bodies to withhold any minutes or information.

18. The governors did arrange, in conjunction with the LEA, a meeting with Mr Gadsby to address issues which he had raised but he declined the invitation.

Mr R Sainsbury

19. Mr Sainsbury indicates that he has three grounds for his objection to the proposal. These are (1) that there were serious deficiencies with the consultation process; (2) that the arguments for maintaining separate schools have not been properly considered by the parties involved; and (3) that parents have been effectively excluded from the process.

20. Deficiencies with the consultation process

Mr Sainsbury argues that the case presented at the 13 October meeting was biased and unbalanced. In their initial discussions governors had examined many aspects of any possible development and at the meeting with parents had attempted to explain what changes might come about if amalgamation were to go ahead. The chairman of the meeting was careful to emphasise that no decision had been taken. From the responses received there was little evidence that parents considered that decision had already been taken or that the responses would not be considered carefully.

21. The Governors took the view that they wished to tell parents in person that they wished to consult on the possible amalgamation rather than announce it indirectly by letter. They did not want possibly incorrect information in circulation. The Governors decided that an evening meeting would better serve parents' interests as there would be the potential for a larger audience. The meeting with the headteacher of Hatch End High School took place following the Governors' meeting in order to avoid middle school parents having to attend on another occasion.
22. The length of the informal consultation period was considered carefully by the Governors and the Steering Group. Mr Gadsby also raised the same point and attention is drawn to the response in paragraph 11. In addition to the formal 13 October meeting there were two further 'face-to-face' opportunities for parents to meet with governors in the 'drop in surgeries'. It is acknowledged that the deadline for responses was an INSET day but the schools were open for both personal and postal deliveries.
23. The use of a structured questionnaire as a format for the responses enabled a detailed analysis of the data. As noted in paragraph 12, this analysis was carried out by a governor with extensive professional experience in this field. A presentation of the results of the analysis was made to both Governing Bodies on 3 November and there was

considerable discussion prior to the individual Governing Bodies voting on whether to proceed to a formal Statutory Notice consultation.

24. At the meeting of 13 October it was pointed out that if both Governing Bodies voted in favour of a formal consultation Statutory Notices would be published and that the School Organisation Committee would decide the matter in January 2005. If the amalgamation were to go ahead for September 2005 the maximum preparation time would be needed.
25. The possibility of a nursery being opened at the combined school was raised at the 13 October parents' meeting. It was stated that any proposal for a nursery will need further discussion with governors, the LEA and LDBS and that any nursery provision would be part of the school's overall development of the Foundation Stage and would not be in place for September 2005. Any nursery development would involve more than making classroom space available.

Potential disadvantages of amalgamation

26. Mr Sainsbury suggests that if the schools were not to amalgamate, due to physical constraints and separate sites, this would assist future bids for capital funding and that, conversely, if the schools amalgamated now the negotiating position for future capital funding would be weakened. There is no current need for major capital works at either school. If the LEA's plans for the change of age of transfer were to go ahead then this would be taken into account in any bid for capital funding for an amalgamated school.
27. Reference is made to smaller schools having a positive advantage, especially for younger children, and the loss of the separate schools' individual characters. If the amalgamation of the two schools were to go ahead, the staff and governors would be committed to ensuring that the best practice and qualities that characterise the present schools would be enhanced in the new school. As noted elsewhere, an amalgamated school would allow for greater flexibility of staffing and resources which would support this approach.
28. If the proposal for an amalgamated school goes ahead there will be one headteacher. As is noted in Mr Sainsbury's submission, a new management structure will need to be developed and the senior leadership team will have to be matched carefully to the needs of the new school and its pupils. The post of the headteacher of the amalgamated school will not be the same as those of the separate first and middle schools: it will be a new post in a new school. From the school amalgamation experience of the LEA and LDBS there is evidence to show that the educational experiences on offer to children will not be affected adversely by new management structures. Any headteacher of a newly amalgamated school will give high priority to being available to meet pupils, parents and staff.

29. As Mr Sainsbury notes, most pupils find the move from first to middle school a positive experience. However, some pupils experience a 'dip' in achievement on the move to another school. A combined first and middle school would alleviate this difficulty as pupils would move naturally to the next age group.
30. Maintaining the confidence of staff is a critical consideration for the Governors. From the outset it was established that all staff will have the opportunity to transfer to the new school. The Governors are confident that staff will maintain their existing high level of professionalism and commitment to the pupils during any transition period and that this would extend to the new school.
31. Reference is made to the impact on the respective headteachers of dealing with amalgamation issues. Clearly, there would be additional work but the LEA and LDBS would offer appropriate support in order to minimise this impact and to make the transition as smooth as possible. In a new school management structure the central focus will be the pupils' learning and the respective responsibilities of staff members within the structure will be made clear to parents. At this stage, it is not known whether any members of staff will leave if the amalgamation were to go ahead but it is not unusual for some staff to leave at the end of the Summer Term for various reasons, e.g. promotion, moving to another area, marriage, etc.
32. If the proposed amalgamation proceeds, both Governing Bodies will be involved in preparation for the new school but the Steering Group has been set up to undertake most of the planning work. In this the Group will be supported by LEA and LDBS officers for whom this is a normal work role. If approval is given for amalgamation, the Steering Group and the Governing Bodies will work hard to keep parents and stakeholders informed.
33. Governors of both schools endeavoured to present parents with full information on the proposal and wished to hear parents' views. They reject the suggestion that they 'intentionally or unwittingly biased the presentation and all subsequent responses in favour of amalgamation'.

Parents excluded from the process

34. Some of the points raised by Mr Sainsbury are similar to those of Mr Gadsby and have been covered in the response to Mr Gadsby's submission. As indicated above, there has been no intention to exclude parents from the process. The joint letter of 4 November from the Chairs of Governors informed parents that both Governing Bodies had agreed to proceed towards a formal consultation in the light of the responses to the initial consultation. In addition to parents' and staff responses, there were responses from some other local schools. The LDBS Board also gave the proposal to consult formally its support. Although some tentative outline planning work took place within the

Steering Group, the next step was the publication of Statutory Notices on 25 November.

CONCLUSION

35. The Governors of both schools are committed to providing the best educational opportunities for the children of the St John's Schools, whatever the outcome of the consultation. They have endeavoured to establish a process which would enable stakeholders to express views about a possible amalgamation. The views of all parties were taken into account when coming to a decision to proceed to a Statutory Notice consultation. The Governors believe that the consultation process has satisfied the expected procedural and legal requirements. They look forward to continuing to work in close collaboration with all stakeholders.