

Re-organisation of C of E Primary School Provision in Bristol City Centre

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1. Consultation

Consultation was initially undertaken with parents and staff in 2019 and a statutory notice published in December, with an implementation date of September 2020. Meetings were held with parents and staff to explain the proposals and give an opportunity to ask questions.

Following feedback from the Department for Education it was decided that the proposals should be re-published with a proposed implementation date of September 2021.

A revised consultation document was issued in 2020 and further meetings organised with parents and staff. Due to restrictions relating to the COVID pandemic, these meetings were held via Zoom. There was also an opportunity for parents to ask questions by email.

Documents were also made available in community languages.

Notes of the meetings and additional information requested by parents were published on the schools' websites.

<http://www.st-george-pri.bristol.sch.uk/about/amalgamation-consultation/>

2. Issues Raised During the Consultation

A summary of issues raised and the responses are given below.

- The main point of discussion during consultation was around the reason that pupil numbers, particularly at St George have been so low. Parents attending the meetings believed strongly that there had not been enough effort made by Governors to promote the school and that additional promotion would have encouraged more parents to apply.

Response: Both schools have appeared every year in the Council's information for parents and on the website in exactly the same way as every other school in the city offering Reception places.

Other local schools were expanded to meet parental demand during a period of rapid growth in primary school numbers. Since numbers began to decline these schools are not as oversubscribed and so fewer pupils need to be offered non-preference schools. This has meant fewer pupils being offered places at St Michael's and St George.

Governors do not feel they could have done more to promote the schools.

- Other schools were allowed to expand and this has affected numbers on roll.

Response: Bristol experienced unprecedented growth in demand for primary school places from around 2003. In order to accommodate this demand many schools were expanded and some new schools opened. These schools have remained popular but there are now surplus places across the city. Larger schools bring economies of scale and are able to manage the variation in numbers more effectively as they can reduce the number of classes and re-open when demand increases.

- Why was Cathedral Primary School allowed to open?

Response: Cathedral Primary was opened under the Free School programme. The decision was made by the Government. It was opened when there was a growing demand for places and a suitable site had not been secured for an expanded St George. Since this time pupil numbers have declined as the birth rate has slowed and new housing development in the city centre tends to attract students, single people or couples rather than being suitable for families.

- What if primary school numbers rise again?

Response: Bristol currently has around 15% surplus places in Reception. A number of schools have reduced the number of classes to be able to plan for staffing etc. There are some suggestions that the periods of 'lockdown' during the past months may result in increased births. There is not any firm evidence for this yet but if the population were to rise there are already a significant number of primary school classes that can be re-introduced.

- The schools are Ofsted 'good' and have offered children a good education. Why close them?

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Response: The proposals do not relate directly to the standard of education offered. The governors have been concerned for some time however that the low number of pupils makes maintaining this standard very difficult and almost impossible in future without significant change. The proposals aim to offer a more secure and viable future for C of E primary education in the city centre. The new school will aim to build upon the high standards and ethos of the existing schools.

- Should the process be stopped in the global pandemic?

Response: The current situation has undoubtedly made life very difficult for parents and for schools but the underlying issue of low numbers and the consequential lack of funding remains. The governors have tried to reduce costs as much as possible by federating the schools and sharing some roles, such as the Headteacher, but the funding remains inadequate to secure a suitable level of staffing and resources to maintain the education provision on both sites.

- Parents raised the possibility of locating the new school on the St George site

Response: The St George site is very small, with a capacity for only 105 pupils (including the annexe building). A one form entry (30 places per year group) school requires accommodation for 210 pupils. Although initially numbers will be well below 210, it is hoped that the new school will encourage more parents to apply as it will have a more viable future.

- The proposal is the easy route and there has been a lack of innovative thinking about other options.

Response: Before making the proposal the option of closing one school was considered but the current proposal ensured that staff and pupils from both schools are treated equally.

Unfortunately the schools financial position due to a lack of pupils makes options very limited. The schools have already federated to reduce costs. Many schools are now part of a Multi-Academy Trust (MAT) which can reduce or spread some costs. The lack financial viability of operating 2 sites however means that a MAT is unlikely to be able to take the schools.

- The historical significance of St George is being overlooked

Response: St George and St Michael's have played a significant part in the history of Bristol's education system. It is hoped that the St George building can continue to provide education provision in some form in future. These proposals are aiming to secure a future for C of E education in the city centre which could be under threat if pupil number continue to decline.

Representation

Full proposals were published on the Bristol City Council website, with a shorter notice being published in the Bristol Post and displayed at entrances to the schools. The full proposals and statutory notices were also published on the school websites.

Copies of the proposal were sent to statutory consultees as listed in the relevant guidance.

6 responses were received to the proposal. The points raised were very similar to those raised in the consultation meetings and have been covered in the summary above.

Ian Bell, Place Planning Manager

