

Appendix C

A summary of the representations received in response to the Statutory Proposal to amalgamate Westminster Cathedral and St Vincent de Paul RC Primary Schools from the 1 September 2022

Consultation Response Analysis

Westminster Council consulted the following stakeholders and interested parties directly to inform them of the publication of this statutory proposal:

- ✓ Secretary of State
- ✓ Parents, Carers and Pupils of Westminster Cathedral and St Vincent de Paul
- ✓ Staff at Westminster Cathedral and St Vincent de Paul
- ✓ Governors of all Westminster schools
- ✓ Diocese of Westminster (Roman Catholic)
- ✓ London Diocesan Board for Schools
- ✓ Westminster Schools Forum and Education Partnership Board (EPB)
- ✓ Headteachers of all Westminster schools
- ✓ Local MPs
- ✓ All Westminster councillors
- ✓ All neighbouring boroughs' local authorities
- ✓ Published on Westminster website / social media accounts
- ✓ Westminster local paper

By the formal close of the statutory notice, the following written responses were received:

Total Responses	Agreed with the Proposal	Neither agreed or disagreed	Did not Agree with the Proposal
47	4	27	16

Respondents identified themselves as:

- Parents of Westminster Cathedral RC Primary School x 6
- Parents of St Vincent de Paul RC Primary School x 2
- Staff at Westminster RC Primary School x 9
- Staff at St Vincent de Paul RC Primary School - 23
- Governor x 2
- Local Councillor x 1
- No identity provided x 4

Under key headings, a summary of questions and comments is provided.

Organisation of classes

I understand the need for the amalgamation and why it is necessary. My concern is how will the classes be divided and mixed. Will they be organised by ability? Can you guarantee that friendship groups will not be broken? How will it work if there are more than 30 children in the year group?

What reassurances are there that there won't be an increase in class sizes to the detriment of pupils?

In previous years, St Vincent de Paul has operated as a one and half form entry school and therefore has the capacity to accommodate the projected numbers. Current school layout allows for flexibility to increase capacity which would accommodate the numbers of pupils they understand. There are areas that could be utilised for extra classroom use to ensure that all pupils are placed on one site. This will ensure that siblings are located on the same site and will lead to a successful cohesive school.

Engagement with Community

This is all very rushed and has come as a genuine bolt from the blue for families. The informal consultation was lamentable and not the way to genuinely garner views from those effected. It has seemed from the start that this merger was going to be rammed through no matter what local residents had to say.

What weight has been given to the overwhelming rejection of the merger by parents at both schools during the consultation process?

We would welcome and encourage links with both Westminster Cathedral and Holy Apostles parishes and know that both clergy teams would be an integral part of the Catholic school community. Once again, this would ensure a successful amalgamation.

Pupils, parents and staff have repeatedly been told that Westminster Cathedral School is not closing but amalgamating to create a new Catholic primary school. This new proposal seems to contradict those initial conversations. As it states clearly in the Cabinet Member report: 'The agreed way forward with both governing bodies, who led the informal consultation, is for the amalgamation of both schools, with Westminster Cathedral RC Primary formally closing at the end of August 2022 and St Vincent de Paul RC Primary to be retained as one-form entry school. A process of amalgamation enables a better transition for children at both schools and helps ensure that strong educational outcomes continue to be delivered'.

The site and travel

What guarantees have been obtained from the diocese that the Westminster Cathedral site will be retained for educational purposes? As local taxpayers are being asked to plug the £400,000 deficit, they should at the very least be assured that the site is retained as a continuing educational asset for our communities.

Your proposal does not explain why the St Vincent site has been retained over the Westminster Cathedral site, which is more easily accessible and closer to the Underground Network. Your proposal also shows that today more students attend Westminster Cathedral than St Vincent. Thus, by retaining the St Vincent site, you will impact more families than if you kept the Westminster Cathedral site.

Travel between schools will just not be at the beginning and end of the day. Children located offsite will not have the opportunity to participate fully in school life (e.g. assemblies, workshops, monitor roles, across year group relationships, specialist teachers, wraparound care, instrumental lessons). If particular year groups were based at the satellite locations, this would result in loss of learning time when travelling to and from the main site to particular elements of school life. Including all children on one site offers a secure, ideal and positive learning environment for pupils to thrive academically, emotionally and spiritually as one school community.

Your proposal does not address logistical challenges that parents will encounter: for many parents this will result in longer commutes - will the Council be there to ensure that wrap around solutions will be offered to parents to address this?

Provision for Children with Special Educational Needs

There are concerns about the adequacy to SEN provision and the disruption this process may cause. What reassurances are there that these are being taken into account and properly mitigated for?

It is imperative that the needs of pupils with EHCPs transitioning to St Vincent de Paul are at the forefront of the amalgamation process. They require their needs to be met fully (e.g. adaptations to the building, resourcing, staffing and timetabling). Establishing a definitive timetable is crucial and will assist the school in this process. Parents need to be reassured that the school understands the background of these children and that the SENCO can meet and plan for a stable and successful transition.

School identity

Will there be guarantees of support in purchasing new uniforms for families that need it? So far there has only been the suggestion this will be 'looked at'. Parents struggling with already increasing costs of living need this information.

As long as the new school has to operate on two sites, I believe the issue of school uniforms should be delayed till all of the school is on one site.

Children at Westminster Cathedral are losing their school and the new identity of the amalgamated school is important.

There is no mention of a new name, new uniform, new emblem or new identity. It reads like St Vincent De Paul are taking our pupils in; which is not the case as that school is also in trouble financially and slightly more unsubscribed than Westminster cathedral.

During the informal consultation meetings, it was made clear that a new name would be given to the newly amalgamated school considering both identities of the new school and this would be done in consultation with stakeholders. We were told the merge would create a new school name and uniform was told the amalgamated school will have a new school name.

This amalgamation, despite being on one site should be seen to be just that – an amalgamation; an amalgamation of two sister schools, two equals; no one school having favourable treatment over the other, either over admissions of the children from the two parishes or in deciding the futures of existing staff in both schools. I am pleased to see that children in both schools are guaranteed a place in the newly amalgamated school. This amalgamation will need a newly appointed board of governors, some of whom can

be from the existing two schools. And that this newly formed governing body should then elect their chairman from among its members.

Staffing

There is no mention of staff retention. Pimlico is a small community and I have been advised that staff at St Vincent De Paul have been assured their jobs are safe. At the present time I am finding it challenging to see how this process is fair. As again, parents were assured that there would be a fair process for all staff retention, not just for one school. The proposal does not mention how this is going to be actioned and we were told it would be included in the formal proposal. We would like clarity on the following statement:

Statement made during informal consultation process – ‘The schools will ensure that a thorough and fair recruitment process is undertaken and staff at both schools will have an equal opportunity to apply for posts at the amalgamated school’. When we had an NEU meeting alongside St Vincent de Paul staff they were told that they would be redeployed. Westminster Cathedral RC Primary School were not told this. This has raised concerns that potentially staff at St Vincent De Paul will be prioritised for staffing roles

Whilst I agree that the merger of equals amalgamation is the best way to secure a strong provision for catholic education in south Westminster, I want to highlight some of the challenges regarding the successful execution of this. It is very much my hope and expectation that the amalgamation will be successful. The two schools already share an executive head, which in some ways is an advantage as they are familiar with both schools. There is a great deal of responsibility on this individual across both schools, exacerbated by the Covid situation. The senior leadership teams have a lot of responsibility and workload without an amalgamation to execute on or a pandemic to navigate there are a number of tasks that need attention. Expediting clarity on areas such as the staffing structure and amalgamation practicalities will aid staff and parents in getting transparency about the future. Such clarity should provide greater certainty and help maintain pupil numbers at the combined school.

Addressing the deficit

The amalgamated school will still have to address a huge debt problem. Your proposal does not explain how this will be resolved.

Summary and conclusion of representation

The Council acknowledges the genuine support and concerns raised by parents/carers, the local community and educational professionals in response to the statutory notice period and the four-week informal consultation period led by the governing bodies of both schools. Whilst taking account of all representations made, the Council must consider these representations against the two key reasons for the proposal to amalgamate the two schools: falling rolls and financial viability. As outlined in the informal consultation and the statutory notice, Westminster currently has a 22% surplus capacity across its primary schools. This is not contained in any particular area but across all areas of the borough. Westminster Cathedral and St Vincent de Paul are located in the 'South' planning area, which is one of six planning areas. The current surplus capacity in this area is currently 24.5%. Both schools have unfilled places at 31% and 34%. Annual projections do not indicate demand over the next 4-5 years, which will result in a continuing increase in deficit at both schools culminating in reduced resources. The Council has a statutory responsibility to not only ensure there is sufficiency of school places in its area but to address excess surplus capacity and ensure the financial viability of its maintained schools.

Westminster Cathedral's deficit was £308,000 at the end of March 2021 and is estimated to be about £400,000 at 31st August 2022, the date of proposed closure (as part of the amalgamation). Unfortunately, although the Council supported Westminster Cathedral school in producing a deficit recovery plan and supported a number of staff reorganisations, as the roll reductions were much higher than it had previously been forecast, and over 90% of school funding is based on pupil numbers, the school's funding reduced significantly. At this stage, the school became financially unviable and was not able to reduce costs further leading to a significant worsening of the deficit.

St Vincent de Paul were in deficit by £39,000 at 31st March 2021 and are estimating this deficit will increase to £79,000 by 31st March 2021. The school has not been able to produce a balanced budget plan over three years and their position is estimated to worsen to £163,000 deficit by 31st March 2024. We believe that this amalgamation proposal offers the best opportunity to secure not only the current, but long-term sustainability of high-quality primary education to current and future pupils, and is a proposal that provides a guaranteed place at St Vincent de Paul for all pupils on roll of both schools.

When schools are amalgamated, it will result in the discontinuation of one of the schools. When an amalgamation takes place, the children attending the discontinued school are not displaced and have a guaranteed place at the new amalgamated school.

An amalgamated school will also enable greater opportunity for families to be provided with a range of extra-curricular activities and ensure value for money including promoting the current nursery offer for 3 and 4 years olds.