



# Business and Children's Policy and Scrutiny Committee

<b>Date:</b>	7 <sup>th</sup> March 2022
<b>Classification:</b>	General Release
<b>Title:</b>	Decision to amalgamate Westminster Cathedral and St Vincent de Paul RC Primary Schools
<b>Report of:</b>	Sarah Newman, Bi-Borough Executive Director of Children's Services
<b>Cabinet Member Portfolio</b>	Young People and Learning
<b>Wards Involved:</b>	Tachbrook and Vincent Square
<b>Policy Context:</b>	Vibrant Communities: Children and young people to have the best start in life, be well cared for and attend excellent schools that promote achievement
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## 1. Executive Summary

This report informs the Committee of the decision made by the Lead Member for Young People and Learning to proceed with the amalgamation of Westminster Cathedral and St Vincent de Paul RC Primary Schools with effect from 1 September 2022. The decision follows a four-week period of public representation in January 2022 in response to the Council issuing a statutory notice on the proposal as recommended by the governing bodies of Westminster Cathedral and St Vincent de Paul RC Primary Schools following an informal four-week consultation, led by both governing bodies, with parents and staff in October 2021.

The decision has been called in for debate and the reasons presented as questions have been provided.

## 2. Key Matters for the Committee's Consideration

Questions/comments provided with response:

- Q1. *Local residents – via the Council – will be left to pick up the bill for the larger £400,000 deficit of Westminster Cathedral School site when it closes. It is not clear what detailed process/discussions have been undertaken to arrive at the decision that one school site is preferable to the other.*

Both school sites are owned by the Roman Catholic diocese, not the Council. The diocese expressed a preference for the school site next to Westminster Cathedral itself to be retained for the amalgamated school, which is the St Vincent de Paul site. This decision was supported by both governing bodies, who have community and parent representatives, as set out in their informal governor-led consultation and in their subsequent recommendation to the Council to issue a statutory notice about the amalgamation proposal.

Westminster Cathedral school site will be retained for educational use. The Council will work with the diocese as the landlord to explore the potential to provide much needed provision for children with special educational needs and disabilities at the site, as well as ensuring that space will be provided for the amalgamated school from September 2022 where any year group still has two classes, rather than one, as the school moves to one form of entry.

- Q2. *The consultation process saw parents overwhelmingly reject the proposals. We want to understand how this was taken into account and how concerns raised by parents and others are being addressed properly.*

The consultation process provided parents with the opportunity to submit their views and concerns about the merger, all of which were fully considered by the governing bodies who led the informal consultation. Throughout the informal process, key questions and concerns raised by parents and staff were addressed and provided in the form of Frequently Asked Questions. These were published on each school's website with hard copies circulated at parent meetings held at each school.

Whilst there is parental opposition in respect of numbers opposing the merger, a decision cannot be made based on one aspect of the consultation feedback alone. Having considered all of the parental and

staff feedback received, both governing bodies provided a written recommendation to the Council to proceed to the formal stage of consultation. As there were no other proposals put forward during the formal consultation to address the falling rolls, current deficits and ongoing financial challenges of both schools resulting from insufficient pupil numbers (despite ongoing increases in per pupil funding), the decision has been made to implement the amalgamation with effect from 1 September 2022 and work with both schools to support parents, pupils and staff with the transition.

- Q3. *There is no detail as to why the diocese felt Option A (to discontinue both schools and open one new school) was not possible; why would the DFE stipulation that any new school have as part of its admission arrangements up to 50% of non-faith pupils be a hurdle. We would like to understand the thinking and discussions on this point, and indeed on whether exploration of changes to current admissions policies at both schools could not also reverse the decline in pupil numbers.*

Catholic schools are required to have regard to the 'Diocese Guidance on Admissions'. The diocese provides model policies that have been carefully drafted to help schools comply with admissions legislation, including the 'Admissions Code'. Schools are expected to use the diocesan model policies. This aims to minimise the risk of schools producing policies which are non-Code compliant. It also aims to ensure that governing bodies continue to provide priority to Catholic children. Offering up to 50% to non-faith pupils does not therefore conform to the diocese guidance issued to all Catholic schools. The Catholic Church has been advised that, when considering amalgamation, the correct strategy to adopt to protect the Catholic character of the remaining school is to discontinue one school and retain the other. As both schools have been, and remain undersubscribed, any applicant regardless of faith is eligible for a place. The admissions policy has not therefore excluded potential applicants.

- Q4. *Understanding the transfer of property from the council to the diocese in advance of these consultations and the potential future of the Cathedral School site.*

The Westminster Cathedral school site was on land owned by the Council, which in turn had inherited it from the former Inner London Education Authority, which was abolished at the same time as the GLC. The school was built as part of the post-war redevelopment. Westminster

Cathedral RC Primary school was re-located there from its former home at another site. Under the School Standards and Framework Act 1998, Diocesan authorities are legally entitled to have the land ownership transferred to them. Westminster has done several of these land transfers over the years. The Council had no grounds to object, and would not have done so in any event, as neither the Council nor the Diocese can use the site for other purposes without the approval of the DfE.

### **3. Background**

- 3.1 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. This approach is in line with the recommendations of the Isos Partnership with regard to reducing spare capacity and supporting the financial management of LA maintained schools; these recommendations were adopted in full by Schools Forum in autumn 2020.
- 3.2 As outlined in the informal consultation and the statutory notice, Westminster currently has 22% surplus capacity across its primary schools (October 2021 School Census). 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 in Westminster. Currently, the surplus capacity in this area is 24.5%. Both schools have unfilled places: 31% at Westminster Cathedral RC Primary and 34% at St Vincent de Paul RC Primary. Annual projections do not indicate any increase in demand over the next 4-5 years, which will result in increasing deficits at both schools culminating in reduced resources. The Council has a statutory responsibility to not only ensure there is a sufficiency of school places in its area but to address excess surplus capacity and ensure the financial viability of its maintained schools.
- 3.3 Westminster Cathedral's deficit was £308,000 at the end of March 2021 and is estimated to be approximately £400,000 at 31<sup>st</sup> August 2022, which is the date when the school will be discontinued as part of the amalgamation. Unfortunately, although the Council supported Westminster Cathedral 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.

- 3.4 St Vincent de Paul RC Primary was in deficit by £39,000 at 31<sup>st</sup> March 2021 and is estimating this deficit will increase to £79,000 by 31<sup>st</sup> March 2022. 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 31<sup>st</sup> March 2024.
- 3.5 The 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. It is a proposal that provides a guaranteed place at St Vincent de Paul RC Primary for all pupils on roll of both schools.
- 3.6 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.
- 3.7 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 the retention of the current nursery offer for 3 and 4 year-olds.

**If you have any queries about this Report or wish to inspect any of the Background Papers, please contact Report Author:**

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## **BACKGROUND PAPERS**

Cabinet Member Decision (also available [here](#)) and Appendices:

- Appendix A - Informal Consultation (also available [here](#))
- Appendix B - Statutory Proposal Notice
- Appendix C – Analysis of Representation