

‘St Stephen’s Church of England Primary School’ – Questions and answers, June 2009

This document sets out in detail the Local Authority’s answers to questions that were asked at the parents’ meeting on 25 June 2009.

Why are extra places needed?

The Council has a duty, under Section 14 of the Education Act 1996, to provide sufficient school places for those residents who require them.

Between 2000 and 2007, the number of live births in the borough rose by 21%, from 2,384 to 2,884, and Richmond Borough’s primary schools were top of the national Key Stage 2 league tables throughout those years. As a result, demand for places in reception increased by 200 pupils in that period, with a large leap in numbers in 2007, which has increased in both subsequent years.

This year, augmented by the effects of the recession, demand has increased to the point that the shortfall in places compared with normal capacity of 1,937 is over 200. We have therefore provided seven additional reception classes across the borough, including one each at Chase Bridge Primary and at Orleans Infant. The take-up rate from birth (i.e. the number of children born in the area, plus those who have moved in, whose parents want state school places for them) has increased this year from 70% to 78%. As the birth cohorts in the next two years will be even larger, we are anticipating that we will need 12 extra classes in 2010/2011 and 14 in 2011/2012.

In our [Primary Strategy for Change](#) (which was one of only 40 in England that was unconditionally approved by the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF), and [Consultation on Primary Expansions Strategy](#) documents, we set out plans to provide five additional forms of entry on a permanent basis. In recognition of our large growth in reception class numbers, in 2008 we were one of only two local authorities in London to whom the DCSF allocated ‘Basic Need Safety Valve’ funding to help with the costs of additional primary school places. There had been no opportunity to bid for Safety Valve funding since 2005. The DCSF also allocated some Targeted Capital Fund money to us last year and we are required to spend this money and the Safety Valve allocation by 2011. Those allocations have been supplemented by other funding streams and from the Council’s own money to create a total pot of £32million to pay for the five planned forms of entry. The conversion of St Stephen’s and Orleans Infant into two-form entry primary schools, both serving children aged 4 to 11, would provide one of those five extra forms of entry.

As demand has been further exacerbated by the recession, we believe that we will require further permanent places on top of those five forms of entry, but we do not yet have funding to enable any plans other than those which have already been proposed. We will continue to lobby the Government for additional funding, although, now that other local authorities, including all five of our neighbours (Hammersmith and Fulham, Hounslow, Kingston, Surrey, and Wandsworth), have found themselves in a similar position due to increased birth rates and the recession, we are effectively competing with other local authorities for any available funding. London Councils, the organisation which represents the interests of local authorities in London, has made a bid for Government funding on behalf of all London authorities in this position (please see:

<http://www.londoncouncils.gov.uk/lobbying/children/primaryschoolplaces.htm>) but we have not yet been notified as to when the outcome will be known.

Why did the Council not foresee the growth in pupil numbers?

We did foresee it, and were in discussions with the governors of Orleans Infant and St Stephen's as far back as the autumn of 2005 regarding the need for extra places. However, our plans to provide further places on a permanent basis could not be realised at that point without significant Government funding, and, despite lobbying by officers, councillors and the local MPs, there were no opportunities to bid for funding until 2008.

Why are extra places needed in St Margarets/central Twickenham in particular?

We have had difficulties with school place planning in this area for many years, despite the permanent expansion of St Mary's at the turn of this century. The birth rate in the St Margarets/East Twickenham/Twickenham Riverside wards increased from 318 in 2003 to 377 in 2007. As a result, applications for Orleans Infant have increased significantly in recent years:

Year	Applications	First preferences
2005/2006	110	N/A
2006/2007	169	83
2007/2008	200	111
2008/2009	217	133
2009/2010	231	129

The number of applications for St Mary's has also increased considerably in each of those years.

A key difficulty of the school planning issues in this area is the fact that children living in North St Margarets stand little chance of admission to Orleans Infant as they are living too far away to be admitted under the 'home to school distance' criterion. We believe that, since their parents pay Council Tax, they should be equally entitled to access a Richmond Borough school within a reasonable distance from their home.

Why was St Mary's not made into a three-form entry primary school when it was expanded to two-form entry?

The expansion of St Mary's was one of a series of permanent expansions between 2000 and 2005 that provided 250 additional places. At that time, the Office of National Statistics (ONS), which provides our base demographic forecasts, did not indicate that the birth rate would increase in the way that it has in recent years. Consequently, it appeared that more places would not be required at that time. It is also the case that St Mary's infant site, at Amyand Park Road, is very limited in size and could not have accommodated three forms of entry.

It subsequently became apparent that the ONS forecasts had substantially underestimated the amount of births in the area and we revised them upwards in order that our pupil forecasts could be more reliable. Until this year, our forecasts have been good, but this year it was very hard to predict the degree to which the recession, once it had struck last autumn, would have an effect on demand for places, and it would have been near impossible to predict that demand would have increased by 8% in one year.

Why did the Council not build a primary school on the old Brunel University site in North St Margarets?

Before Brunel University sold the site to Octagon in 2002, we were informed that the cost of buying sufficient space on the site for a school would have been £15million. That cost, even before the cost of constructing a new school (between £5-10million) was factored in, was prohibitive. It was also felt that as the site was so close to the borough boundary with Hounslow, building a school there would have provided as many places for Hounslow children as it would have done for Richmond children.

If there is such a demand for places, shouldn't the Council be looking to build a new school somewhere in Twickenham?

We are in close contact with Planning regarding the availability of sites and have considered many over the years, but, as with the Brunel site, the problem has often been that they are too costly to buy. Where, as was the case with Gifford House on Twickenham Green, they were already owned by the Council, they were either too small, had too many planning restrictions or were earmarked as sites to meet the Council's target, set by the Mayor of London, for providing new social housing. That said, we continue to look at sites and are hopeful that funding will become available to enable us to develop a site in Twickenham in the next few years.

Don't housing developers have to make a contribution towards the costs of school places?

Yes, they do, if a development is, according to a complex formula, likely to result in there being a net increase in the number of state-school educated children. This is called a Section 106 education receipt. However, most of the housing developments in the borough have been very small compared with those in other areas, so the amount of receipts to be paid has not been over £700,000 from any one development in the last five years. All the Section 106 education receipts accrued in recent years have been put towards the planned permanent expansions referred to earlier in this document.

Why is the Council proposing to convert Orleans and St Stephen's into all-through primary schools rather than simply expanding them to four forms of entry as infant and junior schools?

For several reasons:

Firstly, expanding St Stephen's to four-form entry would require 16 classes, i.e. four more than at present, on an already restricted site, whereas as a two-form entry primary school it would only need 14, i.e. two more than at present.

Secondly, keeping the schools as infant and junior would mean that there would still only be one school in St Margarets with a reception class intake and parents of North St Margarets children would still struggle to gain places on proximity. Our proposal would mean that both schools would have a reception class intake and would serve geographically distinct, though overlapping, areas.

Thirdly, we believe that all-through primary schools provide educational benefits and economies of scale that would not necessarily be achieved in infant and junior schools. Recruitment and retention of staff is usually easier in an all-through school. A larger staff would provide increased opportunities for collaboration on planning and developing the curriculum, sharing of skills and ideas, staff development, specialisms and a broader, more flexible curriculum. The schools would have much larger budgets, enabling both a wider educational experience for the children and curriculum planning across both key stages, providing continuity of learning for the children, especially those with special educational needs. Staff would have closer

contact with parents/carers over a longer period of time, which would be beneficial for children's welfare. Children would not have to change schools at the end of Year 2, and parents would need to make only one admission application during their child's primary education.

The London Diocesan Board for Schools agrees with the educational merits of our proposal. In response to the consultation on the Council's Primary School Expansions Strategy, Tom Peryer, who was until recently the Diocese's Director of Education, stated:

Although the report [the consultation document] makes clear that the Diocese of London through its Board for Schools is supportive of the expansion proposals in relation to St Stephen's and St Mary's & St Peter's I am writing for the record to confirm that this is the case. In particular we welcome the opportunity to create two new primary schools to replace the separate infant and junior schools of Orleans and St Stephen's. This is a better option educationally and for parents. Whilst not taking the consultation and statutory procedures for granted, we look forward to the enjoyable prospect of working with the school communities to develop proposals to expand and improve the existing buildings and provision.

How much will the proposals cost and how are the costs determined?

We anticipate that the conversions of St Stephen's and Orleans will cost £2million and £3.2million respectively. The work at Orleans will involve at least five additional classrooms, as opposed to the two at St Stephen's, but both projects have been costed in accordance with the minimum requirements of the DCSF's 'Building Bulletin 99' guidance for primary schools.

Does the amount of funding mean that less improvement to the condition of the buildings could be achieved at St Stephen's than on other proposed school expansion projects?

No. The brief being issued to the potential architects for the project will be made available on the school website. The Council has £32million to spend across all seven schools whose expansion or conversion will result in the five additional forms of entry and some projects are more complex and challenging than others and therefore require more funding than others.

Can't the school just have the £2million for new buildings and refurbishment of existing buildings without having to change its age range or intake?

No. The money is ring-fenced for the provision of additional school places. The proposed projects at St Stephen's and Orleans are designed to create an extra form of entry for local children whilst also improving facilities and enabling additional educational benefits at the schools.

Why can't you pursue options at other schools?

There aren't any other options that would provide at least a partial solution to the longstanding school place planning difficulties in St Margarets. The only alternative for some resident of the area, especially those in North St Margarets, would be for them to be admitted to schools outside the area, in Whitton, Kew or even further afield.

Wouldn't this proposal just be a case of the Council patching over the problem?

It is the only option available to us at the moment. We have worked very hard to secure Government funding, all of which is grant rather than PFI credits, to enable

our plans to be realised, and we believe it would be against the interest of local residents if the St Stephen's and Orleans proposals are not implemented.

However, we recognise that demand for places is likely to reach even higher levels, even if the recession starts to ease in the next year, so we are actively negotiating with parties to secure a site that could be developed at a reasonable price, should funding become available from the London Councils bid or from the Council's own lobbying of Government Ministers.

Won't the proposals split the St Margarets community in half?

We believe that the alternative – of St Margarets children being driven or bussed twice a day through heavy traffic to and from schools outside the local area – is much more divisive than our proposals. Converting the two schools into all-through primary schools would enable 30 extra children per year to be educated in state-schools within walking distance from their home. We therefore believe that our proposals would be beneficial for the local community.

When will design options be available for parents to see?

Once the architects have been appointed we would expect them to produce design options by October 2009. Parents will be given the opportunity to view the designs, discuss them with the architects, Governors and Council officers, and to make their views on them known.

Can't the proposal involve building on or using the Brook Road allotments that adjoin St Stephen's?

We have pursued this option in the past and, in liaison with colleagues in the Council's Environment Directorate, are considering its viability again.

What is the decision-making process for the proposed conversion and how will parents be consulted?

Once the designs are available, all parties will be able to view them. If the school's Governors and parents were satisfied with those designs and were convinced of the merits of the proposal, it is anticipated that the Governors would make a decision later in the autumn to approve the proposal. The Authority would then, in accordance with statutory requirements, publish a proposal to extend the school's age range and amend its admission number to 60. Parents and other local people would have six weeks to respond to the proposal, and responses would then be collated as an appendix to a report to be considered by the Council's Cabinet, which, in its role as 'local decision-maker', would either approve or reject the proposal.

How would the admissions processes work for the two schools, especially for the children who will be in Year 2 at Orleans Infant in 2009/2010?

This has yet to be agreed with the schools' Governing Bodies. The Council's view is that the current admission criteria could be implemented without any further change. The transition model from infant and junior schools into all-through primary schools is complex and is still to be exactly determined, pending further discussions with both schools and a final decision to be taken by the Governors regarding the conversion the proposal. A possible model would involve: one of the current Year 1 classes at Orleans staying put and three classes moving to St Stephen's for Year 3 in 2010/2011; the current Reception classes at Orleans being split equally between the schools for Year 3 in 2011/2012; and all four Reception classes for 2010/2011 being admitted to Orleans, and then being split equally between the schools for Year 3 in 2013/2014. The Year 3 splits could be determined by the Council's Admissions

Section administering mini coordinated admission rounds as in the way that it does, on a much larger scale, for Reception admissions across the borough.

Couldn't the Council just divide the borough into fixed catchment areas for admissions purposes?

This would be very difficult to achieve, for several reasons.

Firstly, church schools set their own admissions criteria separately from those that the Council sets for community schools. So although we could, in theory, set fixed catchment areas for community schools, church schools would be under no obligation to follow suit. It would be probable that most church schools would continue to admit children whose parents are committed members of the particular faith within particular parishes whose boundaries would inevitably cut across any fixed catchment areas that we could set for community schools.

Secondly, some schools' intakes are very close and some are relatively distant, e.g. the furthest child offered under the 'home to distance' criterion for one school this year lived only 319 metres from the school whereas for another the cut-off was 3,458 metres.

Thirdly, the cut-off distances can vary considerably for individual schools from year to year, e.g. the cut-off last year was 1,190 metres for the school whose cut-off was 3,458 metres this year. In introducing 'random allocation' (i.e. a lottery system) for their secondary school admissions, Brighton and Hove Council found that by far the most challenging aspect was setting catchments that were deemed to be fair and acceptable for local parents. If we were to try to set catchments for the community primary schools, we have no doubt that it would prove to be impossible to set catchments that local people would be happy with.

Fourthly, catchments would still have to reflect the fact that some out-borough children are currently able to gain places at some of our schools where they are living nearer than children within the borough. A High Court judgement against Greenwich Council in 1989 ruled that it is unlawful to reserve all or the large majority of places for in-borough children.

Lastly, we do not believe that setting catchment areas would actually mitigate the shortage of places.

St Stephen's isn't full in Key Stage 2 at the moment so what guarantee is there that there will be enough children to fill the school in all year-groups?

The increases in applications for reception class over recent years are already feeding through into higher year-groups in most schools, and we believe that the combined effects of primary schools' reputations, improved standards in the borough's secondary schools and the economic situation are such that there will be more than enough children to fill St Stephen's as a two-form entry primary school. In particular, the school's link to Orleans Park has become increasingly desirable for local parents.

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