

Thursday 4th June 2026

Dear Parents, Carers, and the Communities of St George's and St Mark's CE Primary Schools,

Consultation on the proposal to create a single, merged primary school

Thank you to everyone who has already taken the time to respond to the consultation which began on 2nd June. We are very grateful for the thoughtful, detailed, and often strongly held views that have been shared so far.

We want to begin by acknowledging clearly that we hear the strength of feeling within the community. We do recognise that both schools, alongside their role in education, play an important part in the life and identity of their local communities. We understand that there are real concerns about the potential impact of any change. We share those concerns, both about the impact on local community identity and also the impact on communities of schools finding it increasingly difficult to deliver a high-quality educational experience for local children in the future.

This consultation has been launched because we face a significant challenge: falling pupil numbers. This affects a school's ability to sustain high-quality education over time. There are no easy solutions, and we fully recognise that every option carries difficult consequences.

We want to be very clear that this is a genuine consultation. While the consultation document sets out the option that we currently believe may best secure high-quality education in the long term, no final decision has been made. The Trust Board will carefully consider all feedback before deciding whether to proceed, amend, or halt the proposal.

Your responses are therefore extremely important, and we strongly encourage continued engagement.

To support this, we have:

- Compiled answers to the most frequently asked questions received so far which are included alongside this letter (we will repeat this process during the consultation period)
- Added a new question to the consultation survey asking for your preferred option among those presented in the consultation document. This is a helpful suggestion that we have received. (If you have already completed the survey, you can access it a second time, in the same way ([here](#)): just complete question 1 again (category of respondent) and then skip through to this new question at the end of the survey)

We are also aware that some families are considering making decisions about their child's future schooling at this stage. We would gently encourage you to remain engaged in the consultation process before taking such steps. The consultation is taking place well in advance of any potential changes, which would not be implemented before September 2027.

Above all, our aim is to secure the best possible future education for children in and around Swanage.

Your ongoing feedback is vital in helping us reach the right decision so thank you again for your engagement.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Paul Howieson".

Paul Howieson
CEO, Coastal Learning Partnership



FAQs – Responses based on the consultation document so far



You are encouraged to read the full consultation document which can be accessed [here](#).

1. Why is a merger being proposed, and what evidence shows it is necessary?

The merger is being proposed, from September 2027, primarily because of falling pupil numbers causing financial sustainability challenges.

- Nationally, primary pupil numbers are projected to fall by around 300,000 by 2030, with birth rates down about 15% over the past decade.
- Locally (Dorset/Purbeck), this decline is already being felt and is expected to continue, with no projected recovery in forecasts.
- Both schools continue to experience reduced enrolment. The reduced funding leads to fewer classes which leads to increasingly wide mixed age teaching,

The merger is therefore proposed to protect educational quality and long term viability.

The Local Authority provides forecast pupil numbers as part of its statutory duty for pupil place planning. Dorset Council supports this consultation process demonstrating its agreement that there is a surplus of primary school places in Swanage and surrounding areas. There is no indication from the Local Authority that an increased future demand, such as from new housing areas, will create a future significant increase in pupil numbers. It is not possible to predict future pupil numbers exactly. Although exact intake numbers vary from one year to the next, both St. George's and St. Mark's consistently have an intake below their Published Admission Numbers year-on-year and there is no evidence to suggest that will change. The admissions process will continue as normal during this time and, should the proposal proceed, every child on roll at either school will be offered a place in the merged school for September 2027.

2. What alternative options were considered before deciding on a merger?

Four main options considered are:

- Option A: Remain as two separate schools. We are concerned that this will lead to a decline in quality of education over time given the resultant organisational and financial constraints.
- Option B(1): Merge into one school on the St. Mark's site. We currently think this provides the best and most flexible accommodation as well as allowing future expansion, should it be required. Parents who do not know the site at St. Mark's are very welcome to make a visit – Katy Astle would be pleased to facilitate that.
- Option B(2): Merge into one school on the St. George's site. We are concerned that the site is too restrictive, lacking some of the spacious accommodation of St. Mark's and providing no future opportunity for expansion.
- Option C: Remain as two separate schools, one infant and the other junior. We are concerned that this poses practical challenges for families and retains ongoing costs of two sites.

3. How will the merger improve educational outcomes for children?

The proposal aims to avoid a future situation where both schools must reduce further the number of classes that they run. This would require mixed-aged teaching to be very broad and may make it more difficult for both schools to continue to achieve the best possible educational outcomes for their children. Maintaining at least four classes allows more appropriate grouping: Reception, Years 1/2, Years 3/4, Years 5/6. This avoids the future possibility of either school requiring very wide mixed-age classes (e.g. four/five-year-olds in Reception mixed with years 1 and 2 and 7 – 11-year-olds taught together through mixing years 3, 4, 5 & 6), which may otherwise occur. This, in turn, supports continued recruitment and retention of high-quality teachers, which is harder in contexts with broad mixed-age teaching. We already know that each school will reduce to three classes (St. George's from September 2026) and reducing to two classes is likely to follow in the future.

It is also the case that very small schools, with the resultant small staffing group, inevitably finds it difficult to provide regular extra-curricular activities, such as after school clubs.

Overall, the merger is proposed to retain a rich, broad, and sustainable educational experience that local communities can access.

4. What will class sizes look like, and how will individual attention be maintained?

The proposed merged school would operate with a Published Admission Number (PAN) of 15 per year group (105 pupils total). It would eventually settle to four classes, with continued effective use of mixed-age teaching across two-year group boundaries in the traditional model of Reception on their own, Year 1/2, Year 3/4 and Year 5/6.

From Sept 2027, we would anticipate that the merged school would have six classes overall in order to accommodate every child on roll across both schools. The class number would then reduce to four over the following two years or so as larger cohorts moved through the school.

The merged school will still use some mixed age teaching – that is a very effective way of organising learning in schools – but the breadth of age ranges mixed together will be less. From September 2027, given that there will be six classes, the extent of mixed-age teaching will be less than it will be in each separate school from September 2026. Actual class sizes will vary, but we anticipate they would all be below 30; it will still be a small primary school.

A primary school of six classes is still a small school and the staff, having come from both St. George's and St. Mark's, would be able to provide individual attention just as they do now.

5. How will children's wellbeing and transitions be supported?

If the proposal to merge the two schools goes ahead, we will produce a clear plan to support all children through the transition.

We will ensure a range of joint activities, so pupils get to know each other and become familiar with a different school site such as shared sporting events, reward events and trips.

All children will have familiar staff surrounding them and there are already several staff members that work across both settings.

We want to engage children in this process and use pupil voice to help re-establish logos, vision and values of the merged primary school. The children can help establish a new uniform (the Salisbury Diocese Board of Education has agreed, should the proposal proceed, to provide a grant which will buy every child a new school jumper; any other uniform items would be phased in).

6. How will the needs of children with SEND be supported?

If the proposal to merge the two schools goes ahead, we will produce a clear plan to support all children through the transition, including those with SEND.

Additional and enhanced transitions will be supported by staff known to the children. Children will then be able to quickly get used to a new environment. Both schools already share the same SENDCO who will prioritise ensuring that adequate provision is in place for each pupil prior to September 2027. The leadership team will meet and plan support in partnership with parents. Social stories and photos will help children get accustomed to their classroom/teacher, similar to how we support transition between classes within school currently.

St. Mark's is a more spacious environment, inside and out, which offers greater opportunity to support SEND children in different ways. The merged school will continue to be a small primary school and so all children will access the attention and support that they need, whether that is to support their SEND or to provide additional challenge.

Furthermore, we believe that school staff will be better placed to support children with SEND if children are educated in a class where the age range is not too broad.

7. What will happen to existing staff, and will there be redundancies?

Currently, the two staff teams work closely together but in separate buildings. Under this proposal, the two teams would come together to form a single team working in the same place. This means that children from both schools will have familiar staff faces around them. Similarly, the current schools' leadership team will continue to lead the merged school.

From September 2027, the school would continue to require most of the staff currently employed across both schools. There is some possible risk to staff where there are duplicated roles and that would need to be managed carefully with those members of staff, should the proposal proceed.

8. What are the transport, parking, and traffic implications?

We are aware that the proposal may create a transport issue for those families who find they are then further away from the merged school than they are their current school. St. George's and St. Mark's are quite close together, although clearly a child in Langton Matravers would have further to go to get to school. We would like to hear from parents about this issue through the consultation process to understand their concerns and suggestions. For example, it might be that the school provides a 'shuttle minibus service' at the start and end of the school day. We think that is entirely possible, should there be sufficient need for it.

Currently, there is no car parking facility for parents, visitors or staff at St. George's; St. Mark's does have a car park for staff use. St. Mark's is designed and built as a one form entry primary school to accommodate up to 210 pupils. Under this proposal, the merged school will remain well under that pupil number and so the impact on traffic is not expected to be significant or disruptive.

9. What will happen to the current St George's site?

This is a more difficult question to answer specifically at this stage. The St George's school site is owned by the Salisbury Diocesan Board of Education (SDBE). The playing field is owned by Dorset Council and leased to CLP for the school's use.

If the St George's building is no longer required by CLP, it would be returned to the SDBE, its legal owner. The SDBE typically invites the local community, via the parish council, to consider purchasing the site at market value (under charity law, the SDBE cannot gift the site).

If the playing field is no longer required by CLP, it would return to Dorset Council. As Langton Matravers Parish Council has an Asset of Community Value registration on the playing field, Dorset Council will determine the future of the playing field in discussions with the Parish Council.

We have explored a variety of options ourselves for either building, should CLP no longer require the use of one of them (or part of them). In particular, given the growing number of neurodiverse children, we have explored whether we might be able to contribute to the growing demand for special school places, such as via a satellite linked to a special school (we have two in other CLP schools). So far, we have been unable to find a partner to work with on this. Local Authority data shows that, although there is growing demand for special schools, that demand is greater in other parts of Dorset.

10. How will school identity and ethos be preserved?

Should the proposal to merge the schools progress to an application with the Department for Education (DfE), it is a requirement of the DfE – and one that we welcome – that the merged school retains some of the character and ethos of each of the separate schools.

The main way we would achieve this is through bringing both existing staff teams together into the single, merged school and retaining the existing shared leadership team. We would also define vision and values for the merged school – engaging pupils and parents - which reflects the vision and values of both separate schools.

We will maintain key links with both churches and continue to engage with key village events, like Langton Parish assembly. Key, defining features from St George's site, like the flagpole and the playground equipment, will be relocated with us.