



Proposal to secure a high-quality primary education experience for the children of Langton Matravers, Herston, Swanage and surrounding areas for years to come.

Consultation Information Summary

This document provides a summary of the information that has informed the development of this proposal. It is provided so that the community can understand the reasons for the proposal and is able to respond to what is being suggested.

1. What are we trying to achieve?

We want to ensure that our children in Langton Matravers, Herston, Swanage (and surrounding areas) continue to have access to a local primary school which can always provide a high quality, rich educational experience. We want to ensure that these local communities continue to be attractive places for families to live, secure in the knowledge that a good local primary school is nearby. Without thinking differently now, we are worried that St. George's and St. Mark's may find it hard to continue providing a rich and broad primary education experience in the near future.

Falling pupil numbers is a real issue across the country. The number of children requiring a place in a primary school in England is expected to fall by around 300,000 by 2030. This is because the birth rate has fallen to a record low, being round 15% lower than ten years ago. 12% of current primary school places are already vacant in England and that number of empty school places will continue to rise.

Across Dorset—and particularly within the Purbeck area—we are seeing that sustained and significant fall in primary-age pupil numbers. This will continue for the foreseeable future. Local Authority forecast pupil numbers do not indicate a future increase.

2. Why do we think this will start to get more difficult for St. George's and St. Mark's?

All primary schools in the Swanage area are already experiencing this issue of falling pupil numbers. Both St Mark's CE Primary and St George's CE Primary & Pre-School are heavily affected. This is why both schools have already started using more mixed-age teaching. There are real advantages to mixed-age teaching and it is a good way of organising children for learning in primary schools. However, as pupil numbers get lower and each school has fewer classes, mixed-age teaching will get broader. For example, there may be a time when Year 3 and Year 6 children must routinely learn in the same classroom; we may find that the mixed age ranges get even broader than that. As separate schools, it will become harder for them to provide a rich educational experience for local children. If the children from both schools were

taught in a single school community in the same building, however, the school would be able to have more classes and keep the breadth of ages within mixed age teaching tighter.

Falling pupil numbers is a difficult issue for schools and trusts because they are government-funded according to the number of pupils they have. Fewer pupils means less money, which means less ability to meet the staff costs associated with larger numbers of separate classes. Schools must therefore run fewer classes and this leads to mixed-age teaching.

Forecasts show that pupil numbers will continue to decline. As pupil numbers fall further, both schools face:

- Increasingly wide mixed-age classes, including whole key stages taught together.
- Financial instability, with reduced income and duplicated costs across two small sites.
- Challenges recruiting and retaining staff, as very small schools with wide age-ranges in single classes can be a less attractive option for teachers choosing a school to work in.

As these two schools are quite close together, we think there is an opportunity to do something different to protect the quality of education for the children in our local communities. Our analysis shows that there is already a lot of mixing of pupils between these catchment areas.

A summary of forecast pupil numbers for both schools is provided at the end of this document.

3. What could it be like if we took no action?

Both schools have already had to reduce their number of classes. This means that more mixed age teaching is happening in both schools. This is because the schools have already been carefully managing the problem of falling pupil numbers. In academic year 2026/27, we currently plan to have seven classes across both schools: three in St. George's and four in St. Mark's. This is one class fewer than in this current year (St. George's reducing from four to three). In 2027/28, St. Mark's will need to reduce to three classes.

If we were to take no further action at all, leaving the planned seven classes as they are across the two separate schools despite continued falling pupil numbers, the schools would not be able to afford all the staff. Each year, the schools would add around -£500,000 to the deficit. Over ten years, a deficit of around -£3,000,000 would build up. This is not a sustainable position. That level of deficit would not be tolerated by the Department for Education. Coastal Learning Partnership would not be a financial going concern. This would put the existence of both schools into severe jeopardy, along with every other CLP school.

4. What are the options that have been considered?

Several different options have been considered in detail by a working group made up of:

- Senior leaders from the schools
- Chair from the schools' Local Governing Body
- Coastal Learning Partnership Senior Leaders
- Coastal Learning Partnership Trustees (representing the statutory Governing Body)
- Representative from Salisbury Diocese (Salisbury Diocesan Board of Education)
- The working group has engaged with Dorset Council and the Department for Education throughout. It has also engaged with key community members such as local clergy.

These are the options that have been considered:

Option A	Continue as two separate schools, with increasingly fewer staff and children as pupil numbers continue to get lower.
Option B	Merge the two schools together to form a single primary school and pre-school with a Published Admission Number (PAN)¹ of 15 (105 pupils total): • <i>Option B1: Single school situated on the St. Mark's site</i> • <i>Option B2: Single school situated on the St. George's site</i>
Option C	Two legally separate schools with different designations: an Infant school on one site and a Junior school on the other.

5. Which options do we think will not work as well?

Option A	Continue as two separate schools, with increasingly fewer staff and children as pupil numbers continue to get lower.
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We don't think option A is the right one because it is a risk to the good quality of education that the children in our community deserve.

In this option, the number of classes in each school would continue to reduce as pupil numbers fall. From September 2027, both schools would probably have three classes each (which would likely require children from Reception, Year 1 and Year 2 to be in the same class, the other two classes mixing Years 3/4 and Years 5/6). By September 2030 or earlier, at least one school would be down to just two classes with the other school following suit within a further year or two. With just two classes, entire Key Stages would be taught in the same classroom: Reception / Year 1 / Year 2 and Years 3 -6. It is possible that one or both schools would later have to reduce to just one class for the whole school.

Financially, the schools and trust would continue to be under strain because of the costs of operating two separate and under-used buildings. The annual operating deficit would be around -£150,000.

In summary, our concerns with this option are:

¹ A school's Published Admission Number, or PAN, is the number of children that it plans to admit to Reception each year.

- The quality of education experience would be significantly impacted due to extremely broad mixed-age classes.
- It is educationally limiting with entire key stages learning in the same single classes.
- Recruitment and retention would become increasingly difficult as such classroom arrangements are not always attractive to teachers.
- Since two school sites are still running, the overall costs will remain high leading to ongoing operational financial deficits.
- The schools' popularity may decline relative to other local schools, adding further to their falling number issue.

Option B2

Merge the two schools together to form a single primary school and pre-school with a Published Admission Number of 15 (105 pupils) situated on the existing St. George's site

We don't think option B2 is the right one because of the limitations of the site at St. George's. To enable this option, financial investment in the site would be required. There is currently no funding route available meaning any such investment would add to the financial risk and future deficit position.

St. George's is a considerably smaller site than St. Mark's. This means that we would have to wait longer before the combined pupil population of both schools could fit into St. George's. Whilst all children from both schools could easily fit into St. Mark's from September 2027 – we can guarantee every child a place - this could not be achieved at St. George's until much later, around September 2031. This delay adds a further -£200,000 to accumulating deficits and will lead to ongoing reductions in class numbers in the meantime.

A bigger concern is that St. George's could not provide opportunity for future expansion. All indications are that pupil numbers will be lower for the foreseeable future. However, sometimes pupil numbers can go up and down. At St. George's, there would be little space for more children to be admitted were that needed in the future. At St. Mark's, however, the pupil population could double to 210 if required in the future.

There are other limitations of the St. George's site: it has no car park for staff or visitors; field access is only via crossing the road in front of the school and the outside areas are generally less spacious and varied.

Some images from the St. George's site are provided at the end of this document.

Option C

Two legally separate schools with different designations: an infant school on one site and a junior school on the other.

We don't think option C is the right one because we would still have to bear the costs of running two separate sites, even though each site would be very under-used. It would be more operationally complex for the school and the trust, maintaining two separate buildings with an annual operating deficit of around -£130,000

This option would also require parents to travel more, making split journeys when they have a younger sibling at the infant school and an older sibling at the junior school.

We think this option might be worth consideration if we had an education-based partner to occupy part of each site, alongside the school, based on a rental agreement. This would add to educational provision in the local area. It would also strengthen the schools' financial position, mitigating the extra costs of running two sites. For example, in some other schools in CLP, we host 'satellite provisions' linked to local special schools. In this arrangement, some of the special school's pupils are on roll at the special school but are educated on the site of the host school. It is a way of increasing specialist provision whilst utilising spare premises and without the need to physically extend special schools. It also generates extra income for the host school. However, we have not yet been successful in securing a partner to work alongside us like this in the Purbeck area. We have already explored this possibility and, so far, not found anything suitable. This is because Local Authority data suggests that although there is a general need for more special school places, that demand is not in the Purbeck area.

6. Which option do we think is best and why?

Option B1	Merge the two schools together to form a new primary school and pre-school with a Published Admission Number of 15 (105 pupils) <u>situated on the existing St. Mark's site</u>
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Currently, we think that this option provides the best long-term solution because:

- It allows the school to be organised in at least four (or more) classes (plus pre-school) which means that mixed-age teaching is a positive feature of the schools and not excessively broad. Depending on exact cohort numbers, the single school would eventually be organised in four classes as follows: Reception; Years 1/2; Years 3/4; Years 5/6. We see this model work well in other schools in CLP and beyond.
- All existing children from both schools could easily be accommodated in the new school from day one from September 2027.
- All families would have access to the school's pre-school.
- There is plenty of opportunity for expansion if pupil numbers rise unexpectedly in the future.
- The grounds at St. Mark's are extensive, including on-site field space and parking.
- Greater ability to retain and attract high quality staff than if classes had very broad mixed age ranges.
- The school will be more financially stable. It may still experience operational deficits, but these will be considerably more manageable within the trust overall.
- It will reflect some of the existing mixing of pupils between these two schools. Currently:
 - 12% of St. Mark's pupils are from the St. George's catchment;
 - 28% of St. George's pupils are from the St. Mark's catchment;
 - Both have pupils from neither catchment (St. Mark's, 34%; St. George's, 22%)

Some images from the St. Mark's site are provided at the end of this document.

7. What do our formal partners think?

Salisbury Diocesan Board of Education (SDBE):

Salisbury Diocesan Board of Education is supportive of this proposal. The Diocese recognises the demographic pressures in the Swanage area, also seeing these elsewhere across the diocese. It fully supports the efforts of Coastal Learning Partnership to secure the best possible quality of education for the pupils in the Swanage community. It has participated actively in all discussions and deliberations leading to this proposal and consultation, feeling fully assured of the values led and committed way the trust has approached this issue.

Dorset Council:

Dorset Council has the statutory duty for pupil place planning across Dorset that includes taking action where there are too many places for the number of children in the local area. There is a trend across parts of the UK of falling birth rates, including in the Swanage area, so Dorset Council is supportive of the need for this consultation. We encourage all community members to engage fully with the consultation to ensure that final decisions are informed by a broad and representative range of perspectives. Dorset Council will continue to work together with the Coastal Learning Partnership and the Salisbury Diocesan Board of Education throughout this process.

Department for Education (DfE):

Updated Department for Education (DfE) guidance, February 2026, significantly revises the "significant change" process for academies to focus more heavily on school place planning and sufficiency, particularly in response to falling pupil numbers. Key updates include treating a reduction in capacity by more than 30 places as a significant change, aligning with the growing need to manage surplus school places, especially in the primary sector.

The DfE is aware of this particular proposal and this community consultation. The DfE has said that, subject to following the required processes as laid out in its significant change guidance (including appropriate consultation), it is content for this proposal to progress to the application stage. As part of any application, CLP would be required to demonstrate a joined-up approach with Dorset Council and Salisbury Diocese.

8. What happens to the St George's site if CLP no longer requires use of it?

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. The following has been confirmed directly by the SDBE and Dorset Council.

If the St George's building is no longer required by CLP:

- CLP would hand the main school site back to the SDBE, its legal owner.
- Under charity law, and since use of the site will no longer be as a church school, the SDBE must dispose of the school site at current market value; it cannot gift the site to another organisation.
- The SDBE typically:
 1. Invites the local community, via the parish council, to consider purchasing the site at market value.
 2. If no such purchase occurs, sells the site via public auction.
- Net proceeds must be reinvested by the Diocese into other Church of England schools.

If the playing field is no longer required by CLP:

- CLP would end the lease on the playing field, which would return to Dorset Council.
- Langton Matravers Parish Council has an Asset of Community Value registration on the playing field.
- Dorset Council will therefore determine the future of the playing field in discussions with the Parish Council.

9. What do we expect to see if we go forward with this proposal?

If we progress this proposal as described in option B1, we expect the following outcomes:

- A single, thriving primary school would be on the site of the current St. Mark's from September 2027: St. George's & St. Mark's CE Primary School & Pre-School.
- With a PAN of 15, there would be plenty of space for every child from both schools to be admitted from the outset, and for future expansion if required.
- The single primary school would reflect the combined values and character of both existing schools, with the same leadership team and teaching team.
- All families would have access to the school's pre-school.
- There would be a minimum of four classes (Reception, Y1/2, Y3/4, Y5/6) – more classes if they were needed – with mixed-age teaching only across two (or fewer) year group boundaries.
- All Swanage primary schools would benefit from having fewer pupil vacancies.
- The school would continue to enjoy successful recruitment and retention of high-quality staff.
- The school would be financially viable with any ongoing deficit within acceptable limits.

10. What happens now?

We are now in a period of consultation. That consultation period is open until Friday 10th July. The purpose of the consultation period is for the community to hear about the proposal and to have the opportunity to ask questions and make comments and suggestions.

Once the consultation period is closed, the Trust Board of Coastal Learning Partnership will consider what it has heard. The Trust Board will determine whether to proceed with, amend or halt the proposals.

If the Trust Board determines that it must make a significant change, an application will be submitted to the Department of Education. If such an application is submitted, we would anticipate doing that early in the autumn term 2026. This application will be considered by the Regional Director. If approved, we anticipate the change coming into effect from September 2027.

No final decision has been made. The purpose of consultation is to inform, listen, and understand views.

11. How can you respond to this consultation?

You can attend either of the following information sessions where you can hear more about the proposal and ask questions directly. Please use the links to confirm your attendance in advance so that we can make the necessary arrangements:

- 15th June, 2pm at St. Mark's: for parents and carers of either school (book [here](#))
- 16th June, 2pm at St. George's: for parents and carers of either school (book [here](#))
- 18th June, 6pm: for wider community members (parents, too) (book [here](#))

The preferred method for receiving responses to the consultation is by completing the online response form [here](#) or by scanning the QR code. This response form can be forwarded to, and completed by, anybody. The response form will allow you to express your views, make general comments and ask specific questions.



You can also submit comments and queries via email to:
mergeconsult@coastalpartnership.co.uk

Alternatively, you can respond to this consultation via the following postal address:

Coastal Learning Partnership
Heathlands Primary Academy
Andrews Close
Springwater Road
Bournemouth
Dorset
BH11 8HB

Summary of forecast pupil numbers:

St. Mark's	Sep-26	Sep-27	Sep-28	Sep-29	Sep-30	Sep-31	Sep-32	Sep-33	Sep-34
R	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6
1	9	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6
2	7	9	6	6	6	6	6	6	6
3	11	7	9	6	6	6	6	6	6
4	16	11	7	9	6	6	6	6	6
5	12	16	11	7	9	6	6	6	6
6	16	12	16	11	7	9	6	6	6
Total	77	67	61	51	46	45	42	42	42
St. George's	Sep-26	Sep-27	Sep-28	Sep-29	Sep-30	Sep-31	Sep-32	Sep-33	Sep-34
R	11	9	9	9	9	9	9	9	9
1	10	11	9	9	9	9	9	9	9
2	12	10	11	9	9	9	9	9	9
3	8	12	10	11	9	9	9	9	9
4	8	8	12	10	11	9	9	9	9
5	16	8	8	12	10	11	9	9	9
6	11	16	8	8	12	10	11	9	9
Total	76	74	67	68	69	66	65	63	63
Combined	153	141	128	119	115	111	107	105	105

Site images from St. Mark's



On site playing fields at front of school



Forest school area to rear of school



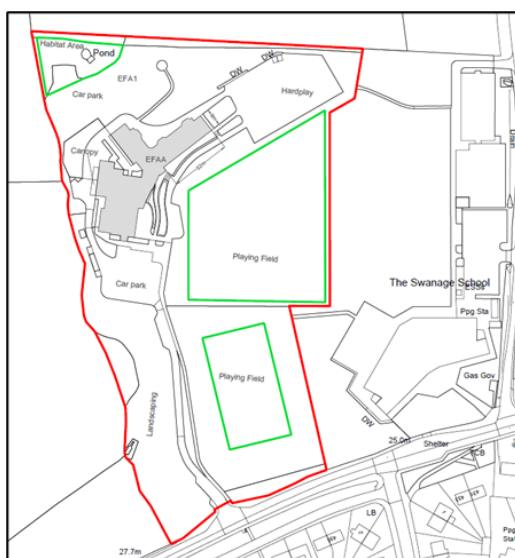
Open space to rear of school, leading up to forest school



Hard surface playground space



Car park at front of school, accessed via a long driveway from the road



Typical classroom

Site images from St. George's



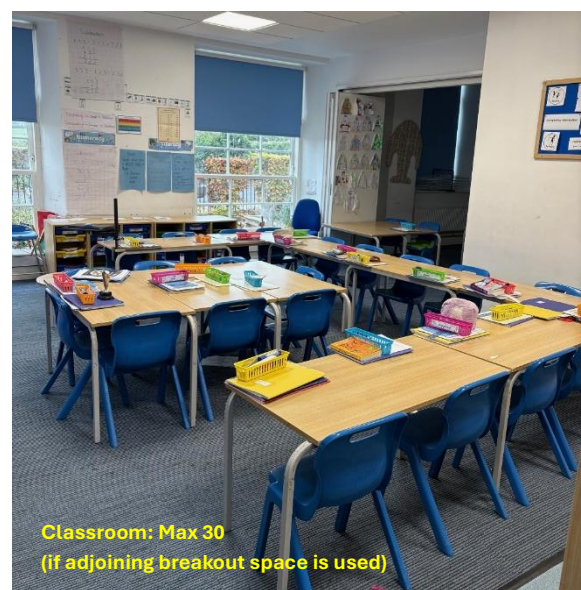
Upper playground space



Lower playground space



Classroom: max 20



Classroom: Max 30
(if adjoining breakout space is used)



Access to shared school field.



Shared school field.

