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Tuesday 9th 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 -
Release of second set of Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)**

Our continued thanks to everyone who is engaging with the consultation which began on 2nd June.

We are grateful for the ongoing thoughtful and detailed responses that we are receiving.

We circulated our first FAQ last week. That can be accessed on the Coastal Learning Partnership website [here](#). Since then, we have seen a further rise in the number of responses and so we are now providing a second FAQ, accompanying this letter.

We hope this is useful in providing the community with ongoing responses to the main concerns and queries raised.

We continue to acknowledge the strength of feeling within the community on such an important matter. We are considering a difficult challenge where every option and solution carries difficult consequences.

We reiterate our previous point that this is a genuine consultation process. Your responses are therefore extremely important, and we strongly encourage continued engagement.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Paul Howieson". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Mr Paul Howieson
CEO, Coastal Learning Partnership

You are encouraged to read the full consultation document, and the previous FAQs, both of which can be accessed via the CLP website [here](#).

1. How has the consultation process been designed, and who has been involved? What legal process must be followed?

The detail of the proposal and the consultation have been developed by a working group including representation from school and trust leaders, the schools' local governors, CLP trustees, and Salisbury Diocese Board of Education. Other external formal partners including Dorset Council and the Department for Education (DfE) have been engaged.

The current phase is a formal consultation open until 10 July 2026. After this:

- The Trust Board will consider what it has heard through the consultation period;
- Consider whether to proceed, modify, or halt the proposal;
- If the Trust Board considers that it needs to proceed with a change, a 'significant change' application must be submitted to the DfE. That application will include information gathered through the consultation period. It must also demonstrate that the proposal is consistent with the Local Authority's pupil place planning and is supported by the Diocese;
- The final decision will be taken by the DfE Regional Director.

The Trust must follow the requirements set out by the DfE in its guidance '*Making significant changes to an academy*' which can be accessed [here](#). Trusts should follow this guidance for all significant changes, including proposed amalgamations.

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. Some respondents have expressed concern that the consultation document appears to be biased towards a particular outcome. We felt the consultation document should set out the options that have been fully considered so far and that, for full transparency, it was important to state the option which, on balance, we currently feel is best placed to support quality education in the long term.

2. How will feedback influence the final decision?

Feedback from all stakeholders (including parents, staff, and the wider community) is central to the process. The detailed consultation document is provided so that the community can understand the reasons for the proposal and is able to respond to what is being suggested.

The consultation is intended to inform, listen, and understand views. Feedback will be analysed and considered by the Trust Board, which may:

- Proceed with the proposal unchanged
 - Amend the proposal
 - Decide not to continue
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3. When will a final decision be taken and what are the milestones?

Key milestones are:

- Consultation closes: 10 July 2026
 - Trust Board decision: After consultation
 - DfE application (if required): autumn 2026
 - Final consideration: The DfE Regional Director will consider whether or not to approve any application.
 - Implementation (if approved): September 2027
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4. Can you provide more detailed financial information?

School funding is based on pupil numbers, so falling rolls directly reduce income. If we maintain the September 2026 number of classes in each school, despite continued decline in pupil numbers, then we anticipate the following combined financial position:

- Annual deficits could reach around £500,000
- A cumulative deficit of around £3 million over 10 years could arise

More detailed financial information is provided at the end of this FAQ. This information provides a financial forecast against each of the options set out in the proposal. None of those options achieve a balanced financial position over time. There is no intent by CLP to make any money from this proposal but rather to bring inevitable deficits into a more tolerable position. The proposal to merge both schools onto the St. Mark's site achieves the smallest operating deficit of the different solutions. A bigger deficit is produced through merging onto St. George's because it will be longer before the combined pupil number is low enough to fit on that smaller site. All pupils could be guaranteed a space at a merged school on the St. Mark's site from Sept 2027 as the site is bigger.

5. How accurate are pupil forecasts, and have housing developments been considered?

The pupil number forecasts provided within the consultation document take into account data provided by Dorset Council and our own observations of pupil numbers over time. We do not see any indicators that give confidence that either school will typically fill to its PAN of 15 for the foreseeable future. This reflects national trends, where primary pupil numbers are expected to fall significantly due to lower birth rates. While population changes can occur, and sometimes we can see larger year groups coming through schools, no local evidence suggests future growth sufficient to require this level of surplus places in the Swanage and surrounding areas. The site at St. Mark's would allow for a larger intake to cope with any 'bulge' year groups or if pupil numbers went up unexpectedly in the area.

Housing developments have not yet been taken into account in forecast pupil numbers. Dorset Council is supportive of the need for this consultation, demonstrating its view that primary school surplus places are too high in our local area. Dorset Council has not indicated that future housing developments will require this level of school places.

The DfE has identified national pupil yields from housing developments which show that, across England, the average number of school age children per home is 0.25. This means that 100 extra homes typically include only 25 primary-aged pupils.

6. What is the impact on the Langton Matravers village community if the two schools merge onto the St. Mark's site?

It is acknowledged that this proposal would have considerable impact on the village of Langton Matravers. Consultation responses to date indicate that this is a key area of concern and CLP really does share this concern. We are similarly concerned about the impact on the community of each school finding it increasingly difficult to deliver a quality education experience for our local children in the future.

If the proposal to merge both schools onto the St. Mark's site were to go ahead, then St. George's would no longer be in Langton Matravers. Rather, children from the St. George's catchment area would be offered a place at the merged school on the St. Mark's site.

The proposal aims to protect long-term access to a strong local school for all local children.

If the St George's site were no longer used as a Church of England Primary School:

- It would return to the Diocese
- The community may have the opportunity to purchase it
- Otherwise, charity law requires that it is sold at market value
- Net proceed must be reinvested by the Diocese into other Church of England schools.

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.

7. How will relationships with local organisations be affected?

We envisage that no relationships with local organisations will be affected negatively and whatever the outcome, we plan to continue engaging with our local churches – holding our termly services in them, attending Crafty Church at St George's and with other local community organisations such as singing at care homes, maintaining our allotment and continuing to attend any other events that are held in both the St George's and St Mark's community.

8. What analysis has been done of parental preferences and how likely is it families will choose other schools?; What if numbers remain low?

There is already quite a lot of mixing of children between the St. Mark's and St. George's catchment areas. Currently, 12% of St. Mark's pupils are from the St. George's catchment area and 28% of St. George's pupils are from the St. Mark's catchment. Both schools have pupils from neither catchment area (St. Mark's, 34%; St. George's, 22%). We are concerned that, as both schools are required to further extend their mixed-age teaching ranges, this may impact negatively on both schools' continued enrolment. We understand why some families are not keen to see their child educated in a class alongside children who may be two or three years younger or older. It is possible that a merged school where mixed-age teaching is less broad will continue to be attractive for families.

Through this ongoing consultation process, we will be able to better understand how local parents feel about these competing priorities and how it may affect parental decisions in the future.

A merge of the two schools is expected to bring greater stability to pupil numbers as there would be fewer primary school surplus places in Swanage and surrounding areas. However, continued low or

further declining pupil numbers would still present financial pressures.

9. Are there too many primary schools in Swanage?

The consultation recognises that there are more school places than children locally, reflecting falling birth rates. Swanage and the surrounding areas are served by four primary schools: St. George's, St. Mark's, St. Mary's and Swanage Primary. All four of these are good schools. Between them, these schools have a combined PAN of 90. This means that these schools together offer 90 places to Reception children each year. Thursday 16th April 2026 was National Primary Offer Day in England: 66 offers were sent against the combined 90 possible places. This would suggest that the four schools are likely to be 73% full overall. No primary schools in the local area are filling easily. Dorset Council has a statutory duty to manage surplus places, and this proposal aligns with that requirement.

10. How does this proposal fit with the Trust's long-term strategy?

The proposal supports the Trust's aim to:

- Maintain the highest possible quality of educational experience for every child
- Ensure financial sustainability
- Respond proactively to demographic changes

It also reduces risk to the wider Trust caused by unsustainable deficits.

11. Have similar proposals been carried out elsewhere by CLP?

CLP continues to support many of its schools in the ongoing management of falling pupil numbers. It is a challenge that impacts all schools, albeit to different extents. Strategies include consulting to reduce Published Admissions Numbers, reducing costs and altering staffing arrangements where required. We have a split-site primary school where we have written to parents setting out a consideration of whether the school might best meet pupil need by occupying only one site in the future.

There are, however, no examples of schools which have been merged together in CLP.

The class structure that may result from any merge of these two schools is well-established in CLP. Wool CE Primary, for example, is a school with a PAN of 15 organised across four classes where mixed-age teaching is used effectively across no more than two year groups.

12. What external oversight is there for this consultation process?

Oversight is provided by:

- Department for Education (DfE): This is the ultimate oversight for Multi Academy Trusts. Formal approval is required from the DfE for any significant change proposal to proceed. Any application must be made after consultation and must include the outcomes from that consultation.
 - Dorset Council: The Local Authority has a statutory duty for pupil place planning. This is not only making sure there are sufficient school places but also considering action when there are too many. Any application from CLP to the DfE must demonstrate alignment with Dorset Council's
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strategic pupil place planning.

- Salisbury Diocese: Both schools mentioned in this proposal are Church of England schools and therefore the Salisbury Diocese Board of Education (SDBE) is a significant stakeholder. Any future application by CLP to the DfE must evidence the SDBE's support of the proposed change.

These three external partners have been engaged in these discussions to date.

13. Could sites be repurposed (e.g. SEND provision)?

We have explored a variety of options for either building, should CLP no longer require the use of one of them (or part of each 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). Such arrangements make obvious positive contributions to local education provision but also generate income for the 'host' school which can mitigate some financial impact of falling pupil numbers. 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 school places, that demand is greater in other parts of Dorset.

While there is general demand for SEND provision, no suitable partnership opportunity has yet been identified in the Purbeck area.

14. Why was money spent on buildings if this proposal is being considered?

Previous school reorganisation work was undertaken by the Local Authority, and it is difficult for CLP to comment meaningfully on the circumstances at the time. Any previous capital investment would not have been at the expense of the individual schools involved, nor CLP as the schools were under Local Authority control at the time.

This proposal emerges now in response to current demographic changes:

- The key driver for the proposal is recent and ongoing demographic decline
- Falling birth rates and pupil numbers are long-term national trends

The current proposal focuses on ensuring future sustainability.

15. Why did CLP allow St. George's to join if the intention was to merge it with another school?

Prior to joining CLP, St George's previous governing body reduced the PAN from 20 to 15. This was in response to pupils being admitted routinely below PAN. At the time of St George's joining CLP, it was a reasonable assumption that pupil numbers would typically be at or around this new reduced PAN.

CLP's trust board has previously reduced the PAN at St Mark's from 30 to 15. It has subsequently become clear that, like St George's, routinely admitting pupils at even this reduced PAN level was unlikely. Additional to reducing PAN, CLP has sought to mitigate the financial impact of falling pupil numbers in these schools in other ways. A significant example of this is the introduction of a shared leadership structure.

It has always been clear to CLP that Purbeck (and other) schools require ongoing support in the management of the impact of falling pupil numbers. CLP did not, however, anticipate a future need to consult on a proposal to merge these two schools together.

Summary of financial forecast against each of the options described in the consultation document:

Academic year	2025/26	2026/27	2027/28	2028/29	2029/30	2030/31	2031/32	2032/33	2033/34	2034/35
Taking no action - leave class numbers at the Sept 2026 agreed position, regardless of further fall in pupil numbers										
Combined actual pupil numbers	162	157	143	131	123	119	117	113	112	112
Combined actual class numbers	8	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7
In-year position	18849.21	-110109	-142480	-232506	-318060	-379306	-418241	-442862	-484372	-508065
Cumulative deficit	-£ 3,017,151.03									
Option A - Continue as two separate schools, getting smaller in line with pupil numbers										
Combined actual pupil numbers	162	157	142	129	120	115	112	107	105	105
Combined actual class numbers	8	6	6	6	6	5	5	4	4	4
In-year position	18849.21	-29952.7	-48471.5	-148023	-240638	-136388	-175626	-82931	-122357	-145027
Cumulative deficit	-£ 1,110,565.54									
Option B1 - Single merged primary from Sept'27 on St. Mark's site, reducing to PAN 15										
Combined actual pupil numbers	162	157	139	124	114	109	108	107	107	106
Combined actual class numbers	8	6	6	6	5	4	4	4	4	4
In-year position	18849.21	-29952.7	72396.49	-81960.8	-98222.2	-76127.9	-70816.9	-80392.2	-91917.8	-98118.4
Cumulative deficit	-£ 536,263.10									
Option B2 - Single merged primary from Sept'27 on St. George's site, reducing to PAN 15										
Combined actual pupil numbers	162	157	144	133	123	116	109	107	105	105
Combined actual class numbers	8	6	6	6	6	5	4	4	4	4
In-year position	18849.21	-29952.7	-47489.1	-152246	-250151	-148409	82994.46	-3774.72	-51941.8	-148492
Cumulative deficit	-£730,611.77									
Option C - 2 separate schools - PAN of 15 at each - Infant school + junior school										
Combined actual pupil numbers	162	157	142	129	120	115	112	107	105	105
Combined actual class numbers	8	6	5	5	5	5	4	4	4	4
In-year position	18849.2086	-29952.7	-47489.1	-146548	-236400	-128852	-52739.4	-75974.3	-112506	-132952
Cumulative deficit	-£ 944,564.93									