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Thursday 11th June 2025

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 third set of Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)**

We continue to appreciate the high level of engagement with this public consultation.

We have previously issued two sets of FAQs based on questions that are coming through the consultation. Please find a third set of FAQs with this letter. We hope that this ongoing release of FAQs is helpful in supporting ongoing community engagement.

A reminder that the consultation survey can be accessed from this link [here](#) or via the QR code. You can also respond to the consultation in the following ways:

- Via email to: mergeconsult@coastalpartnership.co.uk
- Via the following postal address:

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Finally, a reminder that we are running three information sessions next week. These are opportunities for us to discuss the proposal and issues together and hear further questions and concerns. If you wish to attend either of these sessions, please book in advance. We are hopeful of high attendance, and we want to ensure that we have sufficient seating. Please use the links below to tell us you are coming to the sessions:

- 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 at St George's: for wider community members (parents, too) (book [here](#))

Our continued thanks to everyone for the continued engagement with the consultation.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Paul Howieson" in a cursive style.

Mr Paul Howieson
CEO, Coastal Learning Partnership

FAQs – Responses based on the consultation document so far (3)

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 is the Trust Board composed, and what representation is there from local communities such as Langton Matravers and the wider Purbeck area? Are there parent representatives involved in governance or decision-making?

The composition of the CLP Trust Board can be seen on the CLP website. One trustee is Jo Levasier who is also the Vicar of Swanage & Purbeck Deanery Schools Missioner. Jo has also been one of the Trustees on the working group that has, on behalf of the Board, been considering this issue in more detail.

The proposal forming the basis of this consultation has not been developed by the Trust Board in isolation. The working group has included school and trust leaders, CLP trustees and representation from Local Governors and the Salisbury Diocesan Board of Education. Dorset Council and the Department for Education have also been engaged.

The CLP Articles of Association do not require specific parent governors on the Trust Board (although some of the Trustees are parents). There is however provision for a Local Governing Body (LGB) to appoint Parent Governors in its overall membership. The LGB for St. George's and St. Mark's has not found it easy to recruit to these governor roles. The consultation is open to all members of the community. Parents are especially encouraged to respond to this issue which will have a direct bearing on the education of their children.

2. To what extent are Dorset Council and the Diocese involved in the decision, and at what stage do they influence outcomes?

Both Dorset Council and Salisbury Diocese are significant formal partners, but their roles are different. Dorset Council has a statutory duty for pupil place planning: it must consider not only whether there are enough school places, but also whether there are too many. Dorset Council has been engaged in these considerations and is supportive of the need for this consultation, reflecting its view that surplus primary school places in the local area are high. Salisbury Diocesan Board of Education is a key stakeholder because both schools are Church of England schools. The Diocese has participated fully in discussions and is supportive of the consultation. If CLP decides to proceed with a change after consultation, any significant change application to the DfE must demonstrate alignment with Dorset Council's pupil place planning and must evidence the Diocese's support. The final decision would then be made by the DfE Regional Director.

3. Has a decision already effectively been made, or is the consultation genuinely open to change?

No final decision has been made. The consultation document states that feedback will be analysed and considered by the Trust Board after the consultation closes. The Trust Board may proceed with the proposal unchanged, amend it, or decide not to continue. This position is reiterated in subsequent communications with previous FAQ documents.

The consultation document sets out the option that CLP currently believes may best secure high-quality education in the long term. This is presented so that stakeholders can understand and respond to the reasoning.

4. Why has the proposal been brought forward at this point in the school year, after some families have already made admissions decisions?

The proposal has been brought forward now because the challenge of falling pupil numbers has become increasingly pressing. Falling rolls reduce school income, which in turn affects class organisation and the ability to sustain a broad educational experience.

There is never an easy time to launch a public consultation on such a difficult issue. The decision to launch it now was taken to be well in advance of any proposed implementation date: no change would be implemented before September 2027. We were mindful of prospective parents who, next autumn, will be considering applying for a place for their child from that same date.

5. Is CLP doing this to try to rescue an under-performing school?

This proposal is not a plan for one school to resolve under-performance in another. Both St. George's and St. Mark's are 'good' schools. This was confirmed by their last Ofsted inspection. We expect that would be reaffirmed at their next inspection.

This proposal is being considered as a means of securing continued high-quality education for local children in the long term, within the context of the risk posed by falling pupil numbers. St. Mark's is seen as the more viable home for a future merged school because it provides more flexible accommodation (inside and out). It has more space so will allow the school to manage any 'bulge' year groups that may come through the system. Every child from both schools could be offered a place in a merged school at St. Mark's from 1st September 2027. It would not be possible to make this guarantee at a merged school at St. George's for several more years, until combined pupil numbers drop low enough for the pupils to fit. There would then be little room to accommodate any future 'bulge' year groups.

6. What consultation activity has taken place prior to this formal consultation period?

Before this period of public consultation, the proposal emerged from the detailed considerations of a working group as described in question 1. Having progressed this in detail, we now wish to understand the views of local communities and that is the purpose of this public consultation.

7. Why has St. Mark's been identified as the most suitable location for a single, merged school particularly given differences in roll levels?

The proposal to merge onto St. Mark's rather than St. George's is not based simply on current and predicted pupil numbers in each school. St. Mark's is the larger and more flexible site. St. Mark's could accommodate all existing children from both schools from September 2027. The St. George's site is smaller, and the combined pupil population would not fit there until much later, around September 2031. St. Mark's also has more extensive grounds inside and out, on-site field space, parking and capacity to accommodate any future 'bulge' year groups.

10. How have pupil number figures been calculated and presented?

Pupil forecasts use data from Dorset Council, which has statutory responsibility for pupil place planning, together with CLP's own observations of pupil numbers over time. The forecasts are not presented as exact predictions of every future cohort as pupil numbers do tend to fluctuate. We do not see any indicators that give confidence that either school will typically fill to its PAN of 15 for the foreseeable future. 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 been considered in forecast pupil numbers because Dorset Council has not indicated that future housing developments will require this level of school places. 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.

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

11. What is considered a 'manageable' level of financial deficit, and how does that influence decision-making?

None of the modelled options eliminate a financial deficit and that is shown in the figures on the previous FAQ document [here](#). The proposed option does deliver the smallest deficit and allows us to ensure that as much of the schools' income can be spent on things that directly affect children's education, such as staffing.

CLP must operate as a 'going concern' – that means it must be able to meet its financial obligations. CLP's annual accounts show that, as of 31 August 2025, reserves were 3.2%. This is below the Trust's reserves policy (4-6%) and below the DfE recommended 5%. CLP certainly is a 'going concern' but it must consider action where schools are presenting financial challenges which risk undermining the trust's overall financial resilience. More importantly, the Trust seeks to secure the best quality of education for every pupil. The financial challenges associated with falling pupil numbers will make that harder to achieve in both St. George's and St. Mark's.

12. What additional educational opportunities or provision would the merged school offer that are not already available locally?

This proposal is not about adding additional educational opportunities or provision; it is about making existing local primary education secure for the future. A merged school would be able to maintain at least four classes, and initially around six classes (more if needed), rather than seeing both separate schools move towards very broad mixed-age groupings across just two or three classes each. This proposal therefore supports tighter age groupings, a broader staffing team, stronger recruitment and retention, and better capacity for enrichment such as clubs and wider opportunities. All families would have access to the pre-school. The St. Mark's site also offers more spacious indoor and outdoor areas, including field space and forest school space, which may support a wider range of learning and provision, including for children with SEND.

13. What consideration has been given to the impact of this proposal on the community of Langton Matravers? Has any formal assessment been conducted on the wider impact of losing a village school on community life?

It is acknowledged that proceeding with the proposal as currently presented would have a considerable impact on Langton Matravers. This is a key concern raised through consultation responses. CLP shares that concern and recognises the role of the school in the life and identity of the Langton Matravers village community. CLP is also really concerned about the impact on quality of education that falling pupil numbers will continue to have. We see that impact already being felt as both schools increase the breadth of their mixed age teaching in order to remain viable. CLP's Trust Board feels that its priority must be to ensure that every local child experiences the best possible educational experience. It questions whether that can be truly delivered in classes with such a wide age range of pupils, especially where a possible alternative is available to consider.

Whilst there is no 'formal' assessment of the effect of this proposal on the impacted communities, it has been fully acknowledged through ongoing discussions that the impact is considerable. None of the options shared in the consultation are without negative impact – it is a very challenging set of

circumstances – and CLP feels its primary commitment should be to the provision of quality education to local children in the long term.

14. How will the Trust ensure the quality of a higher-performing school is maintained when merging with a lower-performing one?

Both schools within this proposal are ‘good’ schools. This was the judgement of their last Ofsted inspections. We would anticipate their next inspections reaching similar conclusions.

The merged school would retain the existing shared leadership team. That leadership team is effective and well regarded and will ensure the continued development of the merged school. Similarly, the merged school will bring together the two current staff teams to be familiar to all children. Both current teams provide a good quality of education in their respective schools. The proposed organisation of classes in a merged school (initially with six classes and reducing down to four) would minimise the breadth of mixed-age teaching in each class. This would provide each teacher with a better opportunity to meet the needs of every child in the class. This is harder to achieve when a class is made up of a wide age range of children.

15. How will any perceived reputational concerns about one school be addressed as part of the merger?

Any merged school would reflect the combined values, character and ethos of both existing schools, with the same shared leadership team and staff teams brought together. Pupils and parents would be engaged in shaping the vision, values, and identity of the merged school. The DfE expects, and CLP welcomes, the merged school retaining some of the character and ethos of each separate school. This approach is intended to establish a positive, shared identity from the start.

16. What are the likely detailed staffing arrangements across the merged school, including roles and structures?

A staffing structure would be developed if the proposal proceeds and if the DfE gives its approval. There are, however, some clear principles. The two staff teams would come together to form one team in one place, so children from both schools would have familiar staff around them. The current shared leadership team would continue to lead the merged school. From September 2027, the school would continue to require most of the staff currently employed across both schools, especially because the merged school is expected initially to operate with around six classes before reducing over time as larger cohorts move through. There is some possible risk where there are duplicated staff roles, and any such issue would need to be managed carefully with affected staff if and when any final proposal is agreed.

17. How will traffic flow and transport be managed if the merger proceeds?

St. Mark’s was designed as a one-form-entry primary school with a Published Admission Number of 30. This means, if full, it would accommodate 210 pupils. If a merged school were to take place on the St. Mark’s site from September 2027, we anticipate it would start with around 140 pupils. This is well below the capacity at St. Mark’s and so impact on traffic around that area will be minimal. It would also recede further over the following years as pupil numbers continue to drop to its new level of 105, reflecting its Published Admissions Number (PAN) of 15. Traffic impact is therefore not expected to be significant or disruptive, but detailed operational arrangements would need to be considered in the event that a proposal proceeded.

Several families from each of the existing catchment areas already choose to attend the other respective school. Nevertheless, it is acknowledged that the merged school occupying just one site would give some families a further distance to travel to school. It has been mentioned in a previous FAQ that, if there is sufficient demand, it may well be possible for transport to be supported, such as via a ‘shuttle minibus

service' before and after school. It is unlikely that we could commit to such a service through wider surrounding rural locations and such an arrangement does not currently exist. However, a simple 'shuttle run' between the two sites to support collection and drop off is a more feasible consideration.

18. Was this merger part of a longer-term strategic plan following St George's joining the Trust and is this why a shared Headteacher was put in place?

CLP did not anticipate a future need to consult on merging these two schools when St. George's joined the trust. Before joining CLP, St. George's previous governing body had reduced its Published Admission Number (PAN) from 20 to 15 because admissions were routinely below PAN. At that time, it was reasonable to assume that numbers would normally be at or around the new reduced PAN. CLP later reduced St. Mark's PAN from 30 to 15, but it subsequently became clear that both schools were unlikely to admit consistently even at their *reduced* PAN level. The change since St. George's joined that trust is the ongoing fall in pupil numbers in the local areas and the resultant pressure on education opportunity and financial stability. Other measures to achieve this will not be sufficient.

The introduction of a shared leadership model is one strategy to reduce overall staffing costs. In this case, we do not expect that this change will be sufficient given reducing income linked to pupil numbers. We have other examples across CLP where a shared leadership model is in place, challenged and supported by a single Local Governing Body (LGB). In each case, this is to support those schools in reducing their overall costs given the impact of falling pupil numbers but there is no consultation to merge those schools.

The introduction of a shared LGB between the schools is to mirror the leadership model. It would not be feasible, or a reasonable expectation, for a single Headteacher to routinely report to two separate LGB.

The introduction of a shared leadership model is not indicative of a future intent to merge two schools – it is part of schools' strategies to reduce costs.

19. What is the strategy for increasing pupil numbers in the future to ensure long-term viability?

It is especially difficult for schools to increase their pupil enrolment at a time of falling birth rates, nationally and locally. A general decline in pupil numbers means that most schools will have vacancies and competition becomes really high. In Swanage and surrounding areas, all the primary schools have vacancies - no school is filling easily because the number of school-aged pupils in the catchment areas is lower than it used to be and is expected to remain that way. Thursday 16th April 2026 was National Primary Offer Day in England: 66 offers were sent against the combined 90 possible places of the four Swanage-area primary schools. This would suggest that the four schools are likely to be 73% full overall. That is why we think there is a need to reduce some of the surplus places in this area – schools will then still need to work hard to attract pupils in order to admit at, or close to, their PAN.

The best thing that a school can do to attract strong pupil enrolment is to be a good and effective school.

Recently, CLP secured consent from the DfE to extend the age range of St. George's (from 4 – 11 to 2 – 11-year-olds). This was to enable the village pre-school to officially join the school because having a thriving pre-school linked to the main school is attractive to families.

Additionally, both schools routinely do the following to try to attract further pupils:

- Promote in any way possible, through local media, social media and other sources.
- Highlight the amazing things each school offers that is different to other schools in the local area e.g. trips and residentials for all children across the school, forest school each academic year for every child.

- Switched from open evening to arranging school tours to enable prospective parents to see the schools in action (open evenings were not converting into additional pupil numbers)
- Attend many Purbeck sports events, so all children have a turn at attending these events

CLP cannot responsibly base long-term viability on an assumption that pupil numbers will recover when there is no secure evidence to support that. A merged school on the St. Mark's site would still have flexibility for future growth, because the St. Mark's site could accommodate more pupils if numbers rose unexpectedly.

20. Under this proposal, would Explorers no longer operate from St. Mark's?

Explorers continues to support St. Mark's really well, providing wraparound care for families to access. The arrangement with the school is that Explorers rents a space from which they operate their provision. Our colleagues at Explorers are aware of this consultation and they know that it may become necessary to give Explorers notice as per the contractual arrangement. This is because the single, merged school's pre-school would be accessible to every family from the local areas and the school would also offer before and after school wraparound provision directly.

The site at St. Mark's benefits from an impressive forest school area, which is part of the extensive outdoor facilities. Although Explorers would not be running provision from this forest school area, the forest school would remain a key feature of the school and a benefit to all children on roll.

21. Why is the Trust not supportive of smaller classes?

We recognise why smaller class sizes may be attractive to families.

Unfortunately, smaller class sizes over time have a detrimental impact on a school. This is because schools are funded by central government according to the number of children they have on roll. Fewer pupils means less money which makes it harder for schools to afford the staffing levels they would like, along with all of the other costs associated with operating a school. Although the number of children in a school may be less, the school building and facilities still need to be maintained and these costs do not reduce just because there are fewer children. This means that the proportion of income that a school has available to spend on things which directly impact a child's education (staffing and education resources, for example) is less.

This is the why the national issue of falling birth rates is such a concern within the education system as a whole – more and more schools are feeling the impact of this trend.

The quality of teaching is, in any case, a stronger determinant of pupil achievement than class size.

22. Is this proposal an attempt on the part of CLP or Salisbury Diocese to make money?

CLP will make no money from any change that may emerge from this proposal and is not seeking to do so.

CLP is a charity. Under its charitable status, it is regulated mainly by the Department for Education. Its primary charitable objective is the delivery of effective education by providing schools which can offer a broad and balanced curriculum. CLP's concern is that the future quality of education that St. George's and St. Mark's can provide is at risk because of the unavoidable need to further widen the breadth of mixed-age teaching. None of the options set out in the consultation paper completely eliminate the financial risk across the two schools and CLP accepts that. However, merging the two schools together would have the effect of reducing any deficit. The smallest deficit is achieved if the two schools are merged onto the St. Mark's site because the combined pupil population can fit onto the single site sooner, from September 2027.

Like CLP, Salisbury Diocese has no wish to have to consider options such as these. However, the Salisbury Diocesan Board of Education (SDBE) shares CLP's concern about the risk to education quality for local children. Previous documentation has confirmed that, although charity law would ultimately require the Diocese to sell any vacant property, it would have to reinvest resultant income in other Church of England schools.

23. Can you further explain the financial information provided with the second FAQ?

The previous FAQ provided a summary of financial information to show the forecast financial impact of each of the options set out in the consultation paper. That FAQ can be accessed [here](#).

That information tells us that, if we take no further action (i.e. leave both schools separate with a total of seven classes between them despite continued falling pupil numbers) the schools will generate in-year deficits every year. This means that, each year, the amount the schools spend would regularly be more than their income. This size of this in-year deficit would increase year-on-year, forecast to exceed -£500,000 by the end of academic year 2034/35. By that time, the total sum of the deficit overall would exceed -£3,000,000. CLP must remain financially viable and therefore must take action to avoid this position. The action we can take is to reduce, year on year as required, the number of classes in each school proportionate to the number of children joining. This ultimately leads to a wide age-range in each class. We are concerned about the impact of this on quality of education.

The financial information provided shows the two schools' financial position combined. This is because the schools are managed as a single budget, rather than two separate ones, in line with the shared leadership structure. It would be difficult for a single Headteacher to retain oversight of two separate budgets. All of CLP's examples of shared leadership and governance are accompanied with a single budget to support financial oversight.

The financial summary shows that, in both options of the schools merging either onto St. George's or St. Mark's, there is a single year of in-year surplus following the move to a single site. This is because there is a financial timing delay as one element of each school's funding income (the 'primary lump sum') falls away gradually over a three-year period but cost reductions associated with being on one site are felt immediately. In both cases, there is a return to in-year deficit the following year.

Neither school is eligible for the 'sparsity' funding. For schools to be eligible, they need to have a maximum of 21.4 pupils per year group and be more than two miles away from the next nearest eligible school.

26. What trend is shown in pupil numbers across the schools over time?

The following table provides pupil numbers for both schools since 2016.

	Pupil numbers on first school day in September					
	St George's		St Mark's		Combined	
	Reception	NOR (R-Yr6)	Reception	NOR (R-Yr6)	Reception	NOR (YR - Y6)
2016	23	106	17	158	40	264
2017	16	99	22	163	38	262
2018	10	93	25	172	35	265
2019	9	84	19	160	28	244
2020	12	84	20	151	32	235
2021	12	88	14	148	26	236
2022	5	87	23	156	28	243
2023	8	75	8	136	16	211
2024	12	74	7	128	19	202
2025	9	69	6	94	15	163
2026*	11	74	4	76	15	150

* Forecast based on National Offer Day, April 2026

NOR: Number On Roll (total pupil number from Reception to Year 6)