

Merger Consultation Meeting – St George’s (16 June 2026)

Introduction

The meeting commenced with introductions led by Paul Howieson (PH), who presented the eight-point summary document, followed by introductions from Richard Purchase (RP).

Key Questions, Statements, and Responses

Concern:

It was suggested that pupil number challenges across local schools could potentially be alleviated by reducing the PAN (Published Admission Number) at Swanage Primary, given that it and St Mary’s are the most popular schools in the area.

Concern:

The proposed implementation date of September 2027 was widely questioned. Concerns included:

- The perceived urgency of the timeline
- Insufficient notice for families
- Potential disruption to pupils, particularly those approaching SATs
- Ongoing pupil movement destabilising year groups

A request was made to reconsider and push back the timeline.

Response:

It was explained that the proposed date reflects financial pressures, including a growing deficit, which necessitate timely action.

Concern:

Concerns were raised regarding:

- Increased anxiety among parents and staff
 - Reports of parents considering home education or transferring children
 - Job security for teaching staff
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Question:

What pupil numbers would be required at St Mark’s to ensure long-term viability?

Response:

The response emphasised the importance of achieving an appropriate balance of scale rather than identifying a fixed pupil threshold.

Concern:

Some attendees expressed the view that the process appears to be a predetermined merger rather than a genuine consultation, citing measures such as shared leadership as evidence.

Response:

It was clarified that the consultation document:

- Identifies the underlying challenges
- Outlines potential solutions, with merger presented as a preferred option
- Commits Trustees to making a final decision after the consultation, including the options to proceed, amend, or halt proposals

CLP have been managing the budget and falling numbers for a while. Shared leadership arrangements were described as a response to falling pupil numbers and are not indicative of a predetermined outcome.

Concern:

Questions were raised regarding the extent of independent oversight and whether a decision had already been made.

Response:

It was confirmed that:

- No final decision has been taken
 - The Department for Education (DfE) would independently review any significant change proposal
 - Dorset Council and the Salisbury Diocese have both been involved in the process and support the need for consultation
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Concern:

Attendees expressed concerns about declining trust in CLP, referencing communication delays, perceived lack of transparency, and dissatisfaction with engagement to date.

Response:

It was acknowledged that there has been a high volume of correspondence, which is being addressed as promptly as possible.

Concern:

Questions were raised regarding the absence of a clear long-term (e.g. five-year) strategy.

Concern:

Concerns were raised that insufficient action has been taken to promote the school and attract new pupils, including the absence of recent open days.

Response:

It was noted that traditional open days have historically generated limited engagement. The school has adopted a model of individual tours, consistent with other local schools, although this has not significantly altered enrolment trends.

Observation (Pupil Numbers):

It was noted that Reception intake is relatively strong this year.

Response:

It was clarified that 11 pupils are expected (against a PAN of 15). While this represents a comparatively stronger cohort, overall pupil numbers have declined from approximately 100 in 2017 to around 71 today.

Concern:

It was suggested that local families, including those in toddler groups, regard St George's highly and that additional promotion could improve enrolment.

Concern:

It was argued that the consultation process itself has already contributed to pupil movement and community instability.

Response:

School leaders emphasised that maintaining stability and normality for pupils remains a priority.

Question:

A query was raised regarding eligibility for rural designation and associated funding.

Response:

It was confirmed that, due to geographical proximity (less than two miles from another school), the school does not meet the criteria and is, therefore, not eligible for scarcity funding.

Concern:

Parents expressed concern about the impact of uncertainty on children's wellbeing and the perceived lack of genuine choice.

Concern:

Questions were raised regarding the accuracy of financial projections and the possibility of independent audit.

Response:

It was confirmed that financial planning is conducted through established MAT governance structures, including the Chief Finance Officer and Finance Managers, and that projections are considered robust.

Question:

It was queried why, given declining pupil numbers, relocation to St Mark's is proposed, particularly if it is perceived as more expensive to operate.

Response:

Key factors cited include:

- Greater flexibility in buildings and grounds at the St Mark's site
 - Increased capacity to accommodate fluctuations in pupil numbers
 - Limitations of the St George's site, including insufficient full-sized classrooms without additional investment
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Concern:

Questions were raised regarding prior expectations when PAN was reduced and whether alternative approaches could have been taken.

Response:

It was explained that reducing PAN is a common strategy to maintain viability, based on a reasonable expectation that places would be filled. However, this has not materialised.

Concern:

Discussion highlighted:

- Loss of families due to reduced availability of social housing
- Wider demographic changes affecting pupil numbers
- Questions about whether housing developments, and new families in the area, have been fully considered in forecasting

Response:

Projections are based on local authority data but may be subject to further challenge.

Financial Context:

It was noted that:

- Funding is approximately £5,500 per pupil, with additional allocations for specific needs
 - As part of the MAT, financial support has temporarily sustained staffing levels at St George's (e.g. maintaining four classes rather than reducing to three)
 - This approach is not sustainable in the long term, particularly across multiple schools with rising deficits (through falling pupil numbers)
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Concerns:

Some attendees expressed concern about perceived limited governor presence and support.

Response:

It was confirmed that representatives (RP and LC) were in attendance.

Additional Concerns Raised:

- Logistical challenges of relocating pupils, including safety and welfare considerations
 - Future use of church facilities
 - Perceived lateness of engagement with parents and stakeholders
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Closing Observation

The meeting concluded with continued concerns regarding the perceived impact of the consultation process and calls for greater engagement and transparency moving forward.

RP reiterated that the consultation process is intended to gather stakeholder views and that Trustees face a complex decision with no simple resolution.
