

Merger Consultation Meeting – St Mark's (15 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 asked that CLP consider all possible alternatives to the 'closure' of St George's. The consultation was viewed as insufficiently accounting for future local development. It was further proposed that St George's should be recognised as a rural school, given its importance to surrounding villages. Closure was considered likely to have a detrimental impact on these communities.

Response:

PH confirmed that all viable options are being explored, including efforts to secure an alternative education provider (particularly for alternative provision), though these have not yet been successful. Engagement with Dorset Council has not indicated that planned housing developments would significantly increase pupil numbers; a substantial volume of additional housing would be required to materially affect demand.

Observation:

Reference was made to previous increases in birth rates.

Concern:

Some families are reportedly not choosing St Mark's due to its historical reputation, including perceptions associated with its location.

Response:

It was noted that there are also available places in other local primary schools.

Concern:

Questions were raised regarding the feasibility of merging two schools with distinct identities and ethos.

Response:

It was acknowledged that, if no action is taken, both schools' characteristics may change regardless, due to necessary organisational adjustments arising from declining pupil numbers.

Statement:

St Mark's was recognised as a "Good" school, with positive inspection feedback highlighting that pupils are happy and thriving. It was also noted that a recent pupil successfully passed the Grammar School entrance examination.

Concern:

A parent expressed dissatisfaction with negative media portrayals of St Mark's, describing them as unfair and potentially harmful, particularly in influencing children's perceptions. It was suggested that both schools should focus on collaboration and mutual strengths.

Question:

Would all pupils be accommodated at St George's from September?

Response:

It was clarified that while the St George's site has capacity constraints, all pupils could be accommodated at the St Mark's site.

Observation:

There are reports of pupils transferring schools already.

Response:

Headteacher, Katy Astle (KA) noted that parental movement between schools has always occurred.

Concern (Explorers provision):

A parent raised concerns about the future of the Explorers provision and the implications for current children.

Response:

CLP acknowledged the challenges and confirmed that this matter is being addressed.

Concern:

It was asked whether CLP intended to pause the consultation process in light of concerns raised in an open letter regarding its robustness.

Response:

It was stated that the consultation is not believed to be flawed. Trustees will review the letter in due course.

Concern:

It was suggested that projected pupil numbers do not adequately reflect planned local housing developments, including sites in Swanage (Harrow House site), Harmans Cross and social housing provisions.

Response:

PH indicated that local authority projections have been reviewed and will be further challenged where appropriate. RP said that there is very accurate data via Dorset Council. Historical data shows a decline in St Georges pupil numbers from approximately 100 in 2017 to 71 currently, despite anticipated development.

Questions and Concerns:

- Financial implications of falling numbers and per-pupil funding levels
- The potential influence of future developments
- Shortage of childcare provision in the area
- The impact of larger or mixed-age classes, particularly for SEND pupils

Response:

It was explained that declining enrolment would likely result in broader mixed-age classes. A merged school could maintain more consistent class sizes. While mixed-age teaching can be effective, it is not the preferred model.

Question:

Why has St George's not recently held an open day?

Response:

KA advised that while open days have occurred previously, they generated limited engagement. Many schools are now adopting smaller-scale tours instead, which St George's has implemented.

Concern:

Limited promotion of St George's academic results.

Response:

KA noted that efforts have been made; however, many parental choices are based on established preferences rather than engagement with promotional activities.

Statement:

RP reminded everyone that consultation is genuine, with no straightforward resolution. A range of options has been considered, with merging identified (by Trustees) as the most viable solution.

Concern:

Further requests were made for the Trustees to review the open letter prior to additional consultation sessions, citing concerns about fairness and robustness.

Response:

It was confirmed that Trustees will review the letter, though not necessarily before forthcoming sessions.

Concern:

Division between school communities was highlighted, exacerbated by commentary and things being shared on social media. A need for improved unity and collaboration was emphasised.

Suggestion:

A parent felt initial separate engagement with each school community may have been beneficial before combined sessions.

Questions and Observations:

Capacity and access limitations were noted at St George's, however, it was claimed that the school was built to be expanded.

Response:

It is not clear where funding would come from to build additional spaces. St Mark's site offers significantly greater capacity and accessibility without investment.

Question:

What were the projected figures when St George's joined CLP?

Response:

What was known at the time was they had reduced their PAN to 15. The notion was that the school would be full but it is clear that it doesn't meet PAN. Initial expectations regarding pupil numbers have not been realised

Question:

Could the shared leadership model impact enrolment

Response:

Shared leadership was introduced as a response to declining numbers and may have variable effects

Statements:

Wider socio-economic factors, including housing and demographic trends, are influencing numbers at St Mark's

Cost of housing is another factor; 18-30s aren't having children and families are priced out of the market. The birth-rate has now fallen below 1.9.

Question:

Concerns were raised about the media reporting and it was asked if this had been raised with the relevant parties.

Responses:

Concerns about media reporting have been raised with relevant parties.

Closing Note

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