

Consultation on the Proposed Closure of St Mary Magdalen's Catholic Primary School
Meeting One
Held on 22nd April 2021 by Zoom

Representatives from the Governing Body, Archdiocese of Southwark and the London Borough of Lewisham

Pat Barber, Chair of Governors at St Mary Magdalen's- PB
Simon Hughes, Director of Education at the Education Commission- SH
Daniel Coleman, Officer at the Education Commission- DC
Yvonne Epale, Officer at the Education Commission - YE
Angela Scattergood, Officer at Lewisham Council- AS
Matt Henaughan, Officer at Lewisham Council- MH

This was an open consultation meeting attended by parents, staff and members of the local community.

Pat Barber (PB), the current Chair of Governors, welcomed everyone to the Zoom meeting and outlined the reason for the proposed closure as referenced in the pre-publication closure document. PB made everyone aware that there were representatives from Lewisham and the Archdiocese of Southwark.

PB advised they would now take questions. Please use the raise hand function and PB will invite you to speak.

Daniel Coleman (DC) read the questions that had been submitted online.

1. A former pupil asked 'Can you explain the discrepancy? From the outside looking in, the deterioration appears to have happened very quickly. But, if issues were occurring back in 2017-2018 – then why weren't they flagged? '
2. 'Plus, what measures were put in place by the relevant authorities, back in 2018/2019, to address the parents' obvious issues with the running of the school? '

DC responded: The Archdiocese responded to the issues and provided support, assisted in the implementation of a new governing body and Headteacher. None of the issues raised in these questions are related to the proposed closure but to governance or the school management.

Angela Scattergood (AS) responded: When the issues came to light the Archdiocese stepped in. Lewisham and the Archdiocese worked closely together with regards to the new management of the school and put in support for the various issues.

SN- (Parent Questions):

1. Based upon what was just said regarding the SATs results I was active in bringing to light the issues. There were additional problems including the SATs results. There was problem with management, admin and staff. SN agrees the staff at the moment are doing a fantastic job

and the school has been transformed. The child heard things in the school that they should not have heard. Why were these issues overlooked?

2. Parents were fighting on the school's grounds, why were these issues ignored?

The school is effectively new, we felt listened to. Children are traumatised from past issues, children have progressed enormously, there has been no communication between the last incidents and the announcement of the school closing.

Simon Hughes (SH) responded: The paper is very clear on the current issues within the school. Across Lewisham and London there is a migration of pupils out of Inner London. The biggest focus is on the quality of education with the falling roll. The current roll numbers would be an issue in any school and this is not the only school in the Archdiocese that has this problem. Birth rates have gone down. The data in the documents comes from the Greater London Authority. This would have happened regardless of the school's history; the history has made the problem worse. Once we had the information regarding the issues in the school, we put in place a new management structure and new governing body. I am deeply sorry that parents feel like there hasn't been enough communication. This is a disappointing situation and I do not want to close any schools but if we do not the quality of education will decline. When the roll falls the amount of funding per year falls and therefore the number of staff you can employ will fall.

AS responded: I am very sorry to hear about the child's experience. When Mrs Seymour (Executive Headteacher) and Miss De Souza (Head of School) came to the school Lewisham provided support, including financial support. They cannot continue to bail a school out. Officers from the LA have worked really hard with the school. This position is across the borough and across most London boroughs.

LMG – (Parent Questions):

1. What time frame was given to the new staffing for deficit and the condition the school was left in? I feel the decision had already been made
2. Who will be held accountable for the immense issues that occurred at the school originally?

PB responded: The intention at the time was to work with parents to support the school. It was never the intention to close the school, the staff were put on permanent contracts

DC responded: School finances are fairly simple, most of the budget covers the staff. As numbers fall the deficit will grow.

PB responded: SH addressed the issue before but that isn't what this consultation is to discuss.

SI-(Parent Questions):

1. Why weren't parents given the opportunity to share their opinion before the process started?
2. Is this a process to revive or close?

SH responded: Fundamentally there is never a right time to start the process of closing a school. I understand the challenges around closing the school. We have to focus on the health and safety of the pupils first and the quality of education. As DC has advised the deficit will continue to grow. The

depths and levels of the issues within the school became apparent once the Archdiocese had full control. The Archdiocese will look with Lewisham at the challenges in closing the school.

DC added: we are following the statutory process for closing the school.

SN- (Parent Questions):

Questions directed to SH and AS.

1. When the Archdiocese and Lewisham saw the depth of the problem at the school, why were the falling numbers not flagged earlier?
2. I have never known that the numbers were low until the issues arose with management. Additionally, why were other options not explored i.e. changing the school name?

SN feels the changes were not advertised well enough.

AS responded: Several factors have impacted numbers and one of those is reputation. Numbers are falling across Lewisham as people move away from London.

Matt Henaughan (MH) responded: There was huge growth in population year on year for 10 years up to 2016. In the past couple of years things have changed. The forecast is 200 pupils down for this year compared to 2 years ago. These number continue to fall over the next 5 years. In the most recent search and application drop, London has had a drop that was not expected. Lewisham has 230 less pupils going into reception in September 2021.

SH responded: These conversations are also taking place across Southwark and Lambeth.

AS responded: In the face of dwindling numbers, advertising the changes wouldn't have made too much of a difference.

LMG- (Parent Question):

1. Are there any other businesses involved in the financial input of the school?

SH responded: St Mary Magdalen's (SMM) is a VA school that receives a contribution from the diocese. There aren't any businesses related to the school.

SC – (Parent Question):

1. For the council: What were the causes for the fall? What is the reason for the change? Has the total population fallen?

MH responded: The main driver is the birth rate which has been falling for a number of years. There have also been a few shocks to the numbers such as Brexit. There also appears to be a reaction to Covid 19 which has made the situation worse. Some schools in the borough have also reduced form sizes. The situation will last for a few years.

SO – (Parent and Governor Question):

1. There is a huge building construction of flats, e.g. at Lewisham train station. Isn't this an indication of an increase not a decrease?

MH responded: The developments in Lewisham don't particularly have children coming into our schools as they are building single person occupancy accommodation. These are considered with pupil yield in the forecasts.

SO responded: This is a really important consideration, Lewisham has built for single person living and families are moving out. This is something the council need to address.

SI-(Parent Question):

1. Based on the statistics, does this mean the government has failed on building new schools and supporting the current schools?

MH responded: The government's priority was to build free schools, but it didn't have much impact on Lewisham as they are not the type of schools Lewisham has.

SN- (Parent Question):

1. Brockley is a desirable area. Has the council taken this into account? Three houses have sold recently and new residents will want to start families.

PB responded: This has been answered in the previous responses. Lewisham has the data available.

LMG- (Parent Question):

1. If my child is offered a place in a neighbouring faith school, are we likely to face the same problem?

SH responded: The other schools in Lewisham are reasonably secure as they currently have more on roll. There are spaces in all our Lewisham schools. The more we fill them, the safer they will be. I hope that the dispersal of the SMM pupils will strengthen other local schools.

FK- (Parent Question):

1. It is very disappointing to hear the school is closing with such a long history. Is there a possibility of the school not closing?

SH responded: We are only at this point by modelling the numbers. We wouldn't be making this recommendation if we thought there was another route. The councillors have the final decision. The Archdiocese understands this is not easy for parents and pupils. Lewisham and the Archdiocese have put extra resources to find pupil places and the Archdiocese has a duty of care to the staff.

FK responded: I do not want my child to move but we are being encouraged to move our children. Is this correct?

SH responded: It would be better to make a measured decision now about moving pupils rather than waiting until the school closes and risking and not getting places where you would like.

PB responded: This a consultation and we are gathering your views. The decision will be made by Mayor and Cabinet. The numbers are falling and have dropped from 140 to just over 100. The school is not sustainable without funding. Look at the facts on the document.

SN – (Parent Question):

1. MH was very informative with the statistics. But the question about Brockley were not answered. The decision hasn't been made but we are being advised to move children. It feels like a done deal.

SH responded: The governing body, Archdiocese and LA have worked together to put this proposal together as it is not viable to keep SMM open. The elective representatives get to make that final decision. They will take the paper and the views expressed and conclude. I feel the conclusion will be that the school is unsustainable. I cannot say this is a done deal.

SN – (Parent Question):

1. I understood that as parents we need to make the decision regarding our children's education. The letter said the admissions would be bespoke. Does that still stand?

PB responded: No one can direct your child to go to any one school as it is parental choice.

SN responded: We have been given false hope.

SH responded: We will provide you with enough support to help you make the right decision.

AS responded: The admissions officers are working really hard to support parents and pupils. If the decision is made to close the school Lewisham will work to find places for pupils.

PB responded: As detailed in the document support will be offered in the Autumn term.

LMG – (Parent Question):

1. Can you please repeat where we can get the information of facts and figures from?

MH responded: We will send out the details to all involved in the consultation.

DC responded: The school has the contact details of Sharon Docherty who is heading up the process for the Archdiocese.

PB asked if there were any more submitted questions.

DC read out the following question:

Can the school be saved if it moves from maintained to academy?

DC responded: There are not enough pupils in the school and will continue to decline. Converting to an academy would not have changed the issues with funding and the numbers on roll.

There were no further questions.

PB said we are all very sorry for this situation. We will do our very best to continue to support parents and pupils.