

Children's Services
222 Upper Street N1 1XR

Report of: Executive Member for Children, Young People and Families

Meeting of: Executive

Date: 8 February 2024

Ward(s): Finsbury

Subject: Proposal on the Future of Duncombe and Montem Primary Schools

1. Synopsis

- 1.1. Across Islington, 46% of schools are projecting deficit budgets by the end of 2025-26, cumulatively this adds up to a projected deficit of £15m based on the ratified budgets submitted by schools at the end of 2022/23 financial year. The School Organisation Plan agreed by the Executive Board in October 2022 is the strategic plan to reconfigure the school estate to reflect the falling numbers of pupils so that all schools are financially viable. The School Organisation Plan was submitted to Executive Board alongside the Education Plan, 'Putting Children First' and the SEND Strategy to ensure the proposals presented do not compromise the quality of education or our corporate commitment to Inclusion.
- 1.2. The objective of this paper is to support the recommendation that Islington Council issue a statutory proposal to amalgamate Duncombe and Montem Primary Schools on 31 August 2024 on the existing Duncombe site. This would technically close Montem Primary School and automatically transfer all existing pupils from Montem to Duncombe.
- 1.3. Duncombe and Montem Primary Schools are in the Hornsey Planning area which has the highest vacancy rate in Reception across all of Islington, with 32% vacancies. This figure is above both the Department for Education's recommendation of a 5% vacancy rate and the 10% vacancy rate used by most local authorities across London.
- 1.4. Both Duncombe and Montem Primary Schools are two-form entry schools with 60 pupils in each year group, and both have a vacancy rate of over 50% in Reception. We expect these numbers to decline further in the coming years. This means either school has the capacity to absorb pupils from the other.

- 1.5. Each surplus place is equivalent to a £5,700 loss of income and so this level of surplus creates financial pressure for both schools. As stated above across Islington, 46% of schools are projecting deficit budgets by the end of 2025-26, including Duncombe and Montem Primary Schools. The responsibility for managing school budgets sits with Governing Bodies but without the plans and resources to achieve balanced budgets, ultimately, the deficit will fall to the Local Authority, creating an additional financial pressure.
- 1.6. The Local Authority has a sufficiency duty to plan for school places as set out in the Education Act, and in exercising this duty a responsibility to ensure children attend good financially sustainable schools. This means that we must make some very difficult decisions.
- 1.7. An informal consultation was undertaken from 15 November to 20 December 2023 on a proposal to amalgamate Duncombe and Montem Primary Schools, this report details the process for consultation and summarises the feedback for consideration by Executive Board on whether to progress to formal consultation and the issuing of a statutory notice to amalgamate.
- 1.8. The amalgamation will address the existing and projected deficit at both schools, by reducing overall operating costs and creating a viable two-form entry school that is at full capacity.
- 1.9. The advantage of an amalgamation rather than a school closure is that existing staff will be ring-fenced to staffing positions in the amalgamated school.

2. Background

- 2.1. The School Organisation Plan approved by Islington Council's Executive on 13 October 2022 sets out how we will manage the high levels of surplus capacity in our schools to ensure the best outcomes for children and sustainable schools.
- 2.2. Phase Two of this plan was approved by the Executive on 19 October 2023, which agreed to launch an informal consultation on a proposal to amalgamate Duncombe and Montem Primary Schools.
- 2.3. This followed a proposal in 2023 to close Pooles Park Primary School, which has the most vacancies in the planning area (62%). However, following an 'inadequate' judgement from Ofsted, the Department for Education issued an academy order and subsequently appointed an academy sponsor, The Bridge London Trust, to run this school. It is therefore no longer possible to proceed with our proposal to close Pooles Park school.
- 2.4. As a result of the academisation of Pooles Park there is a need to reduce capacity in the Hornsey area to account for falling rolls and reduced demand for primary school places. Duncombe and Montem Primary Schools are the two community schools with the next highest vacancy rates in the Hornsey planning area.
- 2.5. This report details the process of the first stage consultation on the proposal to amalgamate Duncombe and Montem Primary schools and the responses received for consideration by the Executive to determine whether to issue a statutory notice to amalgamate.

- 2.6. The first stage consultation ran for five weeks from 15 November to 20 December 2023 with a series of consultation meetings held for parents and carers at both schools and a public meeting at a nearby, neutral, venue.

3. Recommendations

- 3.1. To review and consider the responses to the consultation.
- 3.2. To proceed to the next stage and issue a statutory notice to amalgamate Duncombe and Montem Primary Schools on 31 August 2024.
- 3.3. Based on the feedback received during the consultation, this report recommends the council makes the following commitments:
 - 3.3.1. To provide early, dedicated, professional support as part of a comprehensive needs led transition plan for pupils with Education, Health, and Care plans to support all aspects of transition. Additional resources will be allocated to the SEND team to work with individual children and their parents/carers to support their transition should the proposal proceed.
 - 3.3.2. To facilitate a parent/carer group with representatives from both primary schools as part of the transition process and bringing the two school communities together.
 - 3.3.3. Officers will work with the parent/carer group and school staff to mitigate the risks of air pollution through developing safer walking routes to school.
 - 3.3.4. Dedicated HR resources will be provided to support any staff impacted by the proposed amalgamation.
 - 3.3.5. To provide additional capacity to the schools to support this process should the proposal proceed.
- 3.4. A draft statutory outline statutory notice is attached as Appendix E.

4. Introduction

- 4.1. Birth rates in Islington have reduced significantly and this decline is projected to continue. This is leading to falling rolls and a high level of surplus capacity in Islington's primary schools with vacancies in reception of 25% in October 2023. This has increased from 20% in October 2022.
- 4.2. The School Organisation Plan sets out our approach to confidently manage this surplus capacity in our schools to ensure the best outcomes for our children and young people and the long-term sustainability of our schools. The plan sets the strategic direction for pupil place planning across the borough and has been developed alongside the Education Plan. It ensures that the principles applied to managing our school estate reflect our corporate and political commitment to driving educational excellence through inclusive and sustainable schools and supports the delivery of a quality educational experience for all children and young people through a diverse curriculum offer.

- 4.3. The Local Authority has a duty to ensure that sufficient schools are available at primary and secondary stages of education in the local area and for children with special educational needs. Decisions to change the organisation of Community and Voluntary aided schools are made by the council, and for academies, by the Secretary of State, advised by the Regional Schools Commissioner (RSC).
- 4.4. Reducing the number of school places in a planned way will support schools to manage change within their national funding formula allocations. Department for Education (DfE) guidance on school closures includes a presumption not to close. Therefore, all options have been exhausted to avoid school closure but when there is no alternative, long-term option, this does have to be considered.
- 4.5. The specific proposals of the second phase of the School Organisation Plan agreed by Executive on 19 October 2023 were to: launch an informal consultation on a proposal to close Blessed Sacrament RC Primary School, a separate informal consultation on the amalgamation of Duncombe and Montem Primary Schools, and a consultation on reducing the Published Admission Numbers (PAN) for Drayton Park, Prior Weston, Rotherfield and Tufnell Park Primary Schools.
- 4.6. An informal consultation on the proposal to amalgamate Duncombe and Montem Primary Schools took place from 15 November to 20 December 2023. This report provides the detail of the consultation and the responses to the consultation.

5. The Proposal

- 5.1. The consultation focused on a proposal to amalgamate Duncombe and Montem Primary Schools on 31 August 2024.
- 5.2. School places are planned by dividing Islington into six different planning areas. Duncombe and Montem Primary Schools are in Planning Area 2, Hornsey. Hornsey has the highest levels of surplus capacity in the borough with 32% vacancies in reception as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: the number of vacancies by planning area

Vacancies by planning area for October 2023	No. of places available	Vacancies	Vacancy rate
Planning Area 1: Holloway	465	108	23%
Planning Area 2: Hornsey	465	150	32%
Planning Area 3: Highbury	360	62	17%
Planning Area 4: Barnsbury	245	74	30%
Planning Area 5: Canonbury	340	72	21%

Vacancies by planning area for October 2023	No. of places available	Vacancies	Vacancy rate
Planning Area 6: Finsbury	300	70	23%
Totals	2,175	536	25%

5.3. Duncombe and Montem Primary Schools are the two community schools with the highest number of spare places in the Hornsey area as shown in table 2. Only Pooles Park Primary School and Whitehall Park Primary School have higher vacancy rates, but as these schools are converting to an academy and are an academy respectively, we do not have the power to close or alter these schools.

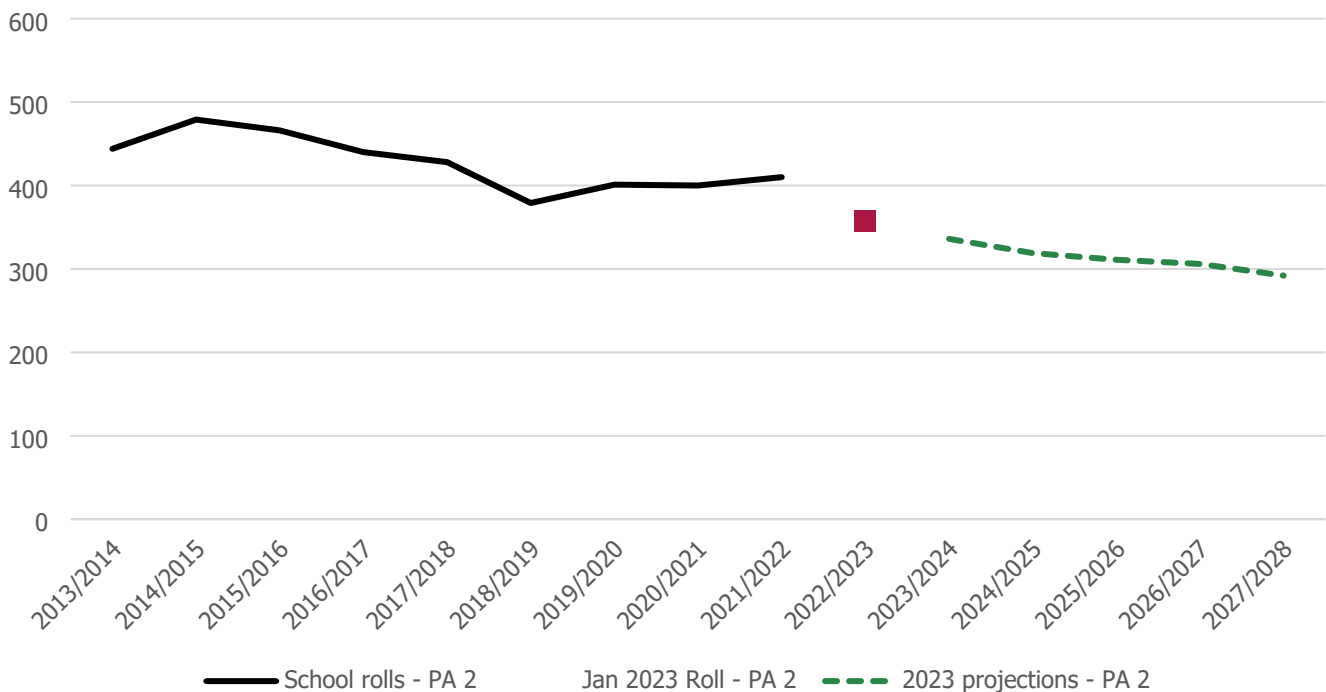
Table 2: Spare places by school in the Hornsey Planning area

School Name	Published Admission Number for Reception	Number of places taken in Reception (October 2023)	Percentage vacancy in Reception (October 2023)	Total number of pupils from Reception to Year 6
Ashmount	60	60	0%	378
Christ the King RC	45	34	24%	243
Duncombe	60	29	52%	313
Grafton	60	60	0%	399
Montem	60	28	53%	270
Pakeman	45	35	22%	272
Pooles Park	45	16	64%	143
St Marks CE	30	30	0%	190
Whitehall Park (Academy)	60	23	62%	245

School Name	Published Admission Number for Reception	Number of places taken in Reception (October 2023)	Percentage vacancy in Reception (October 2023)	Total number of pupils from Reception to Year 6
Total	465	315	32%	2,542

5.4. Roll projections for the Hornsey Planning Area show an overall reduction in pupil numbers since 2014-15. This trend is expected to continue, with a further reduction projected each year in the coming years with expected numbers in Reception in this planning area dipping below 300 by 2027-2028.

Chart 1: Roll projections for Planning Area 2 - Hornsey, Reception year



5.5. Montem and Duncombe are both based in large Victorian school buildings and have both experienced a significant roll drop in recent years. Without more pupils being admitted, they will not be viable in the medium to longer term.

5.6. Montem and Duncombe are situated just over half a mile apart and within walking distance from each other. By amalgamating the schools, we can bring together the strengths of both, whilst significantly improving their long-term financial viability.

5.7. By operating from one site, the amalgamated school will have lower running costs, and due to the size of the buildings, can accommodate all existing pupils and operate as a two-form entry school, with bulge classes for the larger higher year groups.

5.8. Amalgamation will ensure all existing pupils from the school that is closed are automatically moved to the other site. This significantly reduces the risk of any child not having a school place in September 2024.

- 5.9. The Local Authority completed a feasibility study in advance of the consultation period to determine which school we would propose to close and which we would propose as the site of the amalgamated school. This considered and scored factors around four categories:
- 5.9.1. Buildings and site condition – both sites are suitable for an amalgamated school and can accommodate the required pupil numbers
 - 5.9.2. Financial position and running costs – Both schools were in deficit. Duncombe is now projected to be in surplus this financial year. Duncombe has lower running costs in comparison with Montem.
 - 5.9.3. Location – more pupils from both schools live within 1km of the Duncombe site and there are more neighbouring schools near Montem
 - 5.9.4. Air quality and congestion – air quality is better at Duncombe and congestion is less as the site is on a school street
- 5.10. There was no weighting on educational attainment within the feasibility study, as both schools are judged 'good' by Ofsted. Amalgamation will ensure that both schools' culture, teaching practices, and policies can be incorporated into the amalgamated school. However, consideration was given to the quality of education, educational outcomes across both schools.
- 5.11. Based on the outcomes of the feasibility study, we are recommending that the amalgamated school operate from the Duncombe site and keep the Duncombe name.
- 5.12. We recommend that the amalgamated school be on the Duncombe site because:
- 5.12.1. more existing pupils from both schools live closer to the Duncombe site
 - 5.12.2. there are fewer schools nearby to Duncombe. If Duncombe school were to close, there would be less choice for parents in the local area with only one other school within 500m. There are four other schools within 500m of Montem.
 - 5.12.3. the Duncombe site is already on a school street whereas Montem's location means a school street is not possible and the air quality is better in the Duncombe area and has lower Nitrogen Dioxide (NO₂) levels.
- 5.13. The recommendation based on the findings from the feasibility study and the considerations within it is that the amalgamated school is located on the Duncombe site, retaining the Duncombe name and Ofsted number. The rationale underpinning this recommendation is that although both schools currently have deficits, the financial position at Duncombe is projected to improve, meaning that the newly amalgamated school would start in a better financial position, this would safeguard the financial position of the school and help to secure the school's long-term future.
- 5.14. A redacted version of the feasibility study that expands on the rationale underpinning the recommendations within this report is attached as Appendix C.

6. The Consultation

6.1. The consultation process

- 6.1.1. An informal consultation was undertaken from 15 November to 20 December 2023 on a proposal to amalgamate Duncombe and Montem Primary Schools in line with the statutory guidance on Opening and closing maintained schools. The consultation document is at Appendix A.
- 6.1.2. Translated versions of the consultation document were provided in Arabic, Bengali, Somali, and Turkish.
- 6.1.3. All documentation was shared with statutory consultees including local schools, admission authorities, MPs, and other interested organisations. All the documentation was published online at a dedicated webpage. The consultation was reported on in the local press.
- 6.1.4. Seven meetings were held for parent and carers, including a meeting with interpreters, and a public meeting for the wider community.

Table 3: Consultation Meetings

Date	Location	Audience	Approximate number of participants
15 November 2023	Montem Primary School	Parents and Carers	>100
16 November 2023	Duncombe Primary School	Parents and Carers	26
21 November 2023	Montem Primary School	Parents and Carers	>100
22 November 2023	Duncombe Primary School	Parents and Carers	2
23 November 2023	Montem Primary School	Parents and Carers	>100
24 November 2023	Duncombe Primary School	Parents and Carers	6

Date	Location	Audience	Approximate number of participants
29 November 2023	Montem Primary School	Parents and Carers (with interpreters)	27
12 December 2023	Arts and Media School Islington	Local community	35

- 6.1.5. Over 400 people attended the parent and community meetings where they asked questions and fed back their views and concerns.
- 6.1.6. A redacted version of the feasibility study which determined the site of the proposed amalgamated school was published on the consultation webpage on 19 December. This was provided for information purposes only and did not form part of the consultation documentation.
- 6.1.7. 786 responses¹ were received to the online consultation questionnaire.
- 6.1.8. Respondents to the questionnaire could make additional comments. 590 respondents chose to leave additional comments.
- 6.1.9. Respondents were also invited to submit their comments by email to a dedicated mailbox. Eight comments were received by email.
- 6.1.10. The Trade Unions provided a joint response from four trade unions to the consultation.

6.2. Main themes from the consultation

- 6.2.1. 786 responses were received to the online consultation questionnaire.
- 6.2.2. Respondents were asked to select an option that described who they were. 436 respondents (55% of the total respondents) said they were parents of children at Duncombe or Montem Primary Schools. 84 respondents (11%) said they were staff members and 13 (2%) were governors. The remaining 253 respondents (32%) selected 'Other'. 24 of the respondents said they were a pupil at Duncombe or Montem Primary School in their comments.
- 6.2.3. Respondents were asked whether they had children at either school. 162 said they had children at Duncombe and 310 said they had children at Montem, in total this represents 60% of the total responses.

¹ The number of responses does not necessarily equate to the number of people submitting a response. We did not require users to register to complete the questionnaire and as such it was possible for an individual to submit more than one response

- 6.2.4. Respondents were asked whether they agreed with the statement “I agree with the proposal to amalgamate Duncombe Primary School and Montem Primary School”. Of the total respondents, 20% either definitely or somewhat agreed, 3% neither agreed or disagreed, 4% somewhat disagreed, and 71% definitely disagreed. 1% skipped this question.
- 6.2.5. Of the 310 respondents that said they currently had children at Montem, 4% either definitely or somewhat agreed, 2% neither agreed or disagreed, 4% somewhat disagreed, and 90% definitely disagreed.
- 6.2.6. Of the 162 respondents that said they currently had children at Duncombe, 66% either definitely or somewhat agreed, 6% neither agreed or disagreed, 6% somewhat disagreed, and 22% definitely disagreed.
- 6.2.7. A report on the responses to the consultation is provided at Appendix B.
- 6.2.8. The main themes from the consultation comments and meetings and our responses to them are set out as follows:

6.2.9. Alternative Resource Provision (ARP) and Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) [86 comments]

- 6.2.9.1. 75 responses raised concerns about the number of children with SEND at Montem Primary School and how they would be supported to move to another school. Many were concerned about how a change of routine could disrupt learning and how children with SEND would cope with change. There were also concerns that the timeline is not sufficient to prepare the children. They also spoke highly about the SEND provision at Montem, including the sensory rooms. Some were concerned about how the school would manage an increase in children with Education, Health, and Care (EHC) Plans and if children would be disadvantaged by reduced capacity. They questioned why the Local Authority was proposing to amalgamate two schools with very high levels of children with SEND. 11 respondents specifically raised the ARP at Montem and their concerns about the impact closure would have on children who benefit from this provision. The impact on children with SEND and the implications for the ARP was also raised at the consultation meetings on 15, 21, and 23 November and 12 December.
- 6.2.9.2. **Response:** Across Islington primary schools, approximately 16% of pupils were identified as requiring SEN Support in January 2023. This indicates they have some special educational need, but do not meet the threshold for an EHC Plan. 5% of Islington primary school pupils have an EHC Plan. At Montem, 17% of pupils receive SEN support and around 9% have an EHC Plan. The level of SEN support at Montem is slightly higher than the Islington average and is 4% higher for children with an EHC Plan. It is therefore essential that additional support is provided for these children if the proposal to amalgamate progresses. This support is detailed within a comprehensive transition plan to support all pupils, should the amalgamation proceed, including detailed actions for SEN support and EHC Plans. Additional resource will be allocated to support a needs led approach to ensure that each child has a smooth

transition. The proportion of children with SEN support at Duncombe is 16.5% and with an EHC Plan is 6%, this is similar to the ratio of children with SEN needs at Montem. By combining both schools, through the amalgamation, should it proceed, the number of pupils will potentially double and therefore the percentage of children with SEN support and EHC Plans at the newly amalgamated school would remain at a similar percentage. The ARP at Montem gives mainstream children access to specialist support when they need it. Careful consideration will be given to the individual needs of children accessing this support to ensure that when it is relocated the provision meets the needs of children well. Duncombe Primary School does not currently have an ARP. There is a sensory room and skilled staff who support mainstream children with SEN when they require additional help. There is a statutory duty to ensure that all children with additional needs are fully supported, the staffing structure of the newly amalgamated school would draw from the expertise across both schools to ensure that there is a sufficient level of support to meet the needs of all children. A robust transition plan has been drafted for implementation should the proposal progress, this plan will support all children, including those with SEN and EHC Plans. Additional resource has been identified to support the implementation of this plan should the amalgamation proceed.

6.2.10. Attainment [45 comments]

- 6.2.10.1. Respondents asked why attainment, quality of education, and educational outcomes had not been considered when forming the proposal. They cited the most recent attainment results which indicate that more children are performing better at Montem than at Duncombe. Respondents are concerned that the quality of education would be affected if all children are moved to Duncombe. Participants also raised this at the consultation meetings on 15, 16, and 21 November and 12 December.
- 6.2.10.2. **Response:** The proposal is to amalgamate Duncombe and Montem Primary schools, rather than the closure of one school, to ensure that the amalgamated school benefits from the strengths of both schools. The quality of education is good at both schools and so this is not a differentiating factor between them. Officers completed a comparative analysis of outcomes at key stages between the two schools which demonstrates that in Phonics and EYFS, Duncombe's outcomes are higher. At Key Stage 1, their outcomes are aligned. The combined data at Key Stage 2 shows Montem performing above Duncombe. The data comparison shows different areas of strength across both schools. Both Ofsted reports are good, and Duncombe is outstanding in the area of personal development. We are confident that the quality of education would not be negatively impacted by this proposal and by creating a viable two-form entry school, we will ensure the amalgamated school offers the best educational outcomes for all new and existing pupils.

6.2.11. Class sizes and Capacity [37 comments]

6.2.11.1. Respondents raised concerns about how all children will be accommodated in the amalgamated school and whether children will be taught in classes larger than 30 pupils. They also were concerned that the proposed site of the amalgamated school (Duncombe) would not be large enough and whether outside space, including the playground, would be suitable. These points were also raised at the consultation meetings on 15, 16, 21 and 29 November.

6.2.11.2. **Response:** No class sizes in any school will be larger than 30 pupils. Should this proposal proceed, the amalgamated school will be a two-form entry school, which means two classes of 30 children in each year group. Where year groups are larger than 60 pupils, we will also arrange for additional classes, either as a third class or a mixed class across different year groups. Ultimately, all pupils will be in classes of no more than 30. In terms of capacity, both Duncombe and Montem Primary Schools are designed to be two-form entry schools and exceed government requirements on the minimum size required for a two-form entry school. Duncombe has enough classrooms to accommodate all children (20) should all existing pupils remain at the amalgamated school.

6.2.12. Air Quality and traffic [33 comments]

6.2.12.1. Some respondents supported the proposal as Duncombe is on a school street which is better for safety at drop-off and pick-up and improves air quality at the school. They gave anecdotal examples of their children with asthma and other health conditions which was improved by the school street programme at Duncombe. Others suggested that the difference in air quality at Duncombe and Montem is negligible at 1-3 $\mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$, plus the access routes to Duncombe meant children are exposed to high levels of pollution and sound when walking to the school. They are concerned what impact this would have on children with SEND, including those with autism.

6.2.12.2. **Response:** Duncombe is located on a school street, whereas Montem is situated on a busy junction preventing the ability to create a school street at this site. This means Duncombe is safer, and the air quality is significantly better than the air quality at Montem. Across all schools in Islington, the average air pollution level for Nitrogen Dioxide (NO_2) was 22 $\mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$. The average result for Duncombe in 2021 was lower than the average at 19 $\mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$ whereas at Montem it is higher at 26 $\mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$. The SEND transition plan will consider the impact of all changes to children.

6.2.13. Feasibility study [31 comments]

6.2.13.1. Respondents questioned the feasibility study and believed it to be flawed due to the recommendation that Duncombe Primary be the site of the amalgamated school. They believe the feasibility study should have considered attainment, SEND, and safeguarding and should have been shared publicly. Participants at the consultation meetings on 23 and 29 November asked for a copy of the feasibility study.

6.2.13.2. **Response:** Both Duncombe and Montem Primary Schools are judged 'good' by Ofsted and achieve similar outcomes for pupils. The purpose of the feasibility study was to determine which site to host the amalgamated school based on the buildings and site condition, the financial position and running costs, location, and air quality and congestion. Both schools were scored against each of the criteria for evaluation within the feasibility study. The study determined that: both sites are suitable for an amalgamated school and can accommodate the required pupil numbers; both schools are in deficit but Duncombe is projected to be in surplus this financial year and has lower running costs than Montem; more pupils from both schools live within 1km of the Duncombe site; there are more neighbouring schools near Montem with available places; the air quality is better and there is less congestion at Duncombe. It is for these reasons that we are proposing Duncombe as the site of the amalgamated school. Consideration on attainment and SEND are referred to in other parts of this report. We have referenced the SEND transition plan that will support a needs led approach to every child identified with SEN. Educational outcomes were reviewed across both schools and strengths were identified in both. A redacted version of the feasibility study has now been published and is included as Appendix C.

6.2.14. Timescale [24 comments]

6.2.14.1. Respondents questioned the timing of the proposal and argued that it did not give enough time for parents to consider their options or for staff to look for other jobs. They were also concerned that if the proposal is approved in April, this would leave only one term to implement the proposal which would involve a staffing restructure and the transition of Montem pupils to another school. They did not think this was sufficient time. Some asked if this would mean that staff would be expected to work over the summer holidays to complete the amalgamation. Parents, carers, and community members also raised the timescale at the consultation meetings and were concerned that the proposed timeline does not give sufficient time for staff to apply for other jobs.

6.2.14.2. **Response:** The timing of the proposal is in keeping with DfE statutory guidelines around opening and closing maintained schools that the local authority must operate within. Consideration was given to extending the timeline for implementation to 2025, however this would have a negative impact on the financial viability of both schools. Parents / Carers would be likely to withdraw their children and seek alternative education should the amalgamation be prolonged owing to the instability that this would create. Staff are likely to seek secure alternative options for employment during this extended period. This would lead to reduced children and reduced staffing numbers adding to the financial vulnerability of both schools that would impact on the quality of education and children's wellbeing.

6.2.15. Transition support and wellbeing [20 comments]

6.2.15.1. Respondents raised concerns about the impact the amalgamation would have on children's wellbeing. This included concerns about transitioning to another school site, having new children in individual classes, and the impact, changes may have on extra-curricular activities. Concerns about transition and what

support would be provided to pupils was raised at the consultation meetings on 15, 16, and 23 November.

- 6.2.15.2. **Response:** Based on the feedback received, we will ensure that additional resource is provided to support the transition of pupils from Montem to Duncombe - or another Islington school (if that is what parents / carers choose) – and to support pupils at Duncombe who will also be impacted by the proposal. This will include a SEND Transition Plan for those children with SEND or an EHC Plan.

6.2.16. Federation [19 comments]

6.2.16.1. 17 respondents raised concerns about what impact the proposal would have on the Edventure Collaborative; the federation Montem Primary School is currently in with Drayton Park Primary School. They wanted to understand what would happen to the federation and what impact it would have on any surplus or deficit held by the federation. Two emails were also received about this, and it was raised at the consultation meetings on 21 and 23 November and 12 December.

6.2.16.2. **Response:** Should the proposal proceed, it would have an impact on Drayton Park School as it would be the only school in the Edventure Collaborative Federation and therefore the Edventure Collaborative Federation would need to be dissolved. This would mean Drayton Park would no longer be part of this federation and new governance arrangements would need to be established. Any change to the Federation would only happen after the final decision has been made and before the new school year in September 2024. When two or more schools federate, this means they share a single governing body. By law, they remain individual schools and continue to receive individual budgets and how that is managed is determined by the governing body.

6.2.17. Pooles Park [20 comments]

6.2.17.1. Respondents asked why the Local Authority was not proposing to close Pooles Park school instead, that was judged 'inadequate' by Ofsted in 2022. Some recognised that the Local Authority was unable to close Pooles Park following an academy order. Respondents suggested that the council challenge the decision by the Department for Education to issue an academy order for Pooles Park. This was also raised at the consultation meetings on 15, 16, 21, 23 and 24 November.

6.2.17.2. **Response:** A proposal was made in 2023 to close Pooles Park Primary School, which has the most vacancies in the planning area (62%). However, following an 'inadequate' judgement from Ofsted, the Department for Education issued an academy order and subsequently appointed an academy sponsor, The Bridge London Trust, to run this school. When an academy sponsor is identified by the DfE, the local authority is unable to propose closure. It is therefore, no longer possible to proceed with the proposal to close Pooles Park school. With a surplus capacity of 32% across the Hornsey locality area, it is necessary to take action as this creates financial vulnerability for the schools that is not

sustainable. The Local Authority has challenged the decision taken by the DfE to support the academisation of Pooles Park and is awaiting the decision.

6.2.18. Samuel Rhodes School [19 comments]

6.2.18.1. 17 respondents asked what impact closure would have on Samuel Rhodes Primary School, which shares a building with Montem Primary School. Participants at the consultation meetings on 15, 21 and 29 November and 12 December also asked this question.

6.2.18.2. **Response:** This proposal is considering an amalgamation of Duncombe and Montem Primary Schools specifically. Samuel Rhodes Primary is located on the top floor of the Montem school site. Prior to this proposal, consideration had been given to the best long-term location for Samuel Rhodes Primary owing to the specific requirements of the children placed there and the suitability of the current site. Officers continue to work with the headteacher of Samuel Rhodes Primary on how to best support the needs of each child on a needs led basis.

6.2.19. Amalgamation [18 comments]

6.2.19.1. Respondents raised concerns about the rationale of the proposal and why amalgamating other schools had not been considered. They also questioned how the proposal could be described as an amalgamation when it appeared to be a takeover and an amalgamation in 'name only' because the amalgamated school would keep Duncombe's name, site, and governing board. Respondents wanted reassurance and guarantees that Montem's staff would be given equal opportunity to staffing positions. Some suggested it would make more sense for Duncombe to close and Montem used as the site for the amalgamated school as it is part of a federation with Drayton Park. These points were also raised by participants at the consultation meetings on 21 November and 12 December.

6.2.19.2. **Response:** We are proposing an amalgamation of Duncombe and Montem Primary Schools, rather than closure of one of the schools because an amalgamation guarantees a place at the newly amalgamated school for all pupils from both schools and ringfences staff to roles within the newly amalgamated school. This will ensure that the amalgamated school keeps the strengths of both schools. The recommendation is that the amalgamated school keep the Duncombe name and Ofsted number because the financial position at Duncombe is more secure than Montem. This would mean that the newly amalgamated school opens in a more secure financial position, which will secure a viable, long-term future. Based on the feedback received, officers will recommend to the Duncombe Primary School governing board to keep vacancies open for representatives from Montem Primary School. A further recommendation will be that a joint parent group is established with representatives from both schools. All staff will be given the same opportunities to apply for roles within the newly amalgamated school.

6.2.20. Travel times [13 comments]

6.2.20.1. 13 respondents said they were concerned about the increase in travel time by moving from Montem to Duncombe and the impact this would have on children.

This was also raised at the consultation meetings on 15, 16, 21, 23 and 29 November.

- 6.2.20.2. **Response:** Duncombe and Montem Primary Schools are less than half-a-mile apart and data indicates that all existing pupils at both schools live within the Department for Education's maximum distance from home to school of two miles. However, help will be provided for any child that needs additional support for increased journey time and will also support those parents who think another school would be more suitable for their child.

6.2.21. Leadership [12 comments]

- 6.2.21.1. 12 respondents mentioned the leadership of both schools, and either raised concerns about the current leadership or were concerned that the proposal did not include a proposed leadership structure. Respondents also asked about the governance arrangements for the amalgamated school.

- 6.2.21.2. **Response:** At this stage, we cannot comment on the staffing structure or leadership arrangements for the amalgamated school as this can only be determined should a formal proposal be published.

6.2.22. Accessibility [7 comments]

- 6.2.22.1. Related to the ARP and SEND, some respondents raised the practical point of building accessibility, and specifically that Montem has lift access to all floors and Duncombe does not. They are concerned what impact this would have on disabled children. This was also raised at the consultation meetings on 29 November and 12 December.

- 6.2.22.2. **Response:** Whilst Montem does have a lift to access all floors, there are other factors which are detailed within the feasibility study which mean Duncombe is a more desirable option as the site for the amalgamated school. These include more children from across both schools being closer to Duncombe than Montem and also that Duncombe is located on a school street rather than a busy road. Should the proposal proceed, accessibility improvements will be made to the Duncombe site.

6.2.23. School name [7 comments]

- 6.2.23.1. Some respondents suggested that the school should have a new name and the amalgamation is an opportunity for this.

- 6.2.23.2. **Response:** Under statutory guidance, we cannot give the amalgamated school a new name as this would be considered a new school rather than an amalgamated school where the same Ofsted registration number will apply. Instead, the governing body can change the name of the school and may want to consider this should the proposal proceed.

6.2.24. Long-term plans [5 comments]

6.2.24.1. Five respondents asked about the long-term plans for the school site with suggestions including turning the school into a hospital or as a SEND school, including as the site for an expanded Samuel Rhodes school. Some asked if the building would be turned into accommodation and if so, whether the impact on local demand for school places had been considered. This was also raised at the consultation meeting on 16 November.

6.2.24.2. **Response:** Should the proposal proceed, we would seek to retain the Montem site for other educational or community purposes. We cannot determine this until a formal proposal has been issued when we can complete a full study. Current roll projections are based on all known building developments in the local area. The School Organisation Plan is working on the basis that our school estate remains resilient should demand increase in the much longer term, and this proposal will result in a two-form entry school on a site that has capacity for additional bulge classes as required.

6.2.25. Staff options [6 comments]

6.2.25.1. Some respondents left comments asking about how staff will be affected by the amalgamation and what options were available to them. They wanted reassurances around staff redundancies. Parents, carers, and community members at the consultation meetings were concerned that the proposed timeline does not give sufficient time for staff to apply for other jobs.

6.2.25.2. **Response:** We appreciate that more information would be welcomed by staff and parents in relation to the future of staff and that this proposal has created uncertainty for staff. However, it is too early to say as a formal staff consultation can only take place if the decision is taken by the council's Executive to agree the proposal. We will, however, seek to protect employment as far as possible for staff currently working at Duncombe and Montem Primary schools.

6.2.26. Parental choice [5 comments]

6.2.26.1. Five respondents said that they had chosen to send their children to Montem despite living closer to Duncombe because of the reputation of Duncombe. At the consultation meeting on 29 November, parents asked if they could choose to send their children to another school.

6.2.26.2. **Response:** Should the proposal proceed, all existing pupils at Montem will automatically be offered a place Duncombe Primary School. However, support will be made available to any parent who wishes to transfer their child to another Islington school.

6.2.27. Safeguarding [4 comments]

6.2.27.1. Four respondents raised safeguarding concerns related to a historical issue. It was also raised at several consultation meetings.

6.2.27.2. **Response:** We take safeguarding extremely seriously. This was an issue that pre-dates the current leadership of the school and was comprehensively dealt with at the time. We do not have any concerns about safeguarding and the safety of children at Duncombe Primary School.

6.2.28. School uniform [3 comments]

6.2.28.1. Three respondents mentioned school uniforms: one suggested that the school should have a new uniform to create a new school identity; one suggested the uniform should remain the same to save parents money; and one asked how parents were expected to afford purchasing a new uniform.

6.2.28.2. **Response:** School uniform policy is determined by the governing body. We understand that parents are concerned about any additional costs of purchasing new uniform, and where possible will seek to provide additional funding to mitigate this.

6.2.29. Community cohesion [2 comments]

6.2.29.1. Two respondents raised concerns about community cohesion and the impact amalgamating the two schools will have on gang-related activity.

6.2.29.2. **Response:** Although there are historical issues, we are not aware of any current issues.

6.2.30. Funding [1 comment]

6.2.30.1. One respondent said they believe the proposal is the only way to guarantee sufficient funding for the school. A participant also asked at the consultation meeting on 15 November if Duncombe and Montem Primary Schools were the only schools in deficit. Another participant at the meeting on 22 November recognised that amalgamation was the only way to create long-term certainty and ensure the amalgamated school had more resources. The public meeting on 12 December included a discussion about both schools' financial positions, the financial modelling used to justify the proposal, and the impact amalgamation would have on their financial position.

6.2.30.2. **Response:** The proposal to amalgamate Duncombe and Montem Primary Schools is to secure financial viability of the amalgamated school and reduce the fixed running costs of the amalgamated school as it will operate from one site. Existing pupil numbers will mean that the school will operate as a two-form entry school at capacity. Funding is based on pupil numbers, and this will therefore ensure the long-term financial viability of the school.

6.2.31. Equality Impact Assessment [1 comment]

6.2.31.1. One respondent said that the proposal had no equality impact assessment which is a legal duty on all public bodies and should consider the disproportionate impact this proposal will have on children with disabilities. This was also raised by a participant at the consultation meeting on 21 November.

6.2.31.2. **Response:** An equality impact assessment was produced alongside the proposal and approved by Islington's Executive. Further equality impact assessments will be completed and updated should the proposal proceed to the next stage. The assessment includes analysis of the risks for individual groups, and how these risks will be mitigated. A second Equality Impact Assessment has been completed and is appended to this report.

6.2.32. EYFS [1 comment]

6.2.32.1. One respondent asked about the Early Years Foundation Stage Provision (nursery and under-tuos) and whether this would continue at the amalgamated school.

6.2.32.2. **Response:** At this stage, it is too early to determine the structure or arrangements for the amalgamated school. However, we would be determined to ensure that existing educational provision remains in place at the amalgamated school.

6.2.33. Response from the Edventure Collaborative

6.2.33.1. A formal response was received from the Edventure Collaborative governing board which set out their reasons for why they disagree with the proposal. These were: they considered the feasibility study to be flawed, that the amalgamation is in name only, and the timescales for the amalgamation put vulnerable children at risk. Their proposed solutions were to: redo the feasibility study according to Islington's own published principles in the School Organisation Plan, recommend a genuine amalgamation, and extend the timescale for amalgamating the schools.

6.2.33.2. **Response:** The purpose of the feasibility study was to determine which site to host the amalgamated school based on the buildings and site condition, the financial position and running costs, location, and air quality and congestion. Both schools were scored by a panel of officers with different areas of expertise and the study determined that Duncombe Primary School would be the site of the amalgamated school. A redacted version of the feasibility study has now been published and is included as Appendix C. The local authority operates within the DfE statutory guidance 'Opening and Closing Maintained Schools' January 2023 where the process to amalgamate is set out clearly. Technically amalgamation does mean the closure of one school but it brings about the benefits from both schools whereas a closure does not require staff to be ringfenced from both schools and therefore can not be seen to draw from the expertise within both. We are proposing an amalgamation of Duncombe and Montem Primary Schools to ensure that the amalgamated school keeps the strengths of both schools. A recommendation will be made to the Duncombe Primary School governing board that they keep vacancies open for representatives from Montem Primary School. We will also recommend that both schools establish a joint parent group to ensure the amalgamation involves stakeholders from both schools. We are recommending that the amalgamation proceed on 31 August 2024 as proposed and is not extended

because any extension will present significant financial and reputational risks and prolong the period of uncertainty for the school community. We will provide additional resource to support the transition of pupils from Montem to Duncombe, and to support all pupils, including those with SEND or an EHC Plan. Completing the amalgamation by 31 August will safeguard the financial position of the school and help secure the school's long-term future.

6.2.34. YouTube video from Year 6

6.2.34.1. A Year 6 class created and shared a video outlining their views on the proposal: [A message to Islington Council Oak Class \(youtube.com\)](#).

6.2.34.2. **Response:** The contents of the video are noted and each point is addressed elsewhere in the responses.

7. The next steps

7.1. Based on the feedback received during the consultation we recommend that the Executive agree to issue a statutory notice of a proposal to amalgamate Duncombe and Montem Primary Schools on 31 August 2024.

7.2. If agreed, we will issue a formal statutory notice in accordance with the prescribed process. A draft outline statutory notice is included as Appendix E. A four-week formal representation period will follow once the full notice is published.

7.3. The timeline recommended to proceed with the next stage is set out in table 4.

Table 4: Timeline for next steps

Stage	Process and time required
Issue statutory notices	Following consideration of this report by Executive formal publication of notices stating council's intent to implement proposals
Formal Consultation	Four-week statutory representation period if the proposal is agreed to take place from 19 February to 18 March.
Determination	Executive to consider public report of the response received during the representation period.
Implementation	August 2024

7.4. Impacts and risks

7.4.1. Islington has a statutory responsibility to manage and make appropriate offers of education, within a reasonable distance, to all children affected by changes at their

schools. We need to do this in a way that safeguarded access to high quality education especially for vulnerable pupils and communities and those pupils with special educational needs.

- 7.4.2. We will identify the needs of the existing cohort at both schools, especially for those pupils with an Education Health and Care Plan (EHCP) and identify appropriate mitigation to ensure that the right levels of support are in place and aid a smooth transition. An Equalities Impact Assessment (EIA) has been completed and is at Appendix D.
- 7.4.3. The feedback from the consultation has highlighted key risks around the proposed timeline for the implementation of the proposal. If the proposal is agreed in April 2024 for implementation in September 2024. Work will be carried out to transfer all existing pupils, complete a staffing reorganisation, and for Montem to dissolve its existing federation arrangements. This risk has been fully considered and is balanced against the implications of an extended implementation date of September 2025 that would create prolonged financial vulnerability for both schools ultimately impacting on children and staff's wellbeing.
- 7.4.4. The proposed timeline presents risk due to the high number of children with SEND and EHCPs who will require additional support with transition to another school site, or with new children joining existing class groups. This risk will be mitigated through the implementation of a needs led SEND transition plan ensuring all children are supported.

8. Implications

8.1. Financial Implications

- 8.1.1. It is becoming increasingly difficult for schools to remain financially viable when pupil numbers are falling as most school funding is pupil-based in line with the School's National Funding Formula. Therefore, as pupil numbers decline, schools receive less funding. Per pupil funding in Islington is on average £5,700 depending on the characteristics of its pupils.
- 8.1.2. Individual school balances stood at £6.291m at the end of 2022-23, with 15 schools in deficit. School balances are forecast to reduce further over the course of this financial year, where more schools are projected to be in deficit. School balances in Islington have been in decline since 2018-19 when they stood at £11.732m. The main driver of declining school balances is falling pupil numbers alongside increasing cost pressures such as energy costs and pay.
- 8.1.3. Schools that are in deficit or are expecting to go into deficit are required to complete deficit recovery plans to bring their budget back into balance and eliminate their deficit within three years. This is becoming increasingly challenging for schools in the light of falling pupil numbers and increasing cost pressures and is a national issue.
- 8.1.4. If a school closes, the local authority meets the cost of any deficit balance from the General Fund, if the local authority does not retain contingency funds from the schools' block funding. Islington does not retain these funds. In the event of academisation, there are two scenarios: for convertor academies (those that voluntarily convert) the deficit is repaid to the local authority by the DfE and recouped from the academy; for

sponsored academies (forced conversion due to the school being assessed as inadequate) the deficit remains with the local authority to be paid from the General Fund.

- 8.1.5. Duncombe primary school began 2023-24 expecting to end the financial year with a -£130k deficit, however, current projections now indicate a £40k surplus, which would equate to a £170k in-year cost reduction compared to the original forecast. Based on the three year budget plans, however, the school is forecasting to re-enter a significant cumulative deficit in 2024-25, which will increase by the end of 2025-26 if nothing changes.
- 8.1.6. Based on the quarter 3 budget monitoring submitted by Montem primary, the school is projecting to end 2023-24 with a -£65k cumulative deficit. This indicates a £100k cost reduction when compared to the school's ratified budget of a -£167k deficit. Based on the three year budget plan the school is presently projecting to remain in deficit over the three-year budget planning period, ending 2025-26 with a significant cumulative deficit if nothing changes.

8.2. Legal Implications

- 8.2.1. Section 14 of the Education Act 1996 requires local authorities to provide sufficient schools for primary and secondary education in their area.
- 8.2.2. The Education and Inspections Act 2006, the School Organisation (Establishment and Discontinuance of Schools) Regulations 2013, the statutory guidance 'Opening and closing maintained schools' (January 2023), sets out the procedure for closure of schools.
- 8.2.3. The first stage consultation and the proposals set out in this report comply with the above legislation and guidance. The outline draft statutory notice at Appendix E will require completion in accordance with the Regulations and Guidance set out above.
- 8.2.4. In addition to the public sector equality duty, discussed below, the Children and Families Act 2014 and the statutory guidance 'Special educational needs and disability code of practice: 0 to 25 years' (January 2015) sets out responsibilities the council have towards children with special educational needs and disabilities. The proposed SEND transition plan will need to ensure that the council continue to meet these responsibilities and ensure the continuous provision of SEN support and the participation of children and parents in the decision making about their individual support and local provision.

8.3. Environmental Implications and contribution to achieving a net zero carbon Islington by 2030

- 8.3.1. Islington Council declared a climate emergency in June 2019, committing the council to work towards making Islington net zero carbon by 2030. A 10-year Net Zero Carbon Strategy, with action plans, was adopted by the Executive in November 2020. The implementation of the School Organisation Plan 2022-25 will be progressed in a manner that aligns with and supports the delivery of the council's ambitions for creating a clean and green Islington. Key environmental implications that the school organisation plan impact is:

- 8.3.1.1. **Improving the energy efficiency and reducing the level of carbon emissions of all buildings and infrastructure:** schools form a crucial element of our non-residential buildings and infrastructure net zero carbon workstream given their number, size, and distribution across the borough. Decarbonisation Feasibility Studies have already been completed for 22 of our schools with a further 14 taking place during 2022-23. The impact on the environment and the findings from these decarbonisation reports will be fully considered in developing plans, and where there are falling rolls in making better use of the spare capacity thereby optimising energy efficiency.
- 8.3.1.2. **Reducing emissions in the borough from transport:** Schools again can play their part in delivering on this priority. In proposing specific measures as part of school organisation planning, the implications on school journey distances, school streets and potential changes to vehicle journey numbers will be fully considered in consultation with schools and key stake holders.

8.4. Equalities Impact Assessment

- 8.4.1. The council must, in the exercise of its functions, have due regard to the need to eliminate discrimination, harassment and victimisation, and to advance equality of opportunity, and foster good relations, between those who share a relevant protected characteristic and those who do not share it (section 149 Equality Act 2010). The council has a duty to have due regard to the need to remove or minimise disadvantages, take steps to meet needs, in particular steps to take account of disabled persons' disabilities, and encourage people to participate in public life. The council must have due regard to the need to tackle prejudice and promote understanding.
- 8.4.2. A revised Equalities Impact Assessment was completed on 21 December and is included as Appendix D.

9. Conclusion and reasons for recommendations

- 9.1. This report recommends that the Executive agree to issue a statutory notice on a proposal to amalgamate Duncombe and Montem Primary schools on 31 August 2024, by closing Montem Primary School and keeping the Duncombe name and Ofsted number.
- 9.2. There was a high-level engagement with the first stage consultation process, with 778 respondents completing the online consultation questionnaire and over 400 people attending the consultation meetings.
- 9.3. The main themes emerging from the consultation were concerns that the amalgamation would impact negatively on children with SEND and that the proposed timeframe for implementing the proposal was too short, with not enough time for an adequate staffing reorganisation, or to adequately support children with transitioning from one school site to the other.
- 9.4. The proposal will also affect the Edventure Collaborative which would need to be dissolved and a new governing board established for Drayton Park Primary School.

- 9.5. We are recommending that the proposal proceed with an implementation date of 31 August 2024 due to the financial risks of a delay and to reduce the period of uncertainty a longer timeframe would cause.
- 9.6. Whilst we recognise and responded to the concerns raised by the proposal, the council must take assertive action to reduce the surplus capacity in the local area, and to support the financial viability of the school estate to ensure children have access to quality education. We will provide additional resource to support the transition, including a SEND transition plan for those children with special educational needs or an EHC Plan. We will also recommend the schools convene a parent group to support the transition.
- 9.7. We will support children and families on a case-by-case basis. Where children have an EHC Plan, we will need to amend and review those plans based on the change of school location. We do not anticipate any systemic challenges to this work.
- 9.8. Issuing a formal proposal will provide certainty and allow preparatory work for implementing the amalgamation to move forward, including completing a staffing organisation plan and staffing consultation, curriculum planning, and delivery of the SEND transition plan.

10. Appendices

- Appendix A – Consultation document on the Proposal on the Future of Duncombe and Montem Primary Schools
- Appendix B – Analysis of responses to the Public consultation
- Appendix C – Redacted Feasibility Study
- Appendix D – Equalities Impact Assessment
- Appendix E - Proposed outline statutory notice
- Appendix F – Individual responses – **Exempt from publication (exemption 2: Information which is likely to reveal the identity of an individual)**

Final report clearance:

Authorised by: Executive Member for Children, Young People, and Families

Date: 30 January 2024

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