

Informal Consultation on the future of Duncombe and Montem Primary Schools

15 November – 20 December 2023

Your views are invited on our proposal to amalgamate Duncombe and Montem Primary Schools on 31 August 2024 and keep the Montem school site for other education and community uses.

Give your views by completing our consultation online at www.letstalk.islington.gov.uk/duncombe-and-montem

You can also email your views to schoolconsult@islington.gov.uk

You must submit your response by **20 December 2023**.

Summary of the proposal

- Islington Council is proposing to amalgamate – or merge - Duncombe Primary School and Montem Primary School into one school due to falling pupil numbers and subsequent decrease in government funding
- If we proceed, the amalgamation will happen on 31 August 2024, with the school retaining the name Duncombe Primary School and operating from the existing Duncombe site
- All existing pupils at Montem would be automatically transferred to Duncombe Primary School, but we will support parents who wish to transfer their children to another school
- We are seeking your views on this proposal
- No decision has been made with a final decision made in April 2024 at the earliest

Introduction

Islington Council is seeking the views of parents and carers, staff, the local community, and other interested groups on its proposal to amalgamate, or merge, Duncombe Primary School and Montem Primary School into one school.

Across London, because of a falling birth rate and changes to the local population, pupil numbers are falling, and Islington is no exception. We want to ensure a sustainable future for our schools, and excellent education for our children so that they have the best start in life.

Schools with fewer pupils get less government funding which risks their long-term future and the quality of education. Duncombe and Montem Primary Schools both have falling pupil numbers. Because of this, we are proposing to amalgamate Montem Primary School into Duncombe Primary School which will bring together the identities and strengths of both schools under one roof and one name.

The amalgamation would mean these schools merging to operate from a single site, enabling them to make the best use of the staff expertise whilst securing the merged school's financial future. We are proposing that the school be called Duncombe Primary School and be on the existing Duncombe site.

By amalgamating, we can automatically move all existing pupils to Duncombe school meaning children at Montem won't have to apply for another school place.

This consultation gives information about why we have made this proposal and asks your views about it. We welcome your feedback on the proposal and will consider all views put forward during the consultation period.

Islington Council's Executive will decide whether to proceed with the proposal at its meeting on 8 February 2024. If it does decide to proceed, there will be a further period, known as the representation period, during which interested groups can express their views, before the Executive makes a final decision on the proposal in April 2024 at the earliest. The earliest date the amalgamation will take place is 1 September 2024.

Please read this information carefully and respond to our short survey before the closing date of **20 December 2023**.

Background

Islington Council is committed to putting children first and driving educational excellence through inclusive and sustainable schools. We have set out our mission in our Education Plan to ensure that every child, whatever their background, has the same opportunity and ambition to reach their educational potential in a good Islington school. We will equip and empower every child and young person who attends our schools and education settings with the learning and skills for life and the future world of work.

The amount of money a school receives is linked to how many pupils are in each class. As classes get smaller, the less money the school has. This can eventually affect the quality of children's education as schools have less money to spend on staff and resources. We need to manage this situation to ensure every child goes to a good school with a healthy budget.

When considering what action to take to reduce spare places we also consider other information about schools including the quality of education, their financial position, and the local context.

The proposal

We are proposing to amalgamate Montem Primary school into Duncombe Primary School on 31 August 2024 so that we can:

- make the best use of existing staff expertise across both schools
- guarantee a place for all existing pupils
- ensure the amalgamated school is financially viable in the long-term

Technically, based on Department for Education guidance, this is a closure of one school. However, in practice, the proposal would see Montem School join Duncombe School so that the strong community identity of both schools would not be lost.

This proposal would therefore allow both schools to continue together as one amalgamated school.

The amalgamated school will have space for 60 pupils in each new year group from September 2024 and with a total capacity of 585 from reception through to year 6 so that all existing pupils have a school place.

Should the proposal go ahead, all existing pupils at Montem Primary School would continue their education at Duncombe Primary School along with their classmates.

There will be no changes this school year.

Any pupil currently in Year 6 at Montem will complete their primary schooling at Montem Primary School.

Pupil projections and numbers

We plan for school places by dividing Islington into six different planning areas. Duncombe and Montem Primary Schools are in Planning Area 2: Hornsey.

Hornsey planning area

Hornsey is the area with the highest vacancy rate in Islington. Schools operate most efficiently when full or nearly full and any surplus places should be kept to a minimum.

In October 2022, there were vacancies of 23% in reception classes in this planning area, and in September this year, this increased to 32%. 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.

Pupil numbers are expected to decrease further in this planning area and across Islington.

Table 1: the number of vacancies by planning area

Vacancies by planning area for September 2023 based on offers	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%
Planning Area 6: Finsbury	300	70	23%
Totals	2,175	536	25%

The number of pupils at Duncombe and Montem Primary Schools

Montem and Duncombe are both based in large school buildings designed to accommodate more pupils than they currently have. Duncombe and Montem Primary Schools both have a vacancy rate of over 50% in reception.

Numbers at both schools have been falling. Table 2 shows the total pupil numbers at both schools from 2019 to 2023.

Table 2: Pupil numbers at Duncombe and Montem from Reception to Year 6 at October census each year

School	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Duncombe	359	355	353	340	313
Montem	310	280	271	262	270

School funding

School funding from central government is based on the number of pupils in school at the start of a new academic year.

For every unused place in an Islington primary school, the school is missing out on an average of £5,500 a year which has an impact on staffing and resources at the school.

A school with unused places is still required to fund the same level of fixed costs as a full school including the maintenance and operation of school buildings.

Duncombe and Montem schools both have high levels of spare school places, with pupil numbers set to reduce further. As a result, both schools are expected to experience budget deficits in the future. If we do not take action, this could lead to a decline in the quality of education for pupils at both schools. Amalgamating the schools will mean that there is then only one set of running costs, presenting significant savings.

Options considered

Amalgamation

One way to improve this situation is to amalgamate the schools so that all pupils are at one school. Both the Duncombe and Montem buildings can accommodate the number of children currently at both schools.

Table 3 shows the expected numbers in each year group in September next year, and how the combined total could be accommodated in one school.

Table 3: Projected Numbers for Amalgamated School in September 2024

School	R	1	2	3	4	5	6
Duncombe	28	29	43	47	59	49	39
Montem	27	28	45	41	46	30	36
Combined total	55	57	88	88	105	79	75

By bringing together both schools, we can also ensure the culture, learning methods, and school policies from both form part of the amalgamated school.

Reduce the Published Admission Number (PAN)

Each school must publish the maximum number of pupils it can expect. This is called the Published Admission Number - or PAN. Another way to manage falling pupil numbers is to reduce the PAN at Duncombe and Montem.

Duncombe has a PAN of two-forms (60 pupils in each year group) and Montem is due to reduce to a 1.5 form entry PAN (45 pupils in each year group) in September 2024.

Reducing the PAN of each school further to a one-form entry (30 pupils) is not a viable solution, as the schools would not have sufficient funding to pay for the running costs of the large buildings. Doing this would also lead to a higher level of deficit budgets in the future. This is because smaller, one-form entry schools are particularly vulnerable to changes in pupil numbers as they have less flexibility to group classes of 30 children.

Only by amalgamating can we be confident that there will be sufficient pupils in each year group to ensure there will be a healthy budget for a combined school.

What the amalgamated school will look like

The proposal is for the amalgamated school to be established in September 2024.

Montem and Duncombe Schools are an important part of the lives of the children and families who attend the schools, of the staff and of the local community. That is why we are proposing to expand Duncombe school in the higher year groups to make sure that the experience of pupils at Montem continues at a different site as both schools are brought together.

The headteachers of both Duncombe and Montem schools will work together with the Local Authority to plan the arrangements for the proposed amalgamated school, should the proposals be agreed.

The delivery of an excellent educational experience and making careful arrangements to support the transition would be at the heart of the planning. We know that the staff at both schools are highly regarded by parents and pupils alike and that they will want some reassurance about the future of staff. A formal staff consultation can only take place if a decision were to be taken by the council's Executive to agree the proposal and it is too early to offer certainty regarding future staffing arrangements. We will, however, seek to protect employment as far as possible for staff currently working at Duncombe and Montem.

Journey times

Many pupils live close to both schools and we hope it will not change their travel plans. More than 70 per cent of current pupils live within 1 km of Duncombe school, meaning most journeys are approximately a 10-minute walk.

Should any individual pupils live further away, or not want to make the alternative journey, we will support any application to move to an alternative school.

The Edventure Collaborative

Montem Primary School is part of the Edventure Collaborative federation along with Drayton Park Primary School.

Should this proposal proceed, the Edventure Collaborative Federation would only have one school left within it and 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 happen after the final decision has been made and before the new school year in September 2024.

The timelines

Informal consultation: 15 November – 20 December 2023

We will publish this consultation document and hold face to face consultation sessions with parents, staff, and the wider community.

Council decision on informal consultation: 8 February 2024

The council Executive will consider all responses to the consultation and then at its public meeting on 8 February 2024, it will decide whether to proceed with a formal proposal to amalgamate Duncombe and Montem Primary Schools.

Representation Period: spring 2024

If the Executive decides to proceed with a formal proposal to amalgamate Duncombe and Montem Primary Schools, there will be a second stage consultation that will run for four weeks in the spring.

Final Decision: April 2024

The final decision would be made by the council Executive at its meeting in April 2024.

If approved, the changes will be in place for the start of the school term in September 2024.

How to give your views

Give your views by completing our online consultation form at www.letstalk.islington.gov.uk/duncombe-and-montem

You must submit your response by 5pm on 20 December 2023.