

Children's Services  
222 Upper Street N1 1XR

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

Meeting of: Executive

Date: 18 April 2024

Ward(s): Finsbury and Hillrise

Appendices B and C to this report are exempt and not for publication

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

### 1. Synopsis

- 1.1. Islington, like several boroughs across London, is impacted significantly by falling rolls which is exacerbated by the cost-of-living crisis and Brexit which has contributed to an unsustainable school estate.
- 1.2. 46% of Islington's schools are projecting deficit balances by the end of 2025-26, which is presently forecast to total £12.798m. This is currently forecast to reduce the total schools' balances to a deficit of £9.154m. We must take assertive action to tackle these deficits because if we do not, the deficit will have to be absorbed by the council's general fund, putting additional pressure on an already stretched budget.
- 1.3. The reason reducing numbers of pupils is a problem is because each spare place leads to a loss in 2024-2025 of an average of £6,058 for primary school pupils and £9,015 for secondary school pupils based on the allocations to Islington's schools, which affects schools' ability to pay for staff, resources, and materials.
- 1.4. To strategically address this issue, in October 2022 the Executive agreed the School Organisation Plan as the strategic approach to managing school places alongside, the refreshed SEND strategy and the Education Plan, Putting Children First. The reason these reports were presented together was because it was recognised that securing a financially resilient school estate could not be achieved without also driving educational excellence through inclusive schools.
- 1.5. The objective of this paper is to recommend that Islington Council amalgamate Duncombe Primary School and Montem Primary School on 31 August 2024 on the existing Duncombe site. This would technically close Montem Primary School and guarantee all existing pupils from Montem a place at Duncombe Primary School.

- 1.6. This proposal forms phase two of the School Organisation Plan which is tackling the significant impact of falling rolls across the borough by reconfiguring the school estate to support schools to be financially viable. Islington, as 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, this is particularly true when considering the points made in paragraph 2.4.
- 1.7. Duncombe and Montem Primary schools are in the Hornsey Planning area that 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.
- 1.8. Both Duncombe and Montem Primary schools are two-form entry schools with the capacity for 60 pupils in each year group. However, both have a vacancy rate of over 50% in Reception meaning they are collectively losing out on over £300,000 funding for the Reception year alone. We expect these numbers to decline further in the coming years which threatens the long-term financial viability of both schools.
- 1.9. Because of their size, both Duncombe and Montem Primary schools have the capacity to absorb existing pupils from both schools and so amalgamating the two schools will considerably reduce overheads and running costs and create a financially viable school in the long-term and reduce the financial risk for the council.
- 1.10. We are recommending that Montem close and Duncombe be the site for the amalgamated school because: more existing pupils from both schools live closer to the Duncombe site; there are fewer schools nearby to Duncombe meaning parental choice would be reduced if Duncombe closed; and the Duncombe site is on a school street and has better air quality and lower Nitrogen Dioxide (NO<sub>2</sub>) levels.
- 1.11. The current financial position at Duncombe is more positive than at Montem. Duncombe Primary school is projected to end the current year with a £40,000 surplus and Montem is expected to end with a £243,000 deficit. Duncombe also has lower running costs than Montem, which will further improve its ability to balance its budget in the longer-term.
- 1.12. By amalgamating Duncombe and Montem, we can mitigate some of the challenges and risks around school closures, including guaranteeing all existing pupils a place in the amalgamated school should they want to, and ring-fencing staffing positions to staff from both schools. It also means the ethos, culture, learning practices, and policies from both schools can be incorporated into the amalgamated school.
- 1.13. Before amalgamating a school, a proposer must follow the Department for Education's statutory guidance '[Opening and Closing Maintained Schools](#)' January 2023 that includes a requirement to consult affected parties before publishing a proposal and then run a four-week representation period after publishing the proposal.
- 1.14. In this proposal, Islington Council, in line with DfE guidance, launched an informal consultation on the proposal from 15 November to 20 December 2023 before issuing a statutory proposal to amalgamate Duncombe and Montem primary schools on 27 February 2024. The representation period for the statutory proposal has now concluded. Islington Council is the decision maker for this proposal and the Executive must now decide whether to proceed. This report recommends that the proposal proceed with no modifications.

## 2. Introduction

- 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. Duncombe Primary School and Montem Primary Schools are both community schools and under Section 15 of the Education and Inspections Act 2006 (as amended by the Education Act 2011) and the School Organisation (Establishment and Discontinuance of Schools) Regulations 2013, Islington Council has the power to discontinue or amalgamate community schools in accordance with the statutory guidance for Opening and Closing Maintained Schools.
- 2.4. Before launching the informal consultation, the Executive required officers to complete a feasibility study to determine the site of the amalgamated school. This considered and scored factors around four categories: Buildings and site condition, financial position and running costs, location, and air quality and congestion. The feasibility study did not consider educational attainment as both schools are judged 'good' by Ofsted. Although there is a difference in outcomes at the end of Primary with Montem performing better, comparative results over the last three years published results, illustrate that both schools are performing at a similar level. Further, an amalgamation will ensure that both schools' culture, teaching practices, and policies can be incorporated into the amalgamated school, compared to a closure alone which would mean the identity of the closed school is lost.
- 2.5. The feasibility study recommended that the amalgamated school operate from the Duncombe site and keep the Duncombe name. This is because the site is cheaper to run, more existing pupils from both schools live closer to the Duncombe site, there are fewer schools nearby to Duncombe, the Duncombe site is on a school street, and has better air quality and lower Nitrogen Dioxide (NO<sub>2</sub>) levels, and the financial position at Duncombe is more positive than at Montem.
- 2.6. It is a statutory requirement to consult any parties the proposer (in this case, the Local Authority) thinks appropriate before publishing a proposal to amalgamate a school. In accordance with this requirement, we carried out an informal consultation on a proposal to amalgamate Duncombe and Montem primary schools on the Duncombe site from 15 November to 20 December 2023.
- 2.7. Information about the consultation 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. Translated versions of the consultation document were provided in Arabic, Bengali, Somali, and Turkish. The consultation was reported on in the local press. We organised seven meetings for parent and carers, including a meeting with interpreters, and a public meeting for the wider community.
- 2.8. Over 400 people attended the parent and community meetings where they asked questions and fed back their views and concerns.

- 2.9. A redacted version of the feasibility study was also published on the consultation webpage at the end of the consultation period on 19 December. This was provided for information purposes only and did not form part of the consultation documentation.
- 2.10. We received 786 responses to the online consultation questionnaire and 590 comments. We also received eight comments by email. The Trade Unions provided a joint response from four trade unions to the consultation.
- 2.11. 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.
- 2.12. Respondents were separately asked whether they had children at either school. In response to this question, 162 said they had children at Duncombe and 310 said they had children at Montem. In total this was 472 people, or 60% of the total responses.
- 2.13. 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% agreed, 3% neither agreed or disagreed, and 75% disagreed. 1% skipped this question.
- 2.14. Of the 310 respondents that said they currently had children at Montem, 4% agreed, 1% neither agreed or disagreed, 4% somewhat disagreed, and 90% disagreed. 1% skipped this question.
- 2.15. Of the 162 respondents that said they currently had children at Duncombe, 66% agreed, 6% neither agreed or disagreed, and 28% disagreed. 1% skipped this question.
- 2.16. These figures are in line with the responses and level of feeling we would expect when making a decision as difficult as this.
- 2.17. Having concluded the informal consultation process, the statutory process then requires the proposer to publish a statutory proposal within 12 months.
- 2.18. In line with the DfE guidance, 'Opening and Closing Maintained Schools', the Executive reviewed the feedback and comments received during the informal consultation and then agreed to issue a statutory notice at its [meeting on 8 February 2024](#).
- 2.19. The Monitoring Officer received a valid notice of call-in for this decision and in accordance with the Council's Constitution, the Executive's decision and the [call-in notice](#) were then referred to the Children's Services Scrutiny Committee held on 26 February 2024.
- 2.20. The call-in notice asked for the decision to be reconsidered based on five factors: the impacts of this decision on Drayton Park School have not been adequately considered; parents at Drayton Park School have not been adequately consulted; the needs of SEND students at Montem have not been adequately considered; the implications of this decision have wider ramifications for schools across the borough; and student numbers and financial pressures need considering in the round. The Children's Services Scrutiny Committee received representations from the Councillors who called-in the decision, and a reply from the Executive Member for Children, Young People and Families and council officers.

2.21. The Executive Member for Children, Young People and Families explained that there is not an option to do nothing and that a £15 million threat to the council could not go ignored, as ultimately it compromises our commitment to educational excellence through inclusive, financially viable schools. Each aspect of the call-in was responded to as below:

2.21.1. **Impact on Drayton Park school:** the proposal centres on the amalgamation of Duncombe and Montem Primary Schools and so the consultation focused on these communities. However, as Montem is currently federated with Drayton Park as part of the Edventure Collaborative; the leadership of the collaborative were aware of the proposals. The Edventure Collaborative would dissolve if the proposal was implemented, but this would create an opportunity to streamline the leadership at Drayton Park and address their own financial deficit and secure their long-term future.

2.21.2. **Parents at Drayton Park have not been consulted:** Drayton Park is in a different planning area and community, however, the public consultation meeting was extended to include Drayton Park parents/carers and governors, and we received responses from parents who said they had children at Drayton Park.

2.21.3. **The needs of SEND students at Montem have not been adequately considered:** The needs of all children have been considered, which included a focused meeting on SEND for parents and carers of children with SEND or an EHCP during the informal consultation on 4 December. There are similar levels of children with SEND at both Duncombe and Montem, and officers have developed a detailed SEND transition plan along with a dedicated SEND keyworker to support the transition for all children with SEND at both Duncombe and Montem.

2.21.4. **The implications of this decision have wider ramifications for schools across the borough:** the proposal will help reduce the surplus capacity by 45 places in reception and reduce the projected cumulative deficit of both schools to create a more resilient school estate.

2.21.5. **Student numbers and financial pressures need considering in the round:** Islington Council made a strategic decision to align its three plans – the Education Plan, School Organisation Plan, and SEND Plan - to ensure that the whole educational picture across Islington was considered. The School Organisation Plan adopts a consistent approach considering the number of empty places, the financial position, parental preferences, and the quality of education to identify which schools are prioritised and any proposals are considered within the wider local context. This strategic approach means that student numbers and financial pressures are considered in the round and that all children across the borough are at the heart of any decision making.

2.22. The Committee determined that it did not object to the decision of the Executive and the decision could therefore take effect as of 26 February 2024.

2.23. We published a statutory proposal on 27 February 2024 at our consultation website, Let's Talk Islington, along with a statement setting out: how copies of the proposal could be obtained; how anybody can object to; or comment on the proposal; the dates for the representation period, and the address to which objections or comments should be submitted. A brief notice was also published containing the website address of the full proposal in the [Islington Gazette](#) on 29 February and the [Islington Tribune](#) on 1 March.

- 2.24. The Representation period ran for four weeks, from 27 February to 26 March 2024. We received 15 representations during this period. The Executive should consider these representations in making its final decision.
- 2.25. Now that the representation period has ended, the final stage in the statutory process is to make a final decision. The decision maker can: reject the proposal; approve the proposal without modification; approve the proposal with such modifications as they think desirable; or approve the proposal, with or without modification, subject to certain conditions being met.

### 3. Recommendations

- 3.1. To approve the proposal to amalgamate Duncombe and Montem Primary schools on the Duncombe site on 31 August 2024.
- 3.2. To endorse the following commitments:
- 3.2.1. To provide early, dedicated, professional support as part of a comprehensive needs led transition plan for pupils with Education, Health, and Care (EHC) Plans to support all aspects of transition. Additional resources will be allocated to the Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) team to work with individual children and their parents/carers to support their transition should the proposal proceed.
  - 3.2.2. To facilitate a parent/carer group with representatives from both primary schools as part of the transition process to bring the two school communities together.
  - 3.2.3. That 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.
  - 3.2.4. That Schools HR will support any staff impacted by the proposed amalgamation.
  - 3.2.5. To support the cost of any new school uniform for displaced pupils, including pupils transferred to Duncombe.
  - 3.2.6. To provide additional capacity to the schools to support the amalgamation process.

### 4. Background

- 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. As a local authority, we have 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 local authority, 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 or amalgamation 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.
- 4.7. This was in addition to 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.
- 4.8. There is a need to significantly 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, after Pooles Park School, with the next highest vacancy rates in the Hornsey planning area.

## 5. The reasons for the proposal

- 5.1. Islington plans school places 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%
<b>Planning Area 2: Hornsey</b>	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%
<b>Totals</b>	<b>2,175</b>	<b>536</b>	<b>25%</b>

5.2. 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.

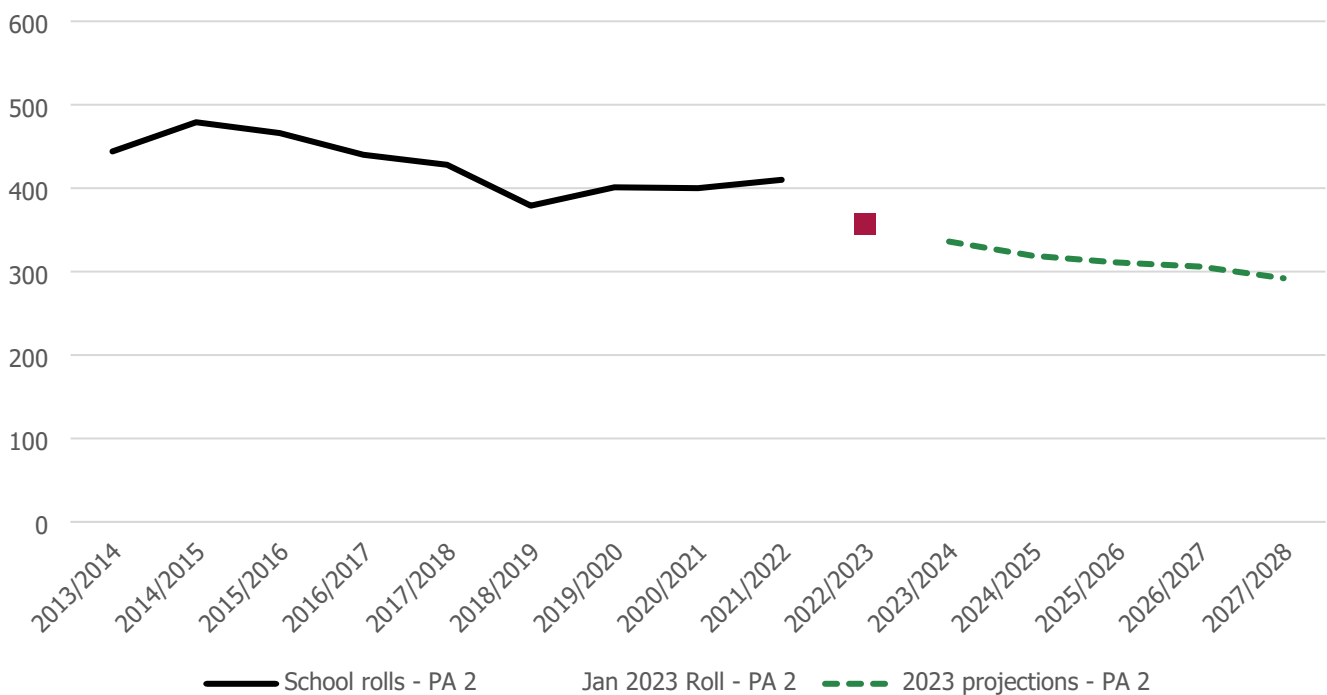
Table 2: Spare places by school in the Hornsey Planning area

School Name	Reception Published Admission Number	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
<b>Total</b>	<b>465</b>	<b>315</b>	<b>32%</b>	<b>2,542</b>

5.3. 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



- 5.4. 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.
- 5.5. 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.
- 5.6. 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.
- 5.7. 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.
- 5.8. 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:
  - 5.8.1. Buildings and site condition – both sites are suitable for an amalgamated school and can accommodate the required pupil numbers
  - 5.8.2. 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.
  - 5.8.3. Location – more pupils from both schools live within 1km of the Duncombe site and there are more neighbouring schools near Montem

- 5.8.4. Air quality and congestion – air quality is better at Duncombe and congestion is less as the site is on a school street
- 5.9. 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. Consideration was given to the quality of education, and educational outcomes across both schools over the last 3 years published results (excluding COVID) and the trend over time demonstrated that the Key Stage 2 outcomes for reading, writing and maths were very close across both schools. It is important to look at these results over time because one year in isolation cannot be seen to be a trend.
- 5.10. Based on the outcomes of the feasibility study, the proposal is for the amalgamated school to be on the Duncombe site because:
- 5.10.1. more existing pupils from both schools live closer to the Duncombe site
  - 5.10.2. 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.
  - 5.10.3. 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 (NO<sub>2</sub>) levels.
- 5.11. 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 the recommendation to retain Duncombe Primary School name is that the current financial position at Duncombe is more positive, meaning that the newly amalgamated school would start in a better financial position which will safeguard the financial position of the school and help to secure the school’s long-term future.

## 6. The representation period

- 6.1. We published a Statutory proposal to amalgamate Duncombe and Montem primary schools on 27 February 2024 online at <https://www.letstalk.islington.gov.uk/duncombe-and-montem>
- 6.2. In accordance with statutory requirements, the proposal included:
- 6.2.1. The name and contact address of the local authority publishing the proposal and the name, address, and category of Montem Primary School
  - 6.2.2. The date on which it is proposed to amalgamate Duncombe and Montem Primary Schools
  - 6.2.3. A statement explaining the reason for the proposal
  - 6.2.4. The numbers, age range, sex, and special educational needs of pupils at Montem Primary School
  - 6.2.5. A statement indicating that there is sufficient capacity to accommodate displaced pupils from Montem Primary School in the amalgamated school

6.2.6. A statement about the impact on the community of amalgamating Duncombe and Montem Primary Schools

6.2.7. A statement about the impact of the amalgamation on the balance of denominational provision in the area and the impact on parental choice

6.2.8. Details of length and journeys to alternative provision

6.3. The proposal also included a statement setting out how copies of the proposal could be obtained, how anybody can object to, or comment on the proposal, the dates for the representation period, and the address to which objections or comments should be submitted.

6.4. We published a notice about this proposal in the Islington Gazette on 29 February and in the Islington Tribune on 1 March and wrote to all parents and carers and staff informing them of the proposal and including a web link to the full proposal.

6.5. We arranged four meetings for parents and carers to discuss the proposal at Duncombe Primary School on 11 and 12 March and at Montem Primary School on 12 and 13 March.

## 6.6. Comments received and responses to concerns raised

6.6.1. There were 15 comments received during the representation period. Three respondents were in support of the proposal. 12 respondents were opposed to the proposal. Appendix C details the full responses received. The points below summarise the concerns raised and include the responses.

**6.6.2. Experience of Montem Primary School:** we thank respondents for taking the time to share their experience of Montem Primary School, both as former pupils themselves and as parents of current or former pupils. We understand that any discussion about closing or changing a school is emotive and difficult, and understand that it can bring back memories, for the whole school community. This is not a decision we have taken lightly, or that we want to take. But we must take action to ensure the long-term viability of all Islington's schools, and to ensure that children get the best education possible to set them up for the best start in life.

**6.6.3. SEND and the Montem ARP:** We have committed to additional resource to ensure a needs-led approach to all children with SEND including those in the ARP. All parents and carers will be supported to make the best decision for their child. We are proposing that the ARP is moved to Duncombe so that they move together with all other mainstream children at Montem. Duncombe is also in a more positive financial position, and it is particularly important that children requiring additional support are in a financially viable school. This will mean the ARP staffing and resources will move to Duncombe as well.

**6.6.4. Rationale of selecting Duncombe over Montem:** Duncombe was selected as the preferred site because more existing pupils live nearer to it, the air quality is better, it has a better financial position, and has lower running costs. There are also more schools closer to Montem, so closing Duncombe would reduce parental choice.

- 6.6.5. **Impact on Edventure Collaborative:** Montem Primary School is part of the Edventure Collaborative Federation. Drayton Park Primary School is the other school in this federation. 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. This is unfortunately necessary because the financial position at Montem is worse than at Duncombe, and we must ensure that the amalgamated school starts in September 2024 in a strong financial position.
- 6.6.6. **Alternative proposal:** our proposal is to amalgamate Duncombe and Montem primary schools by closing Montem Primary School and guaranteeing all pupils a place at Duncombe. During the informal consultation, we heard and received feedback from all stakeholders, including parents, pupils, and staff on the proposal before we issued a statutory notice to close Montem Primary School. We then invited comments on that notice during a further four-week representation period. We have considered the comments and feedback received and included a series of commitments to mitigate some of the concerns raised. The two consultation periods were the opportunity for stakeholders to offer an alternative proposal, but ultimately, we must take decisive action to prevent the financial failure of both schools and ensure the long-term viability of the entire Islington school estate as without the security of financial viability this will ultimately compromise the educational experience of children.
- 6.6.7. **Viability of other schools:** we absolutely understand that parents, staff, and pupils are concerned that we are in uncertain times and that the projected falling pupil numbers in the local area may cause uncertainty about the future of any other school that pupils transfer to. This proposal is part of our wider School Organisation Plan, which sets out our strategy for reconfiguring Islington's school estate to ensure the long-term viability of our schools. The School Organisation Plan was agreed at Executive in October 2022 alongside 'Putting Children First' Islington's Education Plan and the refreshed SEND Strategy. The reason they were presented together was to ensure that the implementation of the School Organisation Plan was considered alongside the quality of education. Without financial viability, the resources to sustain a diverse curriculum offer are compromised and this will ultimately impact on the quality of education pupils. Data projections are based on birth rates and a wide range of sources, including projections around local building plans. Where possible, we are keeping schools open which have the capacity and space to expand should demand unexpectedly increase. We are proposing to amalgamate Duncombe and Montem Primary schools and to guarantee all existing pupils a place at Duncombe because we believe doing so will create a viable two-form entry school with a secure long-term future. This will create certainty for pupils and staff who will work or study in a school with adequate funding.
- 6.6.8. **Staffing:** our HR service is preparing a new staffing structure in partnership with the leadership of Duncombe Primary School and all staff at both schools will be consulted on this new structure and will have an opportunity to have their say. Existing staff will have equal opportunity for all posts.
- 6.6.9. **Attainment:** both Duncombe and Montem Primary schools are rated 'good' by Ofsted and we are confident that combining both schools will ensure that all pupils continue to get a good quality of education in a financially viable, two-form entry school. In terms of attainment, results over time are similar at both schools: the KS2 average over three years at both Duncombe and Montem is 58% and the KS1 average over three years at

Duncombe is 55% and at Montem is 56%. By bringing the two schools together, the knowledge and expertise of both will create a better educational experience for the children.

- 6.6.10. **Timescale:** We want to limit the period of uncertainty for the whole community and need to act now to stop the financial deficit position from worsening and to enable the newly amalgamated school to open in September with a balanced budget. The timescale for the proposal, including the informal consultation and the representation period for the statutory notice, are in keeping with the government's guidance on opening and closing maintained schools.
- 6.6.11. **Support for Montem:** we are providing additional dedicated capacity to both schools to support the amalgamation process. This includes support from the Admissions team so that parents and carers are aware of the availability of school places in neighbouring schools should they choose not to take up a guaranteed place for their children in Duncombe. We have also committed to additional capacity to support the children with SEND who may struggle more adapting to a move. The reason we are proposing amalgamating Duncombe and Montem primary schools rather than just closing one school was so that the amalgamated school would capture the ethos and identity of both schools and benefit from the significant expertise across both schools whilst also creating a viable two-form entry school by bringing together pupils from both schools.
- 6.6.12. **School uniforms:** we will support the cost of any new school uniform for displaced pupils, including pupils transferred to Duncombe.
- 6.6.13. **School name:** under statutory guidance, when amalgamating a school, one school must close, and the other school's name and Ofsted number is maintained. As a local authority, we can't rename the school as this would be considered a new school, which we are not permitted to create. However, the governing body of Duncombe has the power to change the name of the school. We will suggest that the proposed parent/carer group discuss the name of the school with the governing body and, if appropriate, decide a new name that reflects the history of both Duncombe and Montem primary schools.
- 6.6.14. **The Montem building:** should the proposal proceed and Montem close the site must remain for educational use. We will consider options for alternative use so that the Montem building could remain as a community hub. We will potentially explore opportunities to use the building for a Family Hub working with the neighbouring Hornsey Road Children's Centre.
- 6.6.15. **Samuel Rhodes school:** Samuel Rhodes Special school is a separate school and is not part of this proposal.

## 6.7. Summary of meetings

### 6.7.1. Meeting on 11 March at Duncombe Primary School

6.7.1.1. Nobody attended the meeting at Duncombe Primary School on 11 March.

### 6.7.2. Meeting on 12 March at Duncombe Primary School

6.7.2.1. Twelve people attended the meeting at Duncombe Primary School on 12 March. Questions were raised about the future planning for the amalgamated school, and for more information on the support for children with SEND. Parents were concerned about

the speed of the amalgamation and how the transition will be managed in one term. They also asked if children from Montem could go to any other school, including Drayton Park Primary school. They wanted to know if any other amalgamations had happened before. Staff were concerned about how the proposal would impact their jobs and didn't previously understand that 'ring fencing' would require a full restructure.

6.7.2.2. Council officers spoke of the importance of establishing a parent/carer group with representatives from both schools to help plan the transition and the headteacher at Duncombe explained that they would hope to start welcoming children at Duncombe before September. Council officers also made clear that a thorough transition plan had been developed and additional resources allocated to support children with SEND.

### **6.7.3. Meeting on 12 March at Montem Primary School**

6.7.3.1. Twelve people attended the meeting at Montem Primary School on 12 March. Participants at this meeting asked about the planned location for the ARP at Montem and were concerned that Duncombe didn't have the capacity to accommodate the ARP or even enough space for all children, including in the dining room. They also asked about nursery provision and if the existing nursery provision would be moved from Montem to Duncombe. Participants also asked about Pooles Park and whether the council could guarantee that any school Montem pupils transfer to will not close in the future. They also wanted to know what admissions support they could get, including when moving sibling groups. They also asked about staffing.

6.7.3.2. Officers assured participants that any nursery provision will be as good or better than the current provision and that Duncombe has enough space and resource to accommodate all existing children from Duncombe and Montem, including the ARP. They explained that we would support all parents through the admissions process but guaranteed an automatic place for all children at Duncombe Primary School. Staffing would be decided through a separate staffing consultation.

### **6.7.4. Meeting on 13 March at Montem Primary School**

6.7.4.1. Thirty-two people attended the meeting at Montem Primary School on 13 March. Participants asked about the admissions process. A participant asked about the assumptions for class sizes, and whether there would be 45 or 60 places in each year group, and whether it was possible for all schools to operate as smaller schools. They were also concerned that the investment made at Montem over the years, including SEND provision, would be wasted if the school closed. They wanted to know what would happen to the Montem site if the school did close and would all sibling groups be guaranteed a place together in every school. A participant asked how long the Secretary of State will take to decide whether to close the school and had the council factored into their planning what would happen if not all children transfer to Duncombe. A participant asked if the ARP provision will be replicated with the same infrastructure.

6.7.4.2. Council officers explained that the proposal for the newly amalgamated school is that it is 2 Forms of Entry; 60 pupils each year group. To operate with classes under 30 pupils would create some financial pressures for the school as the staffing requirements would still mean that there is a staff teacher for each year group, and this would make the school financially vulnerable. The ARP resources will be transferred where possible to Duncombe Primary School. Officers explained that several options were being considered for alternative use so that the Montem building could remain as a community hub potentially exploring opportunities as a site for a Family Hub working

with the neighbouring Hornsey Road Children's Centre. They explained that the final decision on closure and amalgamation is made by the local authority, not the Secretary of State, and that the council is working on the assumption that up to two thirds of current pupils at Montem will transfer to Duncombe.

## 6.8. Impacts and risks

- 6.8.1. 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.
- 6.8.2. We have identified the needs of the existing cohort at both schools, especially for those pupils with an EHC Plan or with a social worker and have identified the appropriate mitigation to ensure that the right levels of support are available to them to support a smooth transition to Duncombe or another school. An Equalities Impact Assessment (EIA) has been completed and has been updated throughout the stages of this proposal. The latest version is included as an appendix.
- 6.8.3. The proposed timeline presents risk due to the high number of children with SEND and EHC Plans 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.

## 7. Implications

### 7.1. Financial Implications

- 7.1.1. 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. The 2024/25 average per pupil funding for Islington schools is £6,058 for primary school pupils and £9,015 for secondary school pupils based on the allocations to each school.
- 7.1.2. 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.
- 7.1.3. 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.
- 7.1.4. 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.

- 7.1.5. 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.
- 7.1.6. Based on the March 2024 budget monitoring submitted by Montem Primary, the school is projecting to end 2023-24 with a -£243k cumulative deficit. This is £100k worse than their Quarter 3 forecast. 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.

## 7.2. Legal Implications

- 7.2.1. Section 14 of the Education Act 1996 requires local authorities to provide sufficient schools for primary and secondary education in their area.
- 7.2.2. 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 amalgamation of schools, by way of a closure of one school. This requires a local authority to consult prior to publishing a statutory proposal to close a maintained school and for a four-week representation period starting on the date of this publication.
- 7.2.3. Decision makers must have regard to the statutory guidance when deciding proposals to discontinue a school. They should be satisfied that the requirements of the statutory process have been met and should have due regard to all the responses received during the representation period.
- 7.2.4. 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.

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

- 7.3.1. 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.



- 7.3.2. The amalgamation of the two schools is likely to have a positive environmental impact in reducing energy use from two buildings to one, which will substantially reduce carbon emissions and also consumption of materials that have an environmental impact.

## 7.4. Equalities Impact Assessment

- 7.4.1. 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.
- 7.4.2. A revised Equalities Impact Assessment was completed on 26 March and is included as an appendix.

## 8. Conclusion and reasons for recommendations

- 8.1. This report asks the Executive to approve the proposal to amalgamate Duncombe and Montem Primary schools on the Duncombe site on 31 August 2024.
- 8.2. This report also asks the Executive to make the following commitments:
  - 8.2.1. 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.
  - 8.2.2. To facilitate a parent/carer group with representatives from both primary schools as part of the transition process to bring the two school communities together.
  - 8.2.3. That 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.
  - 8.2.4. That Schools HR will support any staff impacted by the proposed amalgamation.
  - 8.2.5. To support the cost of any new school uniform for displaced pupils, including pupils transferred to Duncombe.
  - 8.2.6. To provide additional capacity to the schools to support the amalgamation process
- 8.3. There was a high-level engagement with the first stage consultation process but reduced engagement in the representation period.
- 8.4. 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. 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.

- 8.5. 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.
- 8.6. 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.
- 8.7. 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.
- 8.8. 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. Appendices

- Appendix A – Statutory Proposal to Amalgamate Duncombe Primary School and Montem Primary School
- Appendix B – Comments received during the informal consultation: exempt from publication (exemption two: Information which is likely to reveal the identity of an individual)
- Appendix C – Comments received during the representation period: exempt from publication (exemption two: Information which is likely to reveal the identity of an individual)
- Appendix D – Equality Impact Assessment on Statutory Proposal to amalgamate Duncombe and Montem Primary Schools

### **Final report clearance:**

Signed by:

Cllr Kaya Comer Schwartz

Leader of the Council

Date: 04 April 2024

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