

Informal meeting for New King's parents, with Q&A session

New King's Primary School

20 September 2013, from 9.00am

Notes of meeting and of questions raised by New King's parents on the implications of the proposed amalgamation of Sullivan and New King's schools.

Attending:

Miles Chester, Headteacher New King's Primary School

Andrew Fenwick, Chair of Governors New King's Primary School

Susanne Kelly, Deputy Headteacher New King's Primary School

Meeting was noted by Terry Broady, LBHF communications and information officer, for the questions and answers to be included in the report on consultation feedback and considered as part of the Council's decision making process.

Approximately 35 parents were welcomed by Headteacher Miles Chester (MC).

Chair of Governors Andrew Fenwick (AF) explained that the meeting had been arranged to give parents of New King's an opportunity to find out more about the proposal and to ask questions, this time in an informal setting.

AF outlined the background that had led to this consultation. He said that the governing body had seen great improvement over the last few years, largely in the last three, under the leadership of MC. He highlighted: a very good Ofsted report, good with outstanding features; New Kings top school in LBHF for pupil progress in 2012; very strong results for the Y6 group that has just left the school. The governing body had been very keen to continue this improvement and one idea was to explore conversion to academy status and coming out of LA control. The school was introduced to Thomas's, a group of independent schools with a terrific reputation, looking to partner a mainstream school. This partnership stood to enrich the core curriculum as well as extra-curricular provision.

The intention was to formalise that partnership, converting to academy status as Parsons Green Academy. When the LA was informed it was supportive of the proposal, but said it was looking at solutions to the problem of spare primary places in south Fulham primaries, as well as to a lack of secondary places. Ian Heggs, Tri-borough Director for Schools Commissioning, asked New King's to delay its imminent announcement of a consultation on moving to academy status in order for the LA to consult on a proposal to amalgamate the two primary schools. AF said that it was really a matter for the LA to answer questions on its own consultation, but parents may want to find out more and discuss any concerns in this meeting. AF said that New King's was keen to go ahead with the academy proposal whether or not the Council went ahead with the amalgamation proposal.

MC gave a short presentation, referring to PowerPoint slides. He said he intended to be brief, to give parents as much time as possible to ask questions. He provided a short outline of: the history and the timeline, of "where we are now" and plans for the future.

MC said there would be challenges if the amalgamation proposal went ahead: building bridges and bringing the pupils, teachers and community together. It would be a genuinely merged school, with a strong, combined leadership team drawn from both schools. Pupils would be the first priority, he said, and he outlined how the school would support the pupils through these changes.

He said that the potential changes had not been discussed with the children at New King's, but if and when the time came, the school would want to involve the pupils in designing the new building. There would be a considerable budget for the complete refurbishment, providing not only the less obvious but important things like a modern heating system and new windows, but also the complete refurbishment of classrooms, new specialist teaching areas and greener exterior space and playground areas - in short a great learning environment.

MC said that by partnering with Thomas's the school had developed a vision for the Parsons Green Academy - continuing to build on excellent academic results, developing an international focus based on the very latest educational research. There would be more specialist teachers and a particular focus on science and music in future.

MC concluded his short presentation, saying that the real purpose of the meeting was to hear the parents' views. He opened the meeting to the floor and invited questions.

The questions from the parents were largely about concerns around the implications for their children should the amalgamation proposal go ahead, leading to a Q&A conducted on an "If so, what happens?" basis, with several reminders from the panel that this was part of a consultation process and no decisions had been made. The answers noted below came mainly from Headteacher Miles Chester, with contributions from Chair of Governors Andrew Fenwick and Deputy Headteacher Susanne Kelly.

Q My son is in Y4, will be in Y5 next year, how will he be affected? How will he cope with the changes?

Good question. If the amalgamation proposal goes ahead, there will be disruption for both sets of pupils but we would do lots of work in advance to build bridges and ensure a smooth transition for all pupils. Don't forget that the children move with their classmates and their teachers. A great deal of planning will be needed, working on the curriculum and the needs of each individual pupil, especially support for children with special needs. We need to make sure we are well prepared; the key thing is that we want to make this an enjoyable and positive experience for the children.

Q Where will the children be taught at Sullivan, how will they be housed?

We would need to have temporary classrooms. There would be 'Portakabins', which you may think doesn't sound good, but in fact these temporary classrooms are very good these days. There is a lot of space at Sullivan and we have no concerns about accommodation, but we do recognise that we need to work on integration.

Q Would the children stay in the same groups or would they be mixed up?

The plan would be to merge the children from both schools as soon as possible, mix them by distributing them over classes. It is really important that the two sets of pupils are integrated and feel equal, that we have a consistent approach for all our children.

Q So existing classes would not stay together? Why not keep the children from each school in separate classes?

We feel we need to mix the children up, to build bridges and enable all the children to be happy in a truly merged school. We want to face the challenges head on, straight away, to unite us all and build a strong new integrated identity. We will, though, be careful about how we place the children in groups - there are strong friendships and we would want to keep friendship groups together. Class sizes would be quite small, 25 or so and in future the intake would go down to two forms of entry, 60 a year. The small numbers in each class will help us to put those class groups together carefully.

Q Would the children's teachers remain the same?

Yes, though that is a matter for a separate consultation about a reorganised staffing structure for the new school. If the proposal goes ahead, there will also be lots of opportunities for the Sullivan staff, who are very good, and I hope you will see a real mix of teachers from both schools.

Q How can the children all fit in? Will there be space at first in Sullivan and then how can it all be built on these premises, the New King's site? The Sullivan site is large - where is the space here for both schools and for sports?

There is classroom space at Sullivan and there would be good temporary classrooms on what is quite a large site.

I have seen the plans for the refurbished, built for purpose, New King's site. The buildings would be redesigned specifically for the larger number of classes. There is spare space - don't forget that ParayHouse would move out to a site more suitable for them and free up the top floor that we don't use at present. The funding is there to make this work.

The Sullivan external space is good; we will have to work hard to make sure we have good, green outdoor areas in place here, providing an opportunity to bring learning outside. We are planning that and we will be working closely with Thomas's on sports activities.

Q The main concern of all the parents is the proposed year on the Sullivan site.

If this goes ahead, we will call a parents' meeting to hear your concerns about the move, the disruption and the way it will affect your children's education. We will work on those concerns. We are keen to maintain the Y5 and Y6 groups as they are and we will benefit from a substantial budget that will allow very strong staffing levels and help us manage things smoothly.

Q Are you confident it will be done on time, in a year?

Architects are working on plans and we are confident, but we cannot have detailed conversations with the Local Authority until decisions are made.

(AF) There would be every incentive for the Council to help get New King's work completed on time as in turn it involves the readiness of the Sullivan site for the new free school. We understand your concerns and as a governing body we are keen to keep channels of communication open and to address concerns.

Q Is the aim to privatise in future?

At the moment we are a community school. That means some of the funding comes from the LA and it has a lot of say about our policies and how we use the site.

As an academy, funding would come from the Government. We would have flexibility and freedom. This would apply not only to our curriculum, but would allow us to source things such as payroll and IT support ourselves. Thomas's can help provide this managerial and administrative support and that would free up money for front-line teaching. None of the funding would come from Thomas's.

Changes would include a broadening of the curriculum, introducing a particular focus on science, and music, with new opportunities to learn languages, learn how to play a musical instrument, or take part in a wide range of sports.

It will be different, but it will not be a private school, we will maintain an inclusive, community-led ethos, but with the support of Thomas's.

Thomas's have been looking to open up their children to a London school environment, the partnership benefits work both ways. You may not be aware of this, but some of your children have already been working on their reading with Thomas's volunteers. Thomas's have provided us with the Glee Club, books and PE mats. They have asked for nothing in return.

Q Would the Muslim community have the chance to go to Fulham Boys' Free School as their local secondary school? Muslim girls can't access Lady Margaret.

We hear what you are saying, though Lady Margaret's admissions policy has improved and is now more accessible. The admissions policy of Fulham Boys' Free School (FBS), is published on their website. An equal number of places are offered to Christian families (faith places) as to boys of all faiths and none (open places). The Head of Fulham Boys' Free School (FBS) came to a secondary transfer meeting at New King's and he was clear that the school would be welcoming children from all faiths. He wants the school to be inclusive, with a good representation from all faiths.

Q Children in this area nearly all go to either New King's or Sullivan. As a parent, you consciously choose which one, but with this happening it seems choice doesn't matter, it won't be the same thing.

- The parent went on to express concerns about standards usually dropping when there are changes to schools. She stated that in her opinion it would affect the children's education, it was bound to with three years of disruption ahead. She said this was worrying all the parents.

I hear your concerns, but the vast majority of the children's friends will go with them, there will be continuity. I have read about drops in standards when two schools come together, but usually they are joining because one of those schools is failing and that is bound to affect standards at first. That is not the case here, these are two very good schools and by bringing them together we think standards should go up.

- The parent disagreed, saying that she thought the problem was change itself.

In this case there will be children and teachers they know and two very strong teaching teams. There really should not be a drop in standards. The social side of the integration will be really important.

- It will be better for Sullivan as they stay on their site.

It would have an impact on both sets of pupils. There would be bridges to be built as Sullivan pupils may feel that this change wasn't what they wanted. Research shows that most friends are made in the first two weeks. We think that with the right support the children will bond very quickly – it is likely to be more difficult for the adults. It will not be completely new for the children, there will be much that they know. We will put in all the support needed for each individual child.

Q How will you work with their teachers and other staff?

We cannot guarantee the detailed structure as that is subject to the consultation decision and to process. The vast majority of the staff of both schools will stay. There will, however, be only one Headteacher

AF clarified that Miles Chester would be the Headteacher, as Sullivan would be merged into New King's.

Q What about the nursery? Do you apply as usual?

Yes, all processes would stay the same at present and all the current children are guaranteed a place. If the proposal goes ahead, it would not matter which of the two schools a parent had applied to in that first year.

The number of places in reception would be maintained at 75 for the first year, so there would be opportunities for new children.

Q Possibly a minor issue, but would parents have to buy new uniforms, would uniforms change more than once if the new school becomes an academy?

It's not a minor issue at all; it is something we have thought about. We don't want there to be three sets of uniforms that parents have to find a way of buying, but we would want to introduce a change in September 2014, something new to unite us. We want that to be adaptable, worn throughout the process, perhaps with a change of badge. That would be the likeliest route, straightforward and affordable.

Q If it goes ahead, there would be many more classes, will you be able to put those in place over there (on the Sullivan site)?

Yes. The whole school would have a total of 20 classes, as now: 8 from New King's; 12 from Sullivan. We would mix the classes and use spare classroom space as well as high quality temporary buildings. We would make sure there is ample room, spaces of a reasonable size, good teaching environments. I want to reassure you that the children won't be squeezed in and there will be lots of familiar faces.

MC and AF closed the meeting as there were no further questions. They thanked the parents for coming and said they were happy to stay and talk to anyone who might have any other concerns or questions.