

## **Response to Hammersmith & Fulham Council's consultation on the proposal to amalgamate Sullivan and New King's Primary Schools**

By Greg Hands MP, October 2013

### **Background and Remit**

The Council wrote to me on 16<sup>th</sup> July 2013 seeking my views on this proposal, attaching the public consultation document.

At the outset, I should state for clarity that local schools' reorganisation is not directly the responsibility of the Member of Parliament however, it is only right that the Council has sought my view.

I have spoken with, or visited, many of the interested parties.

I met with a group of parents from Sullivan School on 12<sup>th</sup> August.

I visited Sullivan school on 6<sup>th</sup> September at the invitation of the Chairwoman of Governors, and spent an hour and a half at the school, discussing the issues with them and also touring the school and meeting staff and children. I was very impressed with the commitment and passion of the Head Teacher, the Chair of Governors and staff who I met on my visit.

I have also discussed the proposals with Council Leader Nick Botterill and with the Council Cabinet Member for Schools, Georgie Cooney.

I have also over the last two years or more been discussing with a separate group of parents their proposal to establish a "Fulham Boys School" (FBS), a Church of England voluntary-aided Free School for secondary age boys. I have been a supporter in principle of the school since it was first mooted in 2011, and rendered assistance with various matters, including with the Department for Education, although I was not approached by either FBS or the Council in advance of this proposed consultation, and have not previously been asked, nor have I given, a view on this particular choice of site for the Fulham Boys School.

### **Background on the shortage of school places in Fulham**

This proposal should be seen in the context of a chronic need to create more school places in Hammersmith & Fulham generally, and in Fulham particularly. Whilst there is strong need for primary places at this time, this need will change to secondary places in the future. Meanwhile, the demand for more primary places, according to LBHF figures, is more acute in north Fulham than South Fulham.

The cause of this shortage of places is clear. The then Labour Council in the 1990s, led by Cllr Iain Coleman and Andrew Slaughter, now MP for Hammersmith, embarked on a massive programme of school closures, at both primary and secondary level, and sites were disposed of cheaply to provide land, primarily for social housing estates. The Council at the time seemed blind to the possibility of school rolls going up again in the future. In Fulham, a number of primary schools like Sherbrooke, Beaufort House (Lillie Road), Harwood Road and Munster Schools were closed, and St Mark's secondary school was dealt the same fate. Indeed, the St Mark's site could today have been an ideal location for the Fulham Boys School. The Munster School site is now being used by St John's Walham Green, and their site has now been disposed of, largely for housing development. None of these sites can now be brought back into educational use, and hence the short-sightedness of the then Council leadership has made matters very difficult indeed today to increase the number of school places in the south of the Borough.

Across London, more than 240,000 new primary school places will now be needed. In Hammersmith & Fulham, there will already by 2014 be a shortage of 2.9% of places compared with pupils, according to the National Audit Office.

It is clear that more school places will be needed in the Borough in the coming years at both primary and secondary levels. The Council will have better access than I do to the precise numbers and optimal locations, but any proposal for a schools' reconfiguration will need to be assessed with this as the most important background factor.

### **The Need for a Boys Church of England Secondary School in Fulham**

There has long been an imbalance in secondary provision in Fulham for boys. The excellent London Oratory School serves Catholic boys. The improving Henry Compton School (now known as Fulham College) provides a county (i.e. non-religious) education for boys. Mixed sex provision is also available at Hurlingham & Chelsea, again an improving school. There is another excellent option for Church of England girls at Lady Margaret School, Parsons Green. In Hammersmith and Kensington, there is good secondary provision for Catholic girls.

There is, however, a glaring omission in secondary provision for Church of England boys. This omission has a profound effect on local Church of England primary schools, not only in Fulham (All Saints, St John's), but also further afield in Hammersmith and even in the Chelsea part of my constituency, where there is also no specific CE boys secondary provision. The number of boys at C.E. primary schools tends to fall as the cohorts near the time to leave, as some parents feel forced into choosing a different route for their boys when it comes to secondary education.

Given the strong general need to create additional secondary school places, as well as primary school ones, it seems common sense to try to create places for Church of England boys, to balance the provision at Lady Margaret School. It should be added that there is less need for additional primary places in south Fulham, with Langford also under-subscribed, yet an even more acute need for secondary places in the south of the Borough.

### **The two existing Primary Schools**

I have not had the opportunity to discuss the proposals with senior management, parents or governors of New King's School, and nor have they sought my view. I have not been inside the school in recent years, so I am not familiar with the interior or condition of the building itself.

I have visited Sullivan school on various occasions in recent years, notably summer fairs, and, as stated above, I was shown around the school by the Head Teacher and Chair of Governors in September. The school environment at Sullivan is superb, and they have facilities that would be the envy of many other local primary schools, particularly the outdoor facilities like play areas and the gardens. This is a rare example of an inner city school with quite extensive green areas. The Council states that the buildings, however, are "nearing the end of their useful life," although I understand that the school disputes this.

### **Demand for Places in the existing schools**

I note from the Council's documentation that both schools are under-subscribed overall. However, I also note that the figures used in the Council's consultation are a year out of date (and necessarily so, as the consultation began at the end of the previous school year), and that Sullivan tell me that their situation has improved. This may well be as a result of the demographic pressures outlined above. Figures the school gave me during my visit show them to be 89% full, and that reception has a full complement of 45 children. Nevertheless, I believe that both schools still have significant spare capacity (indeed, I do not believe that their reception classes are full), at a time when pressure will build on the Council to provide more places.

### **Conclusions**

1. In my view, the Council is doing the right thing to seek to urgently increase the number of school places in the Borough. Three new secondary schools have opened since 2010, partly as a result of the Coalition Government's agenda of creating more school choice. New primaries have also opened in the north of

the Borough, and a further new primary school is planned at Earl's Court. Nevertheless, it is the primary responsibility of the Council to ensure that, based on the known demographic projections, that there are enough primary and secondary school places in coming years and beyond, and to show foresight beyond that shown by the Council in the 1990s. I therefore applaud the Council's overall approach in seeking to expand school places, particularly in my Fulham constituency.

2. The very high land values in Fulham especially will make it very difficult indeed to find new sites for schools. Indeed, much of my dealings with the group of parents involved with creating the Fulham Boys School have centred around trying to find a site from Government land which is not in current use in the south of the Borough. Land prices are prohibitively expensive, and Government is obliged in its current financial constraints to find the best price wherever reasonably possible.
3. I am not in a position to evaluate whether there might be alternatives to the configuration envisaged by the Council with relation to the two primary schools. For example, I heard an alternative suggestion that New Kings School might merge into Sullivan on the Sullivan site, thereby freeing up the New King's site for the Fulham Boys School. I would urge the Council to ensure that this possibility be fully investigated, if it has not already been so.
4. With reference to Sullivan Primary School it would, in normal circumstances, be a pity to lose the green space around Sullivan. However, given the overwhelming demographic pressure to create new school places, a careful balance needs to be drawn between an optimal school environment and the pressing need for more places in the confined area of London SW6.
5. I remain strongly supportive of the Fulham Boys School and the need for boys C.E. secondary provision in the Borough.
6. Given the overwhelming need to create additional school places – 800 new ones for the Fulham Boys School alone will be created by this proposal – and if the Council can give assurances that other options and possibilities have been exhausted, I therefore support the detailed proposals outlined in the Council's consultation document.