

SOUTHWARK COUNCIL: PROPOSED AMALGAMATION OF ST JUDE'S PRIMARY AND CHARLOTTE SHARMAN PRIMARY

Response from Humanists UK, April 2024



ABOUT HUMANISTS UK

At Humanists UK, we want a tolerant world where rational thinking and kindness prevail. We work to support lasting change for a better society, championing ideas for the one life we have. Our work helps people be happier and more fulfilled, and by bringing non-religious people together we help them develop their own views and an understanding of the world around them. Founded in 1896, we are trusted to promote humanism by 120,000 members and supporters and over 115 members of the All-Party Parliamentary Humanist Group. Through our ceremonies, pastoral support, education services, and campaigning work, we advance free thinking and freedom of choice so everyone can live in a fair and equal society.

CONSULTATION QUESTIONS

Question One: Please tell us whether you support/do not support the proposed amalgamation of St Jude's Primary and Charlotte Sharman Primary.

Do not support the proposed amalgamation of the schools.

Question Two: If you support the proposal to close please outline why.

N/A

Question Three: If you DO NOT support the proposal to close please outline why.

Effect on child's education

Well-being of child(ren)

Effect on employment

Effect on local community

Other (see below comments)

We are deeply concerned about the proposal to amalgamate Charlotte Sharman Primary – a school with no religious character – and St Jude's Church of England Primary, and replace both with a new voluntary aided (VA) faith school. It is undeniable that as both schools are facing falling roll numbers, a solution needs to be found to address the issue of overprovision, however this proposal would see the loss of the only school of no religious character in the St George's ward despite it being the school with the higher number of pupils (162 compared to 79 at St Jude's). From these figures it could be concluded that Charlotte Sharman, the school with no religious character, is the preferred choice among parents in the local area. The decision that any merger would lead to the new school retaining its voluntary aided and Church of England status appears to run contrary to this.



On religious education (RE) the proposal states that 'all schools, irrespective of whether they are church, community, or maintained, must teach religious education'. This, of course is true, but it fails to make clear that a voluntary aided school – which the outcome of the proposed merger would result in – can teach this in line with the tenets of its religious character. This is also the case with Relationships and Sex Education (RSE). A proposed merger that leads to the replacement of a school with no religious character with a Church of England VA school could see the loss of inclusive, non-denominational RE and RSE with an education underpinned by one religion being taught in its place.

The proposed amalgamation could have a significant negative impact on the employment and promotion of teachers and other staff currently at Charlotte Sharman who may be looking to continue in the new school. Department for Education guidance states that the governing body of a VA school 'may give preference with regard to the appointment, remuneration and promotion' to those staff whose faith matches the tenets of the school's religion, who attend religious worship in accordance of those tenets, and who are willing to teach RE in line with religion of the school.¹ Important details about the leadership of the merged school – alongside the ownership of the Charlotte Sharman building and school assets after the merger – are also missing. The full proposal states 'at this stage there has been no decisions made about a staff structure' and there is no information about who the senior staff of the merged school would be. Consultees are therefore being asked to comment without the full facts.

This proposal does not reflect the immediate local community. According to the Census, 38% of the population of St George's ward, where both schools are located, ticked 'No religion', 37% 'Christian', and 13% 'Muslim'. In other words, 67% are not Christian. And this is among the all-ages population – among children and their parents, the population will be significantly less Christian, more non-religious, and more Muslim. Furthermore, a petition from the National Education Union states that 'over 50% of the children in our school [Charlotte Sharman Primary] are Muslim and a further 17% have no faith'. Nor does the local community appear to support the proposed amalgamation, with 83 of the 112 respondents to Stage One of the consultation against the plans to amalgamate. Rather than working with the community the proposal appears to be going against its views while also being unreflective of the religious makeup of it.

The proposal states that 'Church of England schools welcome pupils, families and staff from all faiths and none' but fails to acknowledge the points above about the curriculum and employment, and that voluntary aided schools can select 100% of their pupils based on religion if they are oversubscribed. This proposal could mean local children lose out when it comes to getting a school place. Furthermore, St George's ward is listed as one of the most deprived wards in the Southwark

¹ DfE (2021), 'Staffing and employment advice for schools', https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1026591/Staff_Advice_Handbook_Update_-_October_2021.pdf, p27.



borough. Recent studies from the Sutton Trust² and the Education Policy Institute³ have also found that faith schools are less likely to admit children from disadvantaged backgrounds. We are therefore also concerned about the impact of any merger on children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

For more details, information, and evidence, contact Humanists UK:

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² Humanists UK (2024), 'Sutton Trust: Faith schools admit fewer disadvantaged pupils than other schools', <https://humanists.uk/2024/01/11/sutton-trust-faith-schools-admit-fewer-disadvantaged-pupils-than-other-schools/>

³ Humanists UK (2024), 'Education Policy Institute: disadvantaged pupils 'less likely to be admitted' to faith schools', <https://humanists.uk/2024/02/09/disadvantaged-pupils-less-likely-to-be-admitted-to-faith-schools/>

