

School Informal Consultation Feedback Report
Our Lady's Girls' Catholic High Schools Admissions Alterations Proposal
May 30th 2023

Report compiled by Dr Helen Jenner, Independent Consultant, appointed by Our Lady's Catholic High School Governors, to support the consultation process.

Introduction

This report summarises the planning undertaken to lead to a public consultation, and the responses to that consultation, which considered a proposal that:

The Governors at Our Lady's Catholic High School, with support from the Diocese of Westminster and Hackney Local Authority, wish to consult on a proposal to admit boys to the school.

The proposal to move to consult on this possibility was agreed by governors on March 24th at a Full Governing Body where key issues were fully considered.

Background

The Governing body of Our Lady's Catholic High School has been aware of the impact of changing demographics on the school's population over several years. They recently appointed Mr English as Headteacher and his strong leadership is leading to strong momentum to build the school community, strengthen the school's sustainability and ensure excellent teaching and learning throughout the school.

Governors are aware that girls attending Our Lady's Catholic High School have brothers who would attend the school, but are not able to. In addition, there are boys in the area who have to travel further than they would like because there are limited numbers of boys' places in the area.

The school has a PAN (Published Admission Number) of 120 and is not currently filling those places.

Governors believe that transition to a co-educational school will help maximise resources that support children's learning, will increase the school's popularity and that, with careful planning, the transition should address concerns but move forward smoothly, with no loss to the school's values or Catholic purpose and that the amalgamation will support the school improvement journey, leading to higher outcomes for both boys and girls.

Having a mixed school would also better prepare our young people to lead their adult lives in the mixed-gender world they will encounter as adults. This promotes respect, modesty and understanding between genders.

The Governing Body has considered equalities issues and concluded that there would be no significant impact for any particular group. They are mindful that some children with

additional needs or disabilities may need additional support to understand the proposal and its implications.

The change would be implemented over time, with boys joining the school as they move from primary education.

As children in primary schools are already taught in mixed environments, it is unlikely that any individual child or vulnerable group will face difficulties. However, some sports and PSHE (Personal, Social, Health, and Economic Education) sessions, as well as changing facilities, will remain single sex.

Governors Planning

A consultation document¹ was prepared, and along with a letter² from the Headteacher and Chair of Governors were placed on the school website on April 26th 2023. The consultation ran from April 26th – May 26th 2023.

Parents and staff have been sent regular updates about the proposal and meetings they can attend to express their views.

The consultation document explains a variety of ways for parents, staff and other stakeholders to contribute their views on the proposal:

1. You can use the response form (or any other written format) at the end of this document to record your views.
2. There is a box in the reception area at school where you can leave your comments, response forms and any questions.
3. There will be a staff meeting specifically to discuss the proposal to which local unions have been invited.
4. There will be an open meeting for parents at school on the evening of Thursday, 4th May 2023. The Headteacher will present the rationale behind the proposal and with the Chair of Governors and Independent Consultant will be available to answer questions.
5. The online Parent Forum scheduled for Friday, 5th May 2023 will focus on the proposal.

¹ Website link for consultation document

<https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSfJWU74DzPUIgkikUcibtubd1h6-cg5LKcUJroWzJitA0CVuQ/viewform>

² Website link for letter

<https://ourladys.s3.amazonaws.com/uploads/letter>

6. A further “zoom” virtual feedback meeting with our Independent Consultant, Dr Helen Jenner is open to all stakeholders on Monday, 15th May 2023 at 5pm.

7. School staff will work with the School Council to create age-appropriate ways of consulting with our children on their views as part of the school curriculum.

8. Staff and parents are welcome to approach the Headteacher and senior leadership team for informal discussion around the proposal.

In addition, governors prepared a set of Frequently Asked Questions ³ which was published on the website and added to during the consultation process.

Consultation Responses

Parents meeting , 4th May.

The meeting was attended by over 40 people, these were mainly parents but also included young women attending the school and senior staff members. The Vice-chair of Governors and the Independent Consultant attended.

Notes were taken by the independent consultant.

Mr English, speaking to a presentation outlined the governors’ rationale in proposing the move to become a co-education school. He made three key points:

1. The values, morals and outcomes of strong Catholic Education would not be compromised. The Westminster Diocese and Local Authority are supportive of this proposal.
2. Becoming a mixed school would benefit boys in the area, including brothers of girls attending the schools, and would maximise the amount of funding focused on learning and increase the future financial resilience of the school.
3. Many other schools have changed to become mixed schools because this gives greater opportunity to prepare our young people to develop into men and women who respect and value each other as they share an understanding of how Catholic values and education can positively shape their adult lives.

He stressed the importance of feedback from parents and young people to help the school with its improvement journey and to manage change positively. He invited parents to make comments and responded to them fully. Where parents would like further discussion Mr English recommended they either speak to him after the meeting or contact him separately.

The key comments made during the meeting were:

³ Website link for FAQs

https://docs.google.com/document/d/1xT_c8LQ0RXoqCD0BkH_2B-lggkKKvwoD7ChdrU3CheY/edit

1. Parents understood the need for change but asked that time could be put into planning carefully for transition. Mr English thanked them for this and explained that meetings such as this are a good opportunity to hear from parents to help the school with this planning.
2. Some parents were concerned that there could be an impact on behaviour and/or learning. Mr English said standards of behaviour and attitudes to learning in the school are already good and improving, this will not be compromised. There will be no lowering of expectations.
3. Parents were pleased that children were being involved in discussions through the School Council.
4. One parent (Year 8) raised that they had accepted a place in a single sex school and felt the changes should not happen whilst their child was at the school.

Feedback from Coffee Morning

On Friday, May 5th, the headteacher, Andy English, led an online coffee morning for parents hosted by the school. Ms. Beccy McKinney, the Vice-Chair of Governors, was also in attendance, along with four parents. During the meeting, the Headteacher explained that the introduction of boys would be done gradually to minimise disruption. He also mentioned that the school would work with other schools that have successfully transitioned from girls-only to coeducational settings. The Vice-Chair of Governors, Beccy McKinney, explained that the decision to consult with parents was driven by what is best for the school given the decline in pupil numbers and the decline in demand for girls single-sex education and not a knee-jerk reaction.

One parent raised concerns about parents who prefer girls-only schools being denied the opportunity, as there is only one other girls-only school in Hackney. The parent also mentioned how parents from different faiths would find the school appealing. Mr English explained that several single-sex schools across Hackney and London have become coeducational in response to changes in family preferences.

The headteacher reassured parents that the school would remain inclusive and true to its core values and Catholic ethos even as it admits boys building on its existing strengths.

Feedback from Virtual Meeting, 15th May

19 Parents joined the online meeting, as well as Mr English, the Chair and Vice-Chair of governors and Dr Jenner.

Parents who spoke expressed their support for the school, stressing particularly the very caring attitudes of the majority of staff. Several of the parents who joined expressed some concerns about change processes whilst recognising that changes were needed.

Key points raised included a desire to keep the school as a girls' school but, if this was not possible, to be certain that the transition was as smooth as possible. Whilst recognising the quality of care in the school and the progress students make, parents want to see the outcomes for students improving and believe this will help with recruitment.

Parents asked about uniform and the name of the school and hoped they would be involved in discussions regarding these. They would prefer not to simply be told in an email.

Clarity was sought about in-year admissions and Mr English re-assured parents that boys would not be admitted to year groups through in-year admissions until the year group was one that was co-educational from Year 7. The school and governors are keen to ensure no girl currently attending has to transition to being taught in mixed classes. The change will be managed over time to ensure it is smooth.

One parent raised whether by inviting boys to join the school more girls would be denied places. Dr Jenner explained that because of the demographic changes this was very unlikely.

Staff Briefings

A staff briefing was held before the consultation was launched on 25th April, staff were advised of the consultation meetings and they and union representatives were invited to a meeting on 28th April.

Staff Meeting

Fifty staff members attended. The Vice Chair and Chair of Governors were in attendance. Staff made the following comments which were added to the FAQs :

They sought re-assurance regarding terms and conditions.

They sought re-assurance that the School would remain Catholic.

They sought re-assurance that the ethos, values and aims of the school would not change.

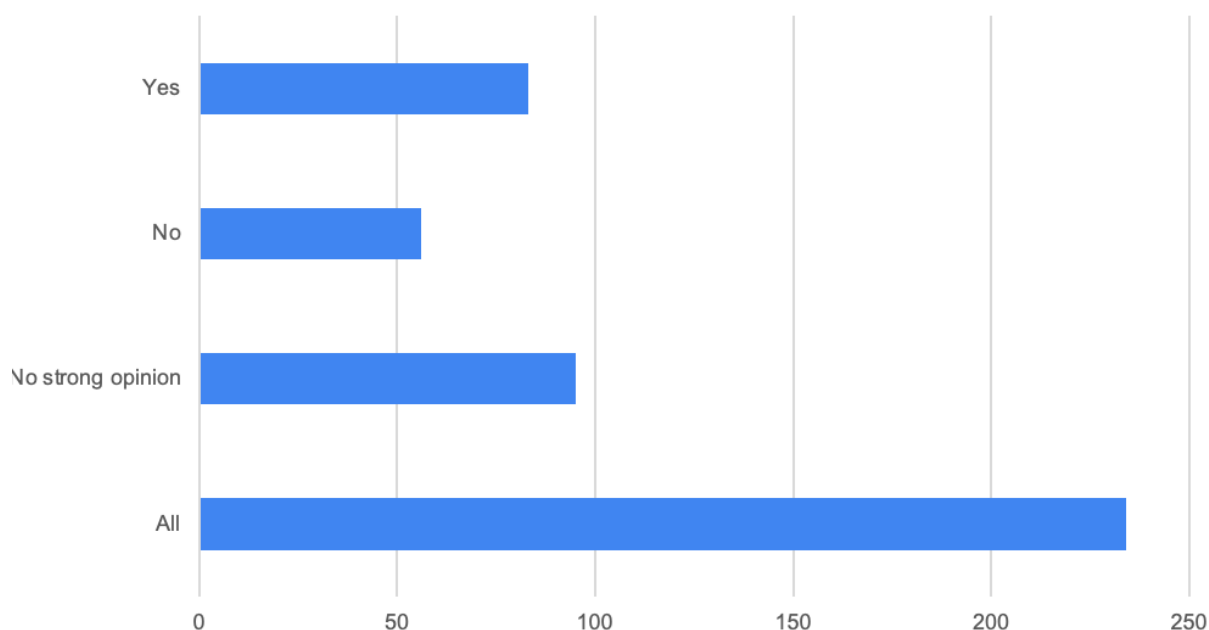
Mr English was able to give assurance on each of these aspects.

The staff were strongly in favour of the change.

Student Feedback

234 students responded to the pupil online survey. Their overall views of the proposal are summarised below.

Student Views Overall



The numbers of students completing the survey varied between year groups:

Year 7	31	Year 8	25	Year 9	50	Year 10	42	Year 11	59	Year 12	12	Year 13	15
No strong	8	No strong	9	No strong	17	No strong	22	No strong	27	No strong	4	No strong	8
No	7	No	7	No	16	No	8	No	13	No	3	No	2
Yes	16	Yes	9	Yes	17	Yes	12	Yes	19	Yes	5	Yes	5

In favour of the changes, girls raised the desire to be a more diversified community, the opportunities for boys and girls to understand each other, the opportunity for boys to attend the school, and the financial resilience it would bring the school.

Those students who are not supportive of the changes are concerned that the values of the school might be reduced, that being in mixed groups may be distracting.

They also raised the fact they had the opportunity to choose a girls' school and future students will not. A few girls suggested that becoming co-educational might reduce the number of girls who choose to attend the school.

There are mixed views about changes in name and school uniform. Older students tend not to think changing school uniform for their final year(s) is sensible financially. Several students raised the need for adaptations, particularly toilets.

There are mixed views around whether including boys will improve or detract from learning behaviours. This is true for those with no strong opinion as well as those who were in favour. As one Year 7 girl in favour of the move to co-education commented:

“it will require stringent discipline so as to curb future arrogance of the boys”,

Another from Year 10 with no strong opinion recognised that the changes would mean: “Young people from both genders will be able to receive a good education”. A Year 11 student who is not in favour of the proposals recognised that there are benefits: “It can help students prepare for the future in the workplace, as they will have to work in cohesion with both sexes.”

Responses do show that girls are able to see the benefits and risks of the proposals and welcomed the opportunity to express their opinion. It will be important for governors to feedback specifically to students who contributed to the survey.

The headteacher also held meetings with students in all year groups.

Students were mostly very positive about the changes. Those who were not were mainly concerned with the timeline of implementation, uniform changes, name change, whether the school will remain Catholic and whether boys will join their classes through in-year admission.

The headteacher assured students that the ethos and values will remain unchanged, that there will be consultation with students regarding change to uniform; that the school will remain Catholic, building on its strengths; that boys will be admitted in September 2024 at the earliest and the learning experience of existing students will not change because lessons will remain girls only for them. Mr English explained that boys will be introduced in year 7 only building up overtime and that boys will not be admitted to exiting girls only year groups.

Electronic Responses

45 online responses were received, two people submitted two responses each.

Of the 43 respondents to the online survey 9 were from students at the school, 11 were from school staff members, 21 were from parents, 1 from a teacher at another school and 1 from a governor.

7 of the students responding on-line were positive about the proposal, 2 were not. Reasons for positivity included: “it will make us competitive and strive harder” and the increase in diversity. The student who was not supportive felt that it is unnecessary to change and reduced the options for girls-only provision. Students sought clarification on name changes, time scales and uniform changes.

All the staff saw the proposal as positive and welcomed governors’ commitment to securing the future sustainability of the school. Some specifically welcomed the opportunity to serve the whole Catholic community and felt co-education is a more modern approach to education. A few raised concerns about the costs in rebranding which they considered un-necessary and two stated they would prefer not to have a name change. Staff are already considering implications and are keen to ensure changes help drive improvements with minimal additional cost.

The teacher from another school and the governor were positive about the proposals.

The views of the 21 parents who responded online were mixed.

7 responses were positive, 11 were not. 3 responses were ambivalent recognising the benefit and rationale, but also indicating risks. A number of parents who were not positive were clear that they had specifically chosen girls' only schools for their daughters and wished Our Lady's to remain as it is. They are concerned that becoming co-educational will not maintain the ethos and values of the school, and may impact on behaviour in the school. A few expressed a view that they would not want their daughters to remain at the school if it becomes co-educational. Some of these parents are specifically concerned about sexual harassment risks. Parents who saw the move as positive thought that it would help young people develop social skills, allow boys and girls to mix and increase the sustainability of the school.

Responses from other stakeholders

During the consultation period officers from the Local Authority have held discussions with the school and provided data to support the consultation process, and advice on timescales for Statutory Notices and Cabinet decision processes.

The Catholic Diocese planned to meet with the school on 26th May, this has been postponed to June. They will support the school to move to the next formal stages of their request. Additional pupil numbers data for Hackney was requested by one Headteacher, this will be included in the Statutory Notice papers.

Letters giving in principle support have also been received from the Local Authority and the Headteachers at Skinners and Gladesmore School. Both Skinners' School and the Local Authority asked that equalities impact assessments should be included in the next stages of consultation.

Feedback to stakeholders

It is recommended that this Consultation Summary and the FAQs be posted on the school website and the link be emailed to parents, staff and other stakeholders, including the Local Authority.

Overview of the independent consultant

The schools' governing body have taken their role in ensuring fair and thorough consultation seriously and ensured all views are heard, and queries answered. Data from the Local Authority supports the need for more boys provision in the area.

There is a positive response to the proposals. Staff are strongly supportive. The majority of parents, particularly those with boys welcome the change. Most pupils are supportive.

Some parents have concerns that they would prefer their daughters attend girls schools, but would like boys to attend mixed schools. They recognised that there are a reducing number of single gender schools. Some feel this is a good thing, others feel that it is reducing parental choice.

Parents are clear that the school has been through a lot of change and expect this change to be well managed and carefully monitored. They feel that the leadership of the schools is stronger and that they can approach the Headteacher and senior staff if they have any concerns.

Parents were concerned that if the uniform should change this would be expensive for families, the school have considered this carefully and will provide financial support.

By introducing the change by only changing admissions from Year 7, governors have been sensitive to the girls who have places they requested because the school is single sex. No girl whose parent applied to a girls' only school will be expected to be in a mixed class. New Year 7 children will be joining the school from mixed primary classrooms.

Although the parents' meetings, and some written response show there are some parental concerns about the impact of the changes, senior staff and governors have responded to these and committed to monitoring and responding if there are negative impacts, these are not expected. Parents appear confident to raise their concerns and committed to continuing to do so.

Staff and unions have not raised concerns, nor have linked stakeholders. The Westminster Diocese have discussed, and are supportive of, the proposal.

Governors have taken careful consideration of key concerns from parents, and equalities impact considerations, and established a clear process for monitoring the effectiveness of the transition to ensure there is no negative impact from the change and to monitor that values, vision and outcomes improve further to guarantee the best possible Catholic Education for the community.

I can see no reason why this proposal would not progress to Statutory Notice.

Dr Helen Jenner
Independent Consultant
Supporting Our Lady's High School