

30 October 2024

School Place Planning Consultation

Response from the Anglican (Church of England) Bishop of Portsmouth, Rt Revd Dr Jonathan Frost to the Isle of Wight Council's consultation proposal to close three Church of England Primary Schools at Arreton, Brading and Oakfield.

In the strongest possible terms, I wish to resist the proposal to close Arreton, Brading and Oakfield CofE Schools for the following reasons, which should be read in conjunction with the responses of the schools and the DBE to this consultation:

1. *The damage which will be caused to deprived and vulnerable communities:*

Through its Church Schools the Church of England makes a significant contribution to the common good, to social capital and to the flourishing and economic well-being of rural communities. Our headteachers are community leaders, working closely with local clergy, lay leaders (paid and volunteer), in serving communities, their infrastructure and the well-being of residents – regardless of whether they worship at one of our churches.

Support for families, children and older people through the social outreach of our churches and church schools is at the heart of our vision to serve the whole community. There is an ecology involved here: our rural schools, like other key community providers, contribute significantly to the flourishing and future of rural communities.

I am well aware of the Department for Education's presumption against the closure of rural schools, particularly in regard to securing 'the best interests for educational provision in the area'. I remain unconvinced that the justification for closing two of our rural schools (Arreton and Brading) is secure. A decision for closure will undoubtedly be appealed. I would draw your attention to the submissions from the DBE and individual schools. However, I would like to add a wider diocesan perspective:

- (i) I believe there will be damaging, unintended consequences on the wider economies of the affected communities.
- (ii) There is an unfounded presumption that families in each of the communities proposed for closure possess the finance and mobility to transport children to other schools. This is transparently not the case.
- (iii) I am particularly concerned by the likely fragmentation of communities and families in areas of deprivation. As you will be aware, and as the submissions from the DBE and individual schools make clear, two of our schools (Brading and Oakfield) serve some of the most deprived communities on the Isle of Wight. I am simply not convinced that the ramifications of closure have been recognised and fully worked through in relation to these contexts.

I strongly urge a reconsideration of these proposals for closure.

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2. The disproportionate impact upon Church of England schools and a reduction in parental choice:

Should the schools close, parental choice in regard to their children's education will be permanently impacted. Removal of parental preference for a CofE school is particularly relevant as parents on the Isle of Wight routinely choose schools away from their place of residence (there being no catchment areas on the Isle of Wight).

I consider the proposal to close three church schools of the six named is disproportionate. The CofE school estate amounts to 27% on the island yet 50% of the proposed schools for closure are Church Schools. I note the DFE's guidance (Opening and Closing Maintained Schools; (OCMS)), which states: 'In deciding a proposal to close a school that has been designated with a religious character, decision makers should consider the effect that this will have on the balance of denominational provision in the area (p39)'.

The proposal to close three Church Schools was not discussed in advance with my colleagues on the DBE.

3. Destination schools:

For two of the Church Schools named in the paper, the suggested destination schools are not Church Schools. For the record, closing Oakfield CofE Primary would remove the only Church School in Ryde, where there are four other schools without a faith designation.

The position of my education team regarding the proposed closure of any Church School across the diocese (including the mainland) is not 'blanket' rejection. We may be minded to support the closure if an alternative CofE destination school is available.

4. Use of schools after closure:

It is profoundly unhelpful that the consultation on proposed school closures has been conflated with the articulation of possible uses of the schools after closure.

At the public meetings, and the meetings with school staff, my DBE colleagues reiterated that we had no prior knowledge of the names of schools earmarked for closure until the working day before the Headteachers and Chairs of Governors were informed. In both contexts they underlined their surprise at hearing specific detailed proposals for the use of our schools should they close. This situation alone should cause the Isle of Wight Council to reconsider its proposals and come to the table with previously trusted partners.

The use of land vested in the Diocesan Board of Education is not a matter for the Council to determine. Any use of our land and schools would have to be approved by the DBE and in this case with the support of the Diocesan Bishop. In the absence of consultation, I cannot imagine a situation where I would give my support.

Surely it will be in partnership that we will find ways through the financial challenges faced and recognised by all those who work in the school system on the Isle of Wight. To

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reiterate: any future use of our land and schools, should they close, is for the relevant diocese and DBE to discern after it has received details of any deeds, covenants and legally binding ‘reverters’.

5. Increased SEND provision:

I welcome the proposal to increase SEND provision on the Isle of Wight. This will positively impact the well-being (including the financial well-being) of children and families, especially where the children are having to travel to the mainland for specialist daily or residential provision.

I was therefore dismayed to see our three CofE schools named, as they already deliver specialist, well received and integrated provision for children with SEND.

My education team will be delighted to work with the local authority to expand such provision in all three of our schools in specific and creative ways. I am confident that a way can be found to address the question of surplus places, build on proven SEND provision, and which achieve demonstrable financial benefit for the council.

6. Concerns around the application of criteria:

I am concerned about the application of the criteria and the data used in determining the three CofE schools identified for proposed closure. More detail in this area is included in the submissions of the DBE and the three schools (which should be read together with this submission).

The rationale for the schools identified for closure is less clear and transparent than I believe it needs to be. For example, there is an inconsistency in the rationale given for different schools. In this context, pupil outcomes and school achievement data have been used to justify a proposal for closure. However, I am unconvinced that schools are being compared on a like-for-like basis. Each of the schools named for closure have a high proportion of pupils with Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs), Free School Meals, and Looked-After-Children. Progress metrics have not been used – although I am aware that they reveal a different picture.

It is my understanding, that when schools are causing concern (DfE publication: ‘Schools Causing Concern’) it is the Regional Group and Regional Director, acting on behalf of the Secretary of State, that would decide whether a school should close for reasons of standards and pupil outcomes. This is a separate issue to addressing surplus school places.

The DfE publication, OCMS, states that the following criteria should be used for school closure (although we accept, not limited to):

- there are surplus places elsewhere in the local area which can accommodate displaced pupils and there is no predicted demand for the school in the medium to long term;

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- it is to be amalgamated with another school;
- it is no longer considered viable;
- it is being replaced by a new school (as sections 10 and 11 provide for).

Standards are not mentioned in the above list.

Of particular concern is that schools identified by the LA as potential destination schools for children also have poor data and/or have been assessed as 'Requires Improvement' by OFSTED. It would seem inappropriate and highly questionable to close a school on the basis that its performance is inadequate, yet recommend destination schools in a similar position. In fact, one of our named schools (Arreton) has moved from an Ofsted grading (as was) 'Inadequate', and in receipt of a Directive Academy Order, to an Ofsted 'Good' (as was).

I am advised by my professional education colleagues that there would potentially be a case to refer the proposed closures to the Schools' Adjudicator, as well as appealing the decisions if progressed, to the Secretary of State for Education. Such action is absolutely not my preference, as this would further delay resolutions that are required for the flourishing of all children and families on the Isle of Wight, through addressing the question of surplus places.

For all the reasons above (1-6) I would urge a pause, for significant reconsideration. My diocesan education colleagues would be delighted to meet with key Council officers and councillors representing our communities, to seek a long-term solution that involves all schools on the island, but which secures the future of our three Church named schools.

Yours faithfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jonathan Portsmouth". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial 'J' and a long horizontal stroke underneath.

**The Rt Revd Dr Jonathan Frost
Bishop of Portsmouth**

Cc: Jeff Williams, Director of Education jeff.williams@portsmouth.anglican.org
Ashley Whittaker, Director of Children's Services ashley.whittaker@iow.gov.uk
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Appendix

A) Background:

The Church of England was the first provider of free education in this country, and its historic contribution to the education of children of 'all faiths and none' is recognised nationally. The first Church schools to be opened in England date back to 1813, although informal education for children (and adults) was an essential part of the church's service to the nation prior to this point. The Church of England is the largest provider of education in the country, and is a respected partner with government nationally.

The Church of England's Vision for Education ([link](#)) is equally relevant and impactful in a pluralist 21st century. It is summarised in the strapline: Deeply Christian, Serving the Common Good (2016). This vision has been developed and extended in the document Our Hope for a Flourishing Schools System 2023 ([link](#)).

The Church of England's vision is to see the education system promote life in all its fullness and flourishing under four headings:

- **Educating for wisdom, knowledge and skills:** enabling discipline, confidence and delight in seeking wisdom and knowledge, and developing talents in all areas of life.
- **Educating for hope and aspiration:** enabling healing, repair and renewal, coping wisely when things go wrong, opening horizons and guiding people into ways of fulfilling them.
- **Educating for community and living well together:** a core focus on relationships, participation in communities and the qualities of character that enable people to flourish together.
- **Educating for dignity and respect:** the basic principle of respect for the value and preciousness of each person, treating each person as a unique individual of inherent worth.

B) The Isle of Wight Context:

Records show that the first formal school on the island dates to 1836 (Brighstone Primary). The Church of England's contribution to the life and fabric of communities, in a large part due to our presence in the education sector, continues to this day.

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The Diocesan Board of Education (DBE) has worked closely and positively with the Isle of Wight Council over many years as it has responded to changing demographics, re-structuring of age-ranges and changing needs.

For example, in the recent past, the establishment of St Francis CofE/RC school was a result of our cooperation in the re-organisation of schools in Ventnor. The use of our land and desire to work collaboratively, saw the establishment of Christ the King CofE/RC College.

In September 2018 the DBE stepped in to facilitate the creation of The Bay all-through school, after the Academies Enterprise Trust decided to close Sandown Bay Academy (formerly Sandown High School). This action would have seen hundreds of secondary students dispersed across the island.

In 2019 the DBE collaborated with the Local Authority and DFE in the re-structuring of Yarmouth, Freshwater and Shalfleet, and the closure of All Saints' School, to enable a new build and rationalisation.

The examples above illustrate that the DBE and its bishops of Winchester and Portsmouth, are not of a fixed view that their schools must never close. Indeed, over the past ten years, the DBE has collaborated with Local Authorities in the amalgamation or federation of schools, and indeed, the closure of three schools when the case is fair, secure and no other options are possible.

The three CofE schools proposed for closure have deep and important historic links on the island, having been established in 1843 (Brading), 1845 (Oakfield - with its new building in 2017) and 1873 (Arreton). Closing these schools would have a significant impact on the economies and flourishing of communities involved.

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