

Questions and Answers

on the proposal to close St Mary's C of E
Infant School from public meetings held
on 1st May 2025

May 2025

Overview

Two public meetings about the proposal to close St Mary's C of E Infant School and transfer its pupils to Puttenham C of E Infant School were held on 1st May 2025 at Shackleford Village Hall. One meeting was held at 2pm to allow parents to attend before school pick up times and the other at 7pm to accommodate those unable to attend in working hours. Across the two meetings, 70 people attended. Of these, 15 were current or former St Mary's parents/carers, 15 were Puttenham parents/carers, 12 were current or former staff members, 26 were local residents and 13 selected other. It should be noted that some attendees selected multiple options.

Panel

Julia Katherine – Director – Education and Lifelong Learning – Surrey County Council

Sarah Jeffery – Service Manager – Education Place Planning – Surrey County Council

Alex Tear – Director of Education – Diocese of Guildford

Matthew Rixson – Deputy Director of Education – Diocese of Guildford

Paul Kennedy – CEO – Good Shepherd Trust

Anna De Filippis – Head Teacher – Puttenham C of E Infant School

Valerie Elliott - Head Teacher – Surrey Oaks Federation (St Mary's CE Infant and St James CE Primary)

Lizzie Geffen – Chair of Governors – Surrey Oaks Federation (St Mary's CE Infant and St James CE Primary)

Summary of presentations at the meeting

Julia Katherine welcomed everyone to the public meetings and advised that they were being held to consider the future of St Mary's C of E Infant School. Julia went on to say that it was important that everyone had all the information that they needed to consider the proposal, and the council wanted to hear everyone's comments, feedback or suggestions.

Sarah Jeffery then explained why this proposal is being made. Sarah advised that, in recent years, Surrey has been experiencing a significant fall in pupil numbers. In Surrey, the height of our pupil population in primary schools was in 2016 and since that time, the number of pupils starting school in Reception classes has fallen by more than 12%. This is the equivalent to their being 56 fewer classes in Reception across Surrey in September 2024 than there were in September 2016. Furthermore, the birth rate is continuing to drop in Surrey and 2023 was the lowest number of births since the 1980s, so the number of children starting school is also going to continue to fall for the next few years at least.

This all means that there are simply less children in Surrey, and so, a lot of our primary phase schools are now operating with classes that are not full. Schools receive money from central government based on the number of pupils they have on their roll and so schools with a high number of vacant or unfilled places have less funding. This presents a difficult challenge to all schools, but that challenge is heightened for small schools and for our small schools, economies of scale mean that even a small reduction in funding can have a huge impact.

In Surrey, our goal is to ensure that no one is left behind - that every child can access a high quality of education and has the opportunity to experience a wide range of learning opportunities. This is only achievable when schools can admit as many children within their Planned Admission Number

(PAN) as possible to maximise the funding they receive. The leadership team at St Mary's, along with the council and the diocese, have explored every avenue available to secure the funding that the school need year on year to keep providing the good quality of education that it provides to the children it teaches. You will be aware the school entered into a Federation with St James' to capitalise on opportunities for shared leadership and shared resources. The staff at St Mary's have also explored different ways of organising the school, such as teaching in mixed age classes to minimise the expenditure required. However, the reality is that the number of pupils attending the school remains too low to secure the funding necessary to keep the school running.

In early 2025, the number of applications for Reception in September 2025 were reviewed and in light of this, discussions began with school leaders at St Mary's about the future of the school. The initial intention was to explore all options of school organisational change with the school community and launch a consultation in the summer term of 2025 on a range of options for September 2026.

Unfortunately, news of the discussions became public, and before any proposal was made, families chose to leave the school. Whilst we appreciate that the late-stage proposal is not helpful for staff or families, the local authority's hand has been forced by families moving their children, reducing the number of pupils at the school by 65% and leaving only 14 pupils in Years Reception and One, with a maximum intake of 6 for September 2025. This makes delivery of education provision very difficult.

Following Sarah, Alex Tear advised that the Diocese is the owners of the school site and buildings. Alex went on to advise that within the Diocese, the Board of Education are responsible for the school site and buildings. Currently, the future of the school site has not been discussed as they do not know the outcome of the consultation. At this stage, the Diocese is unsure what the school site will be used for in the future. Although, it is important to note that any proceeds made from the site can only be used for Church of England education in the future across the Diocese. Once a decision has been made on the consultation, the Diocese can discuss the future of the site further with any interested parties.

Paul Kennedy, CEO of The Good Shepherd Trust, explained that Puttenham C of E Infant School can offer an option where the St Mary's pupils can stay together. The Good Shepherd Trust and Puttenham realise that they are not the only solution in terms of available school places, but the resource and space is already in place. They are unable to say what the offer would look like exactly at this stage because it is dependent on how many pupils would transfer from St Mary's if the school was to close.

Lastly, Sarah Jeffery discussed the next steps. Sarah advised that we are currently in the consultation phase, and it genuinely is a consultation - we want to hear from as many people as possible. Once this stage of the consultation is finished, all responses will be read and analysed. The analysis will be presented to Clare Curran, Lead Cabinet Member for Children, Families and Lifelong Learning at the end of May to agree whether to proceed with the proposal, change the proposal or stop proceedings. If it is agreed to proceed, there will be a further representation period/statutory notices: this is a legal notice we must serve in order to implement the proposal. This stage gives everyone another option to respond. Once this stage is closed, any further responses received will be analysed. The Leader of the Council will then make a final decision in early July. If agreed, the school will close 31st August 2025 and the St Mary's pupils left on roll will automatically be transferred to Puttenham C of E Infant School for September 2025.

Questions and answers

There were several questions submitted ahead of the meeting, and questions asked at the meetings in person. For ease of review, we have grouped these questions thematically. If any questions were repeated, we have strived to provide one definitive answer.

Pupil numbers and pupil projections

	Question	Answer
1	The National Planning Policy has increased the Waverley housing development numbers significantly. Have these been included in the projected forecasts?	Yes, all housing plans from the district and borough planning authorities are fed into our forecasts up until 2033-34 currently. Experience suggests that the number of houses subsequently built is lower than advised and household occupation is taking a while. The number of vacant places at other local schools is sufficient to cover any projected increases in pupils.
2	What data shows Shackleford's birth rate dropping compared to other local villages? What has gone wrong, the school was oversubscribed 5 years ago?	In terms of Shackleford, there has always been a proportionately low number of children living in the village. For a significant time, St Mary's has not been fully populated by pupils who live in Shackleford on its own. The school has been supported by overspill from other areas such as Godalming or Guildford in past years. However, the low birth rate across the county has created a 'buyers' market' for families as most schools now have availability which means families have more choice and are likely to get their first preference. In turn, St Mary's are no longer benefitting from an overspill. The school currently only has 1 pupil attending who is a Shackleford resident.
3	Have Surrey County Council considered migration as part of the forecasts? How are so many houses being built if there are no children.	Yes, migration is a component of our forecasts and has therefore been considered. Currently, the main issue with housing that we are experiencing is that houses are being built but are taking a long time to be occupied. The number of pupils generated by new housing is therefore much lower than one might think.
4	To what degree has children coming out of the private sector into the state system been considered?	It is difficult to include this into our forecasts as we can't necessarily quantify the impact until it happens, however it has been considered. In Surrey, we have not experienced the influx of pupils from the private sector that we were told we might get. Where applications have come in, the pupils have been accommodated in existing school spaces, and we have not had to commission any additional places to cater for pupils leaving independent schools. Furthermore, Surrey has a very large independent sector with a wide range of independent schools with varying fees. This has made it very easy for the independent sector to absorb children moving schools children moving schools within Surrey.
5	There are lots of new nurseries opening so that must mean there are more children who will need a school place in the coming years?	The reason we are seeing an influx of new nurseries is due to the new Government entitlement which has meant the uptake of nursery places has increased. This means that although the population may be decreasing, the proportion of them who are taking up childcare places has increased greatly, meaning an increase in numbers, whereas these children may have previously been looked after at home.

School Organisation at Puttenham

	Question	Answer
1	<p>There are concerns around the temporary 3-year increase to class sizes at Puttenham. It's unacceptable to increase class sizes. What additional support will be put in place to ensure teachers and pupils are supported?</p> <p>Will they be taught by an existing Puttenham teacher? Or will a teacher from St Mary's move over with them? Will they have a teaching assistant?</p>	<p>Class sizes at Puttenham CE Infant will not go above 30 – this is the infant class size in law and infant classes (that is, Year Reception, Year 1 and 2) cannot go above 30 pupils in a class. Puttenham's proposal is to use their spare classroom to accommodate a fourth class, which is in addition to the three existing classes. A new teacher and teaching assistant will be employed for this class. The St Mary's pupils will be in a mixed year group but will mix with Puttenham students for things like break time. There will only be minor change for Puttenham's current pupils and families.</p>
2	<p>Puttenham's proposal to teach the St Mary's pupils in a separate classroom altogether does not work. It feels like the St Mary's pupils are an afterthought.</p> <p>How will you ensure the children moving will be fully integrated into the school?</p> <p>Will a mixed age class negatively impact on their learning/education?</p>	<p>Mixed age classes are happening more frequently within schools - Puttenham had mixed age classes up until 2-3 years ago and St Mary's have this now. Puttenham's results are regularly above national and LA averages, so this shows that mixed age classes are not detrimental to children's attainment. There are other schools in Surrey and the diocese which have great models of vertical grouping. However if this is not appealing to parents, they have the freedom and choice to apply to other schools.</p> <p>Pupils transferring from St Mary's will very much be welcomed as part of the Puttenham family. There are some subjects which are more appropriate to teach in chronological year groups, and the additional staff resource will facilitate this happening, so there will be plenty of opportunities for pupils to work with their year group peers as well as socialising at break and lunchtimes.</p>
3	<p>What is the difference between what Puttenham are offering and St Mary's remaining open? St Mary's pupils will be taught in a small class either way. Why not do the bulge equivalent at St Mary's?</p>	<p>Bulge funding only covers the cost of running a single class, not the cost of running an entire school. The expenditure that a school building requires whether you are using one classroom or four remains the same, but the funding that you receive if you have only one class is significantly less than if you have four classes full of students. The economies of scale that Puttenham will be able to offer in terms of the overhead costs will allow the school to provide a more vibrant educational offer than would be available at St Mary's if it were to continue to operate in the future.</p>
4	<p>Is the plan to mix current Puttenham pupils with the St Mary's pupils at Puttenham?</p>	<p>No, the proposal is for Puttenham to take the St Mary's pupils as an extra class. There would be no changes to the current Puttenham classes, but it is difficult to say how the classes will look until numbers are known.</p>
5	<p>If only a small number of pupils from St Mary's transfer</p>	<p>If there were vacancies in the relevant year group at Puttenham, then pupils could be placed into their current classes. However, if a</p>

	to Puttenham, can Puttenham take the small numbers into their current classes?	class already has 30 pupils, or if the number transferring from St Mary's would take the class size to over 30, then this would be breaching infant class size legislation and the children would have to be accommodated in an additional class.
6	Why should the St Mary's pupils be put into one class at Puttenham, shouldn't the current Puttenham classes split up?	There are only 4 classrooms at Puttenham so that is the maximum number of classes possible meaning that we cannot split every year group. Also, the current families at Puttenham did not sign up for mixed age classes and it would not be the preference of everyone. If the cohort coming from St Mary's is so small, then we will have to look at other school organisational options, but it is difficult to determine this without knowing definitive numbers and year group splits.
7	If there are only 1 or 2 Year 1 children left at St Mary's this term, can they be transferred to Puttenham before the end of the summer term?	If there are vacancies at Puttenham, then parents can choose to apply for a place via the council and transfer to the school ahead of September. However, this is dependent if there are existing vacancies in the current classes – the additional class would only be in place from September 2025 so pupils needing to join that class would not be able to transfer beforehand. However, the Good Shepherd Trust and Puttenham will explore every avenue once they know more about the situation.
	If the subsidiary class is separate from the existing classes and we do not feel this is a suitable option for our children, what alternatives would the council offer that would enable our children to continue their education pathway to Waverley Abbey Junior School?	<p>The proposal that we are consulting on specifically names Puttenham CE Infant School as the school to which we are proposing pupils will transfer. One of the reasons for this selection of school is because Puttenham is also a feeder school to Waverley Abbey Junior School, and this will allow pupils to continue with the junior pathway that they were expecting from St Mary's.</p> <p>The council is not proposing to provide any specific alternative to the offer of a place at Puttenham. If a family/parent/carer does not wish to take up the offer of a place at Puttenham, you are able to submit an in-year application to apply for a place any other local school.</p>

Timeframes

	Question	Answer
1	Who makes the decisions on timeframes and why are parents put aside?	The consultation timescales are statutory timescales set out by the Department for Education. With less funding, pupils' education is at risk, so we are having to move quickly. We have had to balance exploring all options and meeting statutory timescales.
2	What about the wellbeing of the children?	This proposal is driven out of care. The children's education is at the forefront of this consultation and any discussions. If the Cabinet Member decides to keep St Mary's open, the challenge will be around how the school meets the children's needs and preserves the quality of education with insufficient funding.
3	Why have Surrey County Council waited until May to consult?	<p>Surrey County Council, St Mary's and the Diocese of Guildford have been working through alternative options to try and avoid a closure. It only became clear in January 2025 that the number of applications made for Reception in September 2025 was too low to be able to sustain the school moving forward. Discussions started with school leaders, the diocese and other stakeholders in February with the intention to launch a consultation about a range of school organisational options in the summer term and aiming for any proposal to be implemented for September 2026.</p> <p>Unfortunately, those initial discussions became unintentionally public and the uncertainty and anxiety that this caused has meant that many families chose to leave the school before any consultation or proposal was made.</p> <p>As a result, the number of children anticipated to attend the school for September 2025 has dropped by 65% since January 2025 and we have reached a point where the risk to the education of the children because of insufficient funding can now not be mitigated – we would not be making this proposal if we thought there was a better way forward.</p>
4	As parents, what do you recommend we do? July is extremely late.	<p>We understand that July is extremely late and appreciate the concerns, unfortunately the shortened timescales are due to the sudden further decrease in pupil numbers.</p> <p>It is not our place to tell families what they must do, but the options available at this stage are to either wait for the outcome of the consultation or to contact our admissions to enquire about the availability of an alternative school place at another local school.</p>
5	Although this is a consultation, it does already sound like it is a foregone conclusion. What would need to happen to keep the school open?	This consultation is an opportunity for everyone to feed in their thoughts and have their voice heard. You may come up with suggestions that we haven't considered, and we'd love to hear your input to help us understand what the school means to you. However, we need to reassure you that we wouldn't be making this proposal if we hadn't explored all the options already that we think are available to the school.

Impact on the Community

	Question	Answer
1	What is the leadership plan for the community of Shackleford? It is a great concern that both the church and school may be closing.	The potential closure of both the church and school are not linked. However, we recognise that this consultation has come at a time when emotions are already running high and the village is already processing a large change in the potential closure of the church.
2	Has anyone spoken to families in Shackleford about why they are not sending their children to St Mary's? It used to be a popular school.	St Mary's have spoken to families and have been marketing the school via early years settings. Whilst Acorns nursery is full, these children come from a wider area and are not necessarily living in Shackleford. These pupils move together to schools more local to them, and children often leave the village to attend school to remain with that nursery peer group.
3	Is this a failure of the federation model? Why has the federation not worked?	The federation has not failed and if anything, it has extended the life of St Mary's CE Infant School. If the federation was not in place St Mary's is likely to have faced the proposal of closure earlier than now. The federation has helped to maintain the quality of education at St Mary's and has been paramount to it continuing to function as a school whilst facing such difficult circumstances with pupil numbers.

Funding

	Question	Answer
1	What is the figure needed to keep St Mary's open? Why aren't we asking the village community to cover the deficit?	Whilst fundraising is a fantastic way to support the school it is not what we are looking to maintain a long-term sustainable budget. A state schools funding is from the government and is based on pupils on roll. A public funded school will not be sustainable in the long term without high enough pupil numbers. Fundraising may be able to cover a short term deficit, but the reality of the situation is that if the low birth rate rises, it will not physically be able to rise quickly enough to return to a level to keep all small village schools open. If the school was funded entirely by the village community it would no longer be a state funded school.
2	How will Puttenham fund a class with only a small number of pupils that may transfer from St Mary's?	The proposal is for a bulge class to be provided at Puttenham CE Infant, which will be funded by the Local Authority in line with our bulge class funding principles. This funding allows the school to employ the necessary additional staff to teach the bulge class and buy the relevant resources for it. Bulge funding cannot happen at St Mary's because this funding only funds the running of the class and not the running of the whole school.

Next Steps

	Question	Answer
1	Where will the information from the public meetings be published?	The information from the public meetings will be published on Surrey Says where the consultation has been published. We will aim to publish this as soon as possible next week.

2	<p>Has Surrey County Council learned from this process? This is important since there are other schools in Surrey in a similar position.</p>	<p>We are always learning and keen to continue to learn – we will take on board and reflect on all feedback that we receive through this, and any other, process.</p>
3	<p>We felt that the timings of the public meeting were obstructive. Can we have another public meeting to allow others to attend?</p>	<p>Our intention was not to obstruct people from attending the meetings. We deliberately held two meetings at different times of day to try to allow as many people as possible to attend around their existing commitments. I appreciate that residents may have not had as much notice or anticipation of these meetings as school communities, but you can contact us at any time with any questions or queries using the details in the consultation document. We felt it was important to hold these meetings early in the consultation period to allow all respondents the opportunity to get all the information that they require to fully inform their response to the consultation.</p>