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Tuesday 4th December, 2012

Dear Deputy Chief Executive/Director of Children's Services,

RE: Consultation regarding proposed age range changes for St. Mary's Catholic Lower School

There have been 6 submissions to the Deputy Chief Executive/Director of Children's Service following the publication of the statutory notice regarding the school's proposal, 5 of which have been submitted by staff or Governors of Streetfield Middle School. The Governing Body has reviewed all of the responses and many of the issues raised within these submissions are addressed within the Governing Body's original proposal but those that are not are addressed below.

I would like to start with why we started this process. The governing body has considered changing the age range since 2006 when St. Vincent's Catholic Lower School went to consultation. It was felt by many that both schools should look at becoming primary at the same time. Following an informal canvassing of St. Mary's parents, it was clear that there was not sufficient parental support for a number of reasons, including not having, at that time, a permanent head teacher. It was therefore given a low priority, but scheduled for reassessment at a later date.

When Steve Chiswell became head teacher in September 2010, it was felt an appropriate time to informally approach parents again as to their opinion regarding this question. The feedback was very much in favour of the change. St Mary's governing body made this proposal for the following reasons:

- Parents of our pupils, in significant numbers, were asking governors and the head teacher if it would be possible to extend the age range and requesting that we did so.
- Existing Catholic parents were considering moving their children from St Mary's prior to the end of Year 4, to secure a place at another Catholic primary school for the continuation of Catholic education.
- Catholic parents from other Catholic primary schools informed us that they could never consider St. Mary's as a viable option while we didn't provide education up to Year 6.
- Non-Catholic parents, who represent the majority, were very supportive and told us that they had chosen our school because of the Catholic ethos.

Our process has always been about listening to our parents and the community. It has also always had the full support of the Northampton Diocese and the local Catholic churches. It is suggested a number of times that there aren't enough Catholics in the area to warrant this change, and that we would not increase our proportion of Catholic children. The reality is that the exact impact on the proportion of Catholic children at St Mary's is unknown. We are committed to the view that our proposal provides increased parental choice and it is in the best interests of our pupils, their parents and the community regardless of denomination. It

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is interesting that support for the proposal from our parents is equally strong for those who are not Catholic.

Our parents are immensely supportive at school, regardless of whether they are Catholic or non-Catholic. We would like to invite you to our school, so you can experience St. Mary's for yourself and see the impact of our ethos on our children and their families. Please also note that the school would fully support all pupils and their families regardless of whether they choose to leave at the end of year 4 or 6.

It is the opinion of the governing body that extending our age range will help provide a platform for improving standards at St Mary's. Unfortunately Streetfield have taken our positive intentions as suggestions of issues in their school, and much of the Streetfield feedback feels emotional. Our proposal is in no way intended to suggest a lack of provision within the existing local middle schools. We simply agree with the Secretary of State for Education's view that "promoting greater parental choice helps to improve standards for all children". In the letters from Streetfield, they appear to want to deny St Mary's the freedom to develop our school and deny the parents of our pupils the right to choice.

We would like to stress that the staff at St. Mary's have always actively worked with other schools and organisations, including Streetfield, and we are a committed member of the Learning Partnership. We have participated in recent discussions on potential structural changes to the Partnership schools. The Partnership is clearly committed to finding a way for two and three tier schools to work in parallel, and have a number of ideas to take forward. It is clear that Streetfield are committed to maintaining the three tier system, however **we believe the two systems can co-exist.**

In a number of the letters, our commitment to supporting our pupil 'learning journeys' to stay within the Learning Partnership schools has been questioned. Our understanding of the partnership is that we are working together for the mutual benefit of our schools and pupils, most of who stay within the partnership for their entire learning journey. As we are a voluntary aided Catholic school, we must also support the continuation of Catholic education as required. We would also like to clarify that during this process we have never inferred that pupils who remain at St. Mary's for Years 5 and 6 would be 'guaranteed' a place at JFK or Cardinal Newman Secondary schools.

We also work closely with a number of Luton Catholic schools. Our staff regularly meet with those from other schools to exchange ideas, increase knowledge and it is always a two-way process. We also have links with the Downside Community Centre, whose team regularly attend our parent coffee mornings. As many of our parents come from the Downside areas this is a useful link for us.

We acknowledge Mr Tinch's alternative to the St. Mary's proposal and expansion of St. Vincent's ideas. This is clearly not a constructive alternative, for many reasons including the clear wish of our parents and local community, a full response would require discussions with the Diocese and County, but there is currently no reason to believe that this is worth further consideration. It should be noted that when this concept was raised and discussed within the 'Learning Partnership' there appeared to be no support from other schools.

Throughout this consultation process we have been annoyed by the tone and nature of Streetfield's official response. This included canvassing St. Mary's parents with a booklet which set out to undermine not just our proposal, but also our school. St Mary's staff, governors and parents have acted professionally throughout this process, but have been put under much stress as a result.

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We feel it is important to specifically address some comments from Mr. Brown, the chair of governors at Streetfield. Firstly it should be noted that we are offended and upset by the tone of his comments both in his response during the formal consultation and in his endorsement of the above mentioned booklet.

Mr Brown has made some particularly upsetting comments in his statements about our handling of the informal consultation process. He uses language such as 'vehemence', 'preaching', 'aggressive', and 'bullying'. The truth is that we carried out a very carefully considered process, and that we actively encouraged both positive and negative feedback. Since the feedback was overwhelmingly positive he feels that the only way to undermine it is to claim that the process was biased. He attended the public meeting, which was widely publicised, but where a very small number of people expressed concerns and almost all of them were directly related to his school. When you consider the publicity given to our proposal by their anti-proposal booklet, we were shocked to find that so few people felt strongly enough against the proposal to attend the meeting.

Since the beginning of the informal consultation, there has been an overwhelming majority of our parents (regardless of religious affiliation) who want St Mary's to become a primary school. We re-iterate that the proposal is primarily to provide additional parental choice, improved standards and enable continuity of Catholic education. We understand that Streetfield do not agree with our proposal but I hope you will be able to appreciate that St Mary's governors, staff, and the vast majority of parents, would like the school to move forward as a primary school.

Yours sincerely,

Richard Neal
Chair of Governors