

Consultation on the future of Sir Thomas Abney Primary School

Overview

We are consulting you about proposals either to close Sir Thomas Abney Primary School and amalgamate (merge) it with Holmleigh Primary School, by offering all Sir Thomas Abney pupils a place there, or to close it without amalgamating. Under both proposals Sir Thomas Abney would close on 31 August 2025. The proposal to merge with Holmleigh means that the school would also move to the Sir Thomas Abney site permanently. A larger site would be needed to accommodate the children from both schools.

The consultations are the first stage in a process we have to follow by law. Depending on the final decisions made by the Council's Cabinet, they may lead to Sir Thomas Abney closing and merging with Holmleigh, which would expand and relocate to accommodate Sir Thomas Abney pupils too. Alternatively, they may lead to Sir Thomas Abney closing without merging with another school.

In recent years the number of primary age children in Hackney, and in many parts of London, has fallen. The reasons behind this are thought to include lower birth rates, lack of affordable housing for families, as well as Brexit and the recent pandemic. The fall in the number of children, leading to a high number of surplus school places and reduced funding from central government, has meant that our schools are facing difficult challenges.

In 2014, there were 2846 children starting primary schools in Hackney. By May 2024, this number had fallen to 2203 children on roll in Reception - a decrease of 23%. This left 577 reception places vacant (May 2024) - the equivalent of 19 empty classrooms.

Schools receive money from the government for each child on their roll. The yearly cost for each unfilled school place is approximately £6,000. With the growing number of unfilled places in Hackney primary schools, they are under increasing financial pressure. With funding reducing, many schools are finding it harder to work effectively or provide enrichment activities such as extracurricular trips and visits, after school clubs, and tournaments for children. The Council cannot afford to financially support schools that are not sustainable, and must continue to make difficult decisions to make sure our schools are fit for the future, and to protect the high quality education that Hackney is known for.

In the last academic year (2023/24) we had to make the difficult decision to close four primary schools. They closed in July 2024. We took this decision because there were too few children to keep them open and for the schools to remain financially sustainable. While these decisions are never easy, we made them with the interests of all children in mind with the aim of creating a stronger school system in Hackney.

Other London councils are facing similar challenges whilst also making difficult decisions to close and merge schools.

Unfortunately, despite the earlier school closures in Hackney, we still have significantly more school places than we have children to fill them. There were 2125 reception children on roll in Hackney schools (17/9/2024), but we have 2675 places. This means that there were 550 surplus places (21%) this September (2024), causing continuing funding challenges for our schools.

Why are we consulting you?

Our goal is to create a stronger school system where every child has access to a broad and enriched educational experience. That is only achievable when schools can admit as many children within their Planned Admission Number (PAN) as possible, and maximise the funding they receive. Sadly, for some Hackney primary schools, the number of children attending remains too low and has led to financial deficits in some schools that the Council is unable to maintain.

This has happened at Sir Thomas Abney and we now have to consider options for the school's closure. We would not be doing so if we thought there could be a better option.

We now want to hear your comments on the two options proposed for the future of Sir Thomas Abney Primary School (Fairholt Road, N16 5ED). These are closure with a merger with Holmleigh Primary School (Dunsmure Road, N16 5PU) or the closure of Sir Thomas Abney Primary School with no merger. The difference between the two options is described below. We welcome ideas and/or alternative options you may have about the future of the school. The responses received to this consultation and the consultation on the expansion of Holmleigh Primary School will be considered together as linked proposals.

Your input, suggestions and feedback are important in helping us to further understand what the school means to the children, parents/carers, staff and local community.

Sir Thomas Abney Primary School

In 2023 Sir Thomas Abney was a two form entry school, but reduced to one form entry in 2023, due to falling rolls. The school has a language resource provision which provides 10 places. The school is judged 'Good' by Ofsted (2019), but unfortunately due to low numbers, has a large financial deficit which is not likely to reduce in the medium term. This is not sustainable.

If school leaders took action to return the school to a sustainable financial position, this would be likely to undermine the quality of education and standards at the school, and significantly impact children with the highest level of need.

The school site is too large for the current number of pupils on roll, but would be a good site for a larger two form entry school.

In Reception last year, the school had 20 pupils on roll out of a possible 30 places, see Table 1.

Table 1 - Reception roll number 2023/24 (May census)

PAN (Reception)	No of pupils on roll (Reception)	Surplus places	% surplus of PAN
30	20	10	33%

In May 2024, the school had 188 pupils enrolled from Reception to Year 6, out of a possible 390 places as shown below in Table 2.

Table 2 - Whole school roll 2023/24 (May census)

Planned Admission Number (PAN) (whole school)	No of pupils on roll (whole school)	Surplus places	% surplus of PAN
390	188	202	52%

As of 17/9/2024, there are 28 children enrolled in the Reception class.

Option 1. Proposal to close Sir Thomas Abney Primary School and merge it with Holmleigh Primary School. Holmleigh would expand from one to two forms of entry.

- Sir Thomas Abney closes on 31 August 2025, as part of its merger with Holmleigh Primary School.
- All children from Sir Thomas Abney would be offered places at Holmleigh Primary School to start on 1 September 2025.
- On 1 September 2025, Holmleigh expands from a one form entry (30 places each year), to a two form entry (60 places each year).
- Holmleigh Primary School will move to the old Sir Thomas Abney site permanently. A larger site would be needed to accommodate the children from both schools.

Holmleigh Primary School

There is a separate linked statutory proposal relating to the expansion of Holmleigh Primary School from one form of entry to two forms of entry on 1 September 2025. You can read about this proposal here - bit.ly/school-proposal-consultation

Why are we proposing this option?

Merging the two schools can bring several benefits. It would allow Sir Thomas Abney's large financial deficit to be removed by the Council. An enlarged Holmleigh Primary School would give the school access to more funding with more children attending the school. This could provide more teachers, learning materials, and support extra activities such as school trips, and breakfast and afterschool clubs. There would continue to be a school in the local area so that children continue learning in a familiar environment, even if some changes are made.

Holmleigh and Sir Thomas Abney schools are very close, less than 650 metres from each other. Holmleigh children would therefore be able to travel to the new school site. Holmleigh is judged 'Good' by Ofsted and would benefit financially from becoming a two form entry school. This option would make good use of the bigger Sir Thomas Abney site for continued educational use.

What would it mean for the children?

All children currently on roll at Sir Thomas Abney will have a guaranteed place. They would join the children currently at Holmleigh School. Holmleigh Primary School will be able to provide two classes for each year group as a two form entry school. If parents/carers prefer, we will assist with finding places at alternative schools.

The Council plans to work closely with school leaders to ensure that each child's feelings are properly considered, making the change of school as smooth and positive as possible, where the opportunities for making new friends and trying different activities are the focus. Our goal is to create a strong and vibrant school where all children feel supported and welcomed.

What would it mean for children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND)?

We will work with schools and families to ensure that children with SEND, with or without Education, Health & Care plans (EHCPs), including those who attend the language resource provision (more details below) continue to receive high quality, suitable provision that meets their needs. EHCP applications that are in process will continue to be assessed with support from the plan coordinators.

Families with children who have an EHCP will be directly assisted by the Council's Special Educational Needs Service to support them through the transition, along with families with children who receive specialist support.

Families of pupils receiving support for special educational needs and disabilities, but who do not have an EHCP, will receive advice and guidance when considering changes to provision or settings. Specialist local authority staff are available to provide support to schools.

What would it mean for the children at the language resource provision?

Sir Thomas Abney has a language resource provision which provides extra support for pupils who have a diagnosis of developmental language disorder or severe speech disorder. If Sir Thomas Abney closes, its language resource provision will also close. If the proposal to merge Sir Thomas Abney with Holmleigh goes ahead, there will be a separate consultation about moving the language resource provision to Holmleigh, so that the children who currently attend it could move over with it.

What would it mean for my child being part of a larger school?

We know that becoming a different and bigger school might be difficult, especially for the children who are used to a smaller environment. Even though the new school will feel different to your child(ren), we will make sure they get the right support to settle quickly. We want to hear children's voices in the options being considered so we will ask the school for help in gathering their thoughts and feelings.

How would the admissions process work for the merger?

Children on roll at Sir Thomas Abney would automatically transfer to Holmleigh on 1 September 2025. A dedicated admissions officer will assist you with information and support taking into consideration any issues and concerns you have, including support applying to other schools if this is what you prefer.

If you have children with an EHCP you will be contacted as soon as possible to begin discussion about the transition to Holmleigh, or to alternative schools you prefer, in case the council decides in April 2025 to close/merge your child's current school. The timeline for achieving a closure is shown in the table below called 'Timeline'.

What would it mean for the staff and Headteacher?

The closure of Sir Thomas Abney will affect all staff including the Executive Headteacher. The Council will provide all staff with support to have the confidence to apply for new roles. There may be redeployment opportunities available within the Council for staff affected by redundancy. Our priority would be to ensure that staff at risk of redundancy are supported fully throughout this transition, just as we would be supporting our children and families. This will include a programme of support, advice and training activity including access to an employee assistance programme, offering confidential advice and counselling.

Would there be any changes to the school building(s)?

This option would see the current Holmleigh school building and site becoming vacant. The Council will consider alternative options for the site.

The Sir Thomas Abney Primary School site is large enough to accommodate the pupils from both schools. If the merger with Holmleigh School is pursued then the Council will assess the Sir Thomas Abney site to identify any adaptations required to suit the expanded school.

Option 2. Closure of Sir Thomas Abney Primary School without a merger with another school

- Sir Thomas Abney would close by the end of August 2025 due to low numbers and its large financial deficit which means that the Council cannot continue to provide the funding necessary to ensure a high quality of education for the children.
- Children would be offered a place at another school in Hackney or elsewhere, subject to preferences of parents and available spaces.

Why are we proposing closure as an option for Sir Thomas Abney Primary School?

Despite Sir Thomas Abney being judged by Ofsted to be a 'Good' school, it has experienced falling rolls over recent years. The number of pupils on roll has declined by 27% between October 2021 and 2023 census. The school is on a large site with buildings capable of accommodating up to three forms of entry but is only able to fill places for one form of entry. The large site has high maintenance costs that have contributed to the school's large deficit balance.

Running a school takes a lot of money - from paying teachers, to looking after the building, and making sure children get the best education. When there are not enough children, it becomes even more challenging to keep up the quality of education that all children deserve, and puts the school at risk of increasing its debt.

Having reviewed the school's financial position and plans for future sustainability, the Council believes the school can not be maintained without putting the quality of education for the children at risk, and negatively impacting on its children with the highest level of need. It is for these reasons that we are proposing to close the school.

What would it mean for the children?

All children currently on roll at Sir Thomas Abney will have a guaranteed place at another school in Hackney to continue their education. Children will have access to a wide range of resources and opportunities in a school that is sufficiently filled, even though it may mean attending a different school in the local area. Under this option, we are not able to guarantee that children would move to another school with their Sir Thomas Abney classmates because this would depend on the number of spaces available at other Hackney schools. If parents/carers prefer, we will also work to find a suitable school outside Hackney that meets your needs.

We know that a school closure might be difficult for some children to understand and come to terms with, so we will work closely with parents/carers and school staff to find the best ways to support them as they transition to a new school. We want to hear children's voices in the options being considered so we will ask schools for help in gathering their thoughts and opinions.

What would it mean for children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND)?

We will work with schools and families to ensure that children with SEND, with or without Education, Health & Care plans (EHCPs), including those who attend the language resource provision (more details below) continue to receive high quality, suitable provision that meets their needs. EHCP applications that are in process will continue to be assessed with support from the plan coordinators.

Families with children who have an EHCP will be directly assisted by the Council's Special Educational Needs Service to support them through the transition, along with families with children who receive specialist support.

Families of pupils receiving support for special educational needs and disabilities, but who do not have an EHCP, will receive advice and guidance when considering changes to provision or settings. Specialist local authority staff are available to provide support to schools.

What would it mean for the children at the language resource provision?

Sir Thomas Abney has a language resource provision which provides extra support for pupils who have a diagnosis of developmental language disorder or severe speech disorder. If Sir Thomas Abney closes, its language resource provision will also close. If the proposal to close Sir Thomas Abney goes ahead, there will be a separate consultation about the language resource provision.

Our intention would be to move the language resource provision to another local school and the pupils currently attending would be able to attend the school where the provision is moved to. The children's transfer would be undertaken as part of a review of their individual EHCPs and under a phased process to minimise disruption and ensure a smooth transition.

What would it mean for my child being part of a different and potentially larger school?

We know that for some of the children at Sir Thomas Abney, moving to a different and potentially bigger school might be difficult. Even though the new school will feel different to your child(ren), we will make sure they get the right support to settle quickly. We want to hear children's voices in the options being considered so we will ask the school for help in gathering their thoughts and feelings.

How would the closure process and admission to a new school work?

A dedicated admissions officer will assist you with information and support to apply for alternative school places, taking into consideration any issues and concerns you have. You have the right to apply to other schools and move your children at any time.

If you have children with an Education, Health & Care Plan (EHCP) you will be contacted as soon as possible to begin discussion about alternative schools you prefer in case the council decides in April 2025 to close/merge your child's current school. The timeline for achieving a closure is shown in the table below called 'Timeline'.

What would it mean for the staff and Headteacher?

The closure of Sir Thomas Abney will affect all staff including the Executive Headteacher. The Council will provide all staff with support to have the confidence to apply for new roles. There may be redeployment opportunities available within the Council for staff affected by redundancy. Our priority would be to ensure that staff at risk of redundancy are supported fully throughout this transition, just as we would be supporting our children and families. This will include a programme of support, advice and training activity including access to the Council's employee assistance programme, offering confidential advice and counselling.

Would there be any changes to the school building?

This proposal would result in the existing Sir Thomas Abney school building and site becoming vacant. The Council will consider alternative options for the use of the site.

What happens next?

This paper is part of a six week public consultation, setting out two options for the future of Sir Thomas Abney Primary School. The expansion of Holmleigh Primary School is being consulted on separately as a linked proposal. The consultation began on 8 October and will end on 19 November 2024 at 5pm.

There are a number of ways you can respond to the consultation, and these are set out at the end of this paper.

The Council will consider all the views put forward during this consultation period before making a decision on whether to publish proposals required by law. If proposals are published, there will be a further period for comments, called the representation period. This would last for 28 days. A final decision would be taken by Hackney's Cabinet at a later date. The timeline for this proposal is shown in the table below (dates may be subject to change).

Timeline

Date	Event
8 October - 19 November 2024	<p>Informal consultation</p> <p>The dates for a parent/carer meeting and an additional engagement opportunity will be confirmed separately by Sir Thomas Abney school.</p> <p>Your input, suggestions and feedback are important in helping us to further understand what the school means to the children, parents/carers, staff and local community.</p>
January 2025	<p>Results of the informal consultation are considered by Hackney Cabinet. A decision is made whether to publish a statutory notice for the closure of Sir Thomas Abney or a merger of Holmleigh and Sir Thomas Abney primary schools.</p>
February - March 2025	<p>A statutory notice is published for a 4-week representation period</p>
April 2025	<p>The outcome of the representation period and any objections are considered by the Cabinet and a final decision on the closure or merger proposal is made.</p>
Summer term 2025	<p>School closure/merger arrangements are carried out (subject to Cabinet's decision), if the proposals are approved</p>
31 August 2025	<p>Sir Thomas Abney Primary School officially closes.</p>
1 September 2025	<p>In the case that a merger if progressed, Holmleigh Primary School expands from one form to two forms of entry and moves to the former Sir Thomas Abney site.</p>

How can I get more information?

You can find out more about the options from the Hackney Education website at bit.ly/school-proposals

How do I respond to this consultation?

You can give your views on this proposal by:

- completing the response form attached to this consultation document, or
- online by clicking on the following link: bit.ly/school-proposal-consultation
- Or by visiting consultation.hackney.gov.uk

If you choose to fill in a paper response form, please hand it into the office at Sir Thomas Abney or Holmleigh Primary School, or post it to:

Hackney Council
Education Services
School Place Planning
Hackney Service Centre, 3rd Floor
1 Hillman Street
London, E8 1DY

The closing date for comments and suggestions is **Tuesday, 19 November 2024 at 5pm.**

If you have any questions about this proposal, please email school.sufficiency@hackney.gov.uk

If you require this document in a different format please contact us and we will get back to you in the next five working days.

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We will consider your request and get back to you in the next five working days.

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- אויב ווילט איר וויסן וואס דער דאקומענט זאגט, ביטע טיך די פאסיגע קעסטל, שרייב דיין נאָמען, אַדרעס און טעלעפאָן נומער און שיק עס צוריק צו די אַדרעס אונטן. (Yiddish)

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