

TITLE	Farley Hill Primary School expansion and new site
FOR CONSIDERATION BY	The Director of Childrens Services, in consultation with the Lead Member for Children’s Services
WARD	Wards: Arborfield, Barkham, Finchampstead South, Swallowfield
LEAD OFFICER	Carol Cammiss Director of Childrens Services
LEAD MEMBER	Cllr UllaKarin Clark Lead Member for Children’s Services

PURPOSE OF REPORT (INC STRATEGIC OUTCOMES)

The new primary school premises under construction in the Arborfield Garrison area will be ready for occupation in September 2021. The purpose of this report to enable Farley Hill Primary School to relocate to these premises and expand when appropriate.

RECOMMENDATION

That the Director of Children’s Services agrees, after consultation with the Lead Member for Children’s Services:

1. To the opening of a second site for the Farley Hill Primary School within the Arborfield Green housing development (accompanied by the temporary closure of the current Farley Hill site) in September 2021.
2. To the phased expansion of Farley Hill Primary School from 210 places (Reception to Year 6) to 420 places (with the Admission Number increasing to 60 from September 2024) and 630 statutory primary school places (with the Admission Number increasing to 90 from September 2026).
3. To the opening of a new nursery class from September 2021.
4. That the expansion dates shall be reviewed in a timely manner to ensure that expansion is appropriate, taking account of the increased need for places created by the continued growth of the Arborfield Garrison SDL and the number of places expected to be available in other local schools.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

On 30th January 2020 the Council’s Executive agreed that formal consultation could be undertaken on a proposal to enable Farley Hill Primary School to operate from a new site on the Arborfield Green (Arborfield Garrison SDL) development. This would address deficiencies in the current Farley Hill accommodation, solve a school run traffic congestion problem in Farley Hill, and enable the school capacity to expand in line with local need. Since the new site is central to the Arborfield Green development and a high proportion of the school’s roll has always been drawn from the Garrison and surrounding communities, this will enable a higher proportion of the school’s roll to walk to school.

The formal consultation, required under Section 6 and Schedule 3 of School Organisation (Prescribed Alterations to Maintained Schools) (England) Regulations 2013, was

conducted between 13th February 2020 and 13th March 2020. It was conducted through publication of a notice in a local paper, information on the school's website, a meeting at the school and emails to key partners (such as local schools, trade unions, Diocesan Authorities, neighbouring local authorities and members).

Seventeen written responses were received. A detailed summary is provided in Appendix A. Eight were opposed, six in favour and three expressed no view either way.

Local parents (and the head of a local Multi Academy Trust were in favour of the proposal).

The Keys Trust and various individuals associated with the Coombes school were opposed. They were concerned the proposal would threaten the viability of their school. An alternative proposal was put forward for the expansion of the Coombes school as a way of meeting the Arborfield Green / Garrison area needs.

Representations were made on behalf of the Finchampstead Schools (Gorse Ride Schools, Finchampstead CoE and St Sebastians in particular), that they should be taken into account in the assessment of need.

The Keys Trust concerns have some validity. In the first phase Farley Hill will transfer without a change in capacity, but as the number of children requiring primary school places increases in Arborfield Green pressure will grow to expand the school. Furthermore, if parents across the area to the south and west of the Coombes school do not express preferences for that school they will be reliant on diverted children to maintain their roll. The Coombes expansion proposal is problematic, as current parental preferences indicate the places would not be taken up and there is no obvious acceptable way to manage the additional school run traffic this would generate.

Of the Finchampstead Schools, only the Gorse Ride Schools and Nine Mile Ride are accessible schools, in that they are within walking distance (for some homes) and linked by a safe walking route to the Arborfield Green / Garrison area. The number of places taken up and the degree of movement between the Arborfield Green / Garrison area and Finchampstead schools will need to be considered when the Farley Hill expansion programme is reviewed.

These concerns need to be balanced against the deficiencies in the current Farley Hill accommodation, and the needs of the Arborfield Garrison SDL communities. In the period until 2030 over 2,500 new homes will be built in the area. Analysis shows that additional capacity will be required to meet needs locally, in line with the long adopted master plan for the Arborfield SDL area. The only satisfactory proposal identified to date is to provide this capacity is through a new school site on the Arborfield SDL site, which this proposal offers. Other proposals either rely on children being bussed across the borough (with an adverse impact on the home to school transport budget) or on expansion on the site of the Coombes, which could only meet part of the need, even if Planning permission was granted.

It is therefore recommended that the current proposals are approved.

BACKGROUND

The case for the Arborfield Primary School premises being taken into the management of the Farley Hill Primary School is set out in:

- the “Options for the management of the new Arborfield Primary School provision” report to the Council’s Executive on 30th January 2020

and further elaborated in the

- statutory proposal and document “The Farley Hill Primary School proposal: background information” appended to the statutory proposal.

These documents established a case for the Farley Hill Primary School taking on the new site (but, for the time being, retaining, but ceasing to use, the Farley Hill Village premises) and that school expanding once local school capacity is exhausted. In addition to providing additional capacity in line with the growth of the Arborfield Garrison SDL (now known as Arborfield Green and Finchwood Park) the expansion would solve a long standing deficiency with Farley Hill Primary School’s accommodation and school run associated traffic congestion in Farley Hill Village.

The Council’s Executive, having considered the report on 30th January 2020, approved the statutory consultation exercise and delegated authority to the Director of Children’s Services, in consultation with the lead member for Children’s Services to determine the outcome.

The formal consultation, as required by Section 6 and Schedule 3 of School Organisation (Prescribed Alterations to Maintained Schools) (England) Regulations 2013 took place between 13th February 2020 and 13th March 2020. The Council has 2 months from the end of the consultation period to determine the proposal, after which the proposal must be passed to the Schools Adjudicator for determination.

As required the full proposal and supporting information were published on the Council’s website, a notice was published in a local paper (the Wokingham Paper) and other parties, including local schools, local early years providers, their Academy Trusts (where relevant), Diocesan Authorities, neighbouring local authorities and relevant Trade Unions were consulted. Seventeen responses were received, eight against, six in favour and three raised issues, but expressed no clear view either way.

Responses came from:

- Two Academy Trusts (one for, one against)
- Two Governors of local schools, in a personal capacity (both against)
- Three headteachers (all against)
- Eight parents (three for, two against, two expressed no clear view either way)
- Two Parish Councils (both for, but with important reservations)

Issues raised were:

1. The impact on the Coombes CoE School in Arborfield Cross.
2. The impact on Finchampstead Schools
3. That the analysis of need should take account of places available in the Gorse Ride Schools, Nine Mile Ride and Finchampstead Church of England Primary School.
4. That the impact on St Sebastian’s school should be considered.
5. The new Finchwood Park School
6. Traffic and parking issues around the new school site.

7. The costs of the proposals (particularly for the management of the vacant site).
8. That as an alternative, the Coombes School could expand to offer 90 places per year.
9. That if the current Farley Hill admissions arrangements are retained, parts of the Arborfield Green area are disadvantaged.
10. Concern that the Council's projections may not be reliable, given the level of surplus capacity in schools the council has expanded across the borough.

These issues are dealt with in depth in the attached Appendix A (which includes summaries and commentary on, all responses received). The brief commentary is:

On points 1 to 4 above

Under the current proposal the Farley Hill School retains its current capacity immediately after transfer. Expansion does not occur until 2024 and would be subject to review in a timely manner. Farley Hill school currently draws its rolls from the southwest area (with a significant number of children living in the Arborfield Garrison and associated communities area. While relocation of the school (without expansion) can be expected to have some impact, because of changed patterns of parental preference, this is mitigated by the fact that it moves to an area where many parents already express preferences for the school. The expansion review process is outside the scope of this decision, but will need to take account of impacts in other schools around the school. In practise the Coombes CoE School and The Gorse Ride Schools are now comparable distances from the Arborfield Garrison by safe walking routes. The Gorse Ride Schools are 1.2 miles, by a lit greenway (walking, cycling and horses) route from the closest homes, while the Coombes School is about 0.7 miles from its closest homes, but the route is alongside a busy main road. Which is closest is dependent on where in the Garrison / Arborfield Green area a family lives. Given this, it is a reasonable presumption that most Arborfield Green families would drive to either school. Neither Finchampstead CoE School or the St Sebastians schools are within walking distance and so, although the review should take account of pupils attending and sibling follow-up, there seems to be no good reason to plan that either school should form part of the long term provision for the area. Some parents may prefer these schools and see their children successfully admitted, though.

These concerns are not of sufficient weight to counterbalance the benefits of the proposal. They do though underline the importance of timely review of the expansion programme, to ensure that increased capacity on the Arborfield Green site is not detrimental to local education.

On point 5

The new Finchwood Park school will only be programmed once there is good evidence that the capacity is required.

This point therefore has no bearing on the current proposal.

On point 6

The parking provision for the new site includes parent and drop-off parking areas, as well as staff car parking. It was judged to be appropriate though the planning process.

These concerns do not therefore give concern that the Farley Hill Primary School proposals would have an unacceptable impact on the local community.

On point 7

Estimated costs were included in the report of the 30th January 2020. In short the costs of relocating an established school will be less than the costs of establishing a new school, because a new school would require financial support for senior staff and administration while it grows to full capacity. The unused Farley Hill buildings may be found a temporary use so may not incur any costs. If the building was mothballed every effort would be made to reduce costs, by disconnecting services and boarding the property, rather than relying on a permanent security presence.

These concerns do not give reason to believe that the relocation of the Farley Hill school would be a poor use of public finances.

On point 8 (Coombes expansion)

The proposal for the Coombes to offer 90 places (an additional 15 places per year) has three main objections:

- That the expanded school would not be sufficient to meet all the needs generated locally by the growth of the Arborfield Garrison SDL, as only 105 additional places would be created.
- That the Coombes school does not have the capacity to offer 90 places through all age groups. This would require additional teaching accommodation, play and PE space (to be compliant with DfE guidance), and staff car parking and parent drop-off (to comply with standard planning requirements). The parking and drop-off requirements would be particularly challenging to meet.
- That, while parental preferences can change quickly, there are reasons to be concerned that too few parents would express preferences for the school for expansion to be viable. In the most recent admission round 65 (out of 75) places were offered, but 17 of these offers were to children who could not be offered a place at a preferred schools. Most of these children live in nearby communities (where there are sufficient children to largely fill the school).

This proposal therefore does not adequately address the need for places and carries too many risks to be considered a viable alternative.

On point 9

The admission arrangements for 2021 have already been determined, in accordance with the statutory timetable. Some recently completed homes on the edge of the former garrison area are outside the designated area of Farley Hill primary school. These arrangements can be changed annually and the area could be expanded in 2022. It should be noted though that the current designated area includes many rural communities and the school is already oversubscribed from within its designated area. Any extension of the area will lead to families in villages (Swallowfield, Risely etc) being unable to secure places for first and only children at the school. It should be noted that this risk is already inherent in the growing number of homes on the garrison, as matters stand. The new Arborfield Green homes within the current designated area are closer to the current Farley Hill Village site than homes in outlying communities and so would have higher priority within each admission criteria than homes in these outlying areas.

This has no bearing on this decision though, as not approving this proposal would not lead to a school being available to Arborfield Green residents in 2021.

Other responses were in favour of the proposal, noting that:

- In terms of the options for the future management of the school, we support in principle the expansion of Farley Hill Primary School on to the site, effectively meaning the relocation of the existing school to the new site.
- We fully support the expansion onto the new Arborfield Green site, and look forward to being able to walk our daughter to school.
- I am writing in strong support for the published proposal for the phased expansion of Farley Hill Primary School on a new site in Arborfield Green from September 2021.
 - As a local MAT, The Circle Trust is committed to serve the community of Wokingham. As Executive Headteacher I can appreciate the clear advantage and logic in the move of Farley Hill Primary School moving to new premises and serving the Arborfield Green community much of which it already serves.
 - Farley Hill School is a well led, successful and well established local school and this moves secures a better physical space for members of the school community as well as expanding to meet growth needs.
- As a parent of one child at Farley Hill school and another who will hopefully start in September I am strongly In support of the move to the new site near Biggs Lane.
- The school is a great school and I feel that this would be enhanced by the new location.
- The current situation with parking at Farley hill makes for a number of risks to children’s safety at drop off any pick up times
- We’re excited about the new school opening!

BUSINESS CASE

The business case for the proposal was set out in the report of 30th January 2020.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE RECOMMENDATION

The Council continues to face severe financial challenges over the coming years as a result of reductions to public sector funding and growing pressures in our statutory services. It is estimated that Wokingham Borough Council will be required to make budget reductions of approximately £20m over the next three years and all Executive decisions should be made in this context.

	How much will it Cost/ (Save)	Is there sufficient funding – if not quantify the Shortfall	Revenue or Capital?
Current Financial Year (Year 1)	Up to £30K	Yes	Revenue
	£3.3M	Yes	Capital

Next Financial Year (Year 2)	Up to £90K £4.9M	Yes, subject to Schools Forum agreement	Revenue Capital
Following Financial Year (Year 3)	Nil	Yes	Revenue

Other Financial Information
The capital costs relate to the construction programme and this decision has no bearing on these.

Stakeholder Considerations and Consultation
As set out in the report above

Public Sector Equality Duty
An equalities impact assessment is available

Reasons for considering the report in Part 2
N/A

List of Background Papers
Executive report of 30 th January 2020

Contact Piers Brunning	Service Strategic Commissioning for Learning, Achievements and Partnerships
Telephone 0118 974 6084	Email piers.brunning@wokingham.gov.uk

Sign off

That after consultation with the Lead Member for Children's Services I approve:

1. To the opening of a second site for the Farley Hill Primary School within the Arborfield Green housing development (accompanied by the temporary closure of the current Farley Hill site) in September 2021.
2. To the phased expansion of Farley Hill Primary School from 210 places (Reception to Year 6) to 420 places (with the Admission Number increasing to 60 from September 2024) and 630 statutory primary school places (with the Admission Number increasing to 90 from September 2026).
3. To the opening of a new nursery class from September 2021.
4. That the expansion dates shall be reviewed in a timely manner to ensure that expansion is appropriate, taking account of the increased need for places created by the continued growth of the Arborfield Garrison SDL and the number of places expected to be available in other local schools.

Signature

Carol Cammiss, Director of Childrens Services

Date