

Response to The Arborfield Primary School Options

Wokingham Borough Council have invited key stakeholders to contribute to the development of options for the management of Arborfield Primary School, the first of two schools to be constructed on the Arborfield Garrison Strategic Development Location (SDL). The first school is planned to be ready for occupation in September 2021.

The Arborfield area is served currently by two schools; Farley Hill Primary School (Farley Hill), a one form entry maintained school with a PAN of 30 (210 pupil places) and The Coombes CE Primary School (The Coombes), a sponsored academy school within The Keys Academy Trust. The Coombes is a two form entry school with a PAN of 75 (525 pupil places).

Current proposals

The proposal document has identified three options for the management of the new school:

- 1) To open the premises as a new Free School, (probably under a Multi Academy Trust)
- 2) To open the premises as part of a planned expansion of Farley Hill Primary School.
- 3) To open the premises as part of the planned expansion of another school.

The falling roll at The Coombes

As of January 2020, there are currently 107 surplus spaces across The Coombes, and therefore under funded by £312,000. This is due to:

- The decline in the birth rate, which has resulted in surplus spaces across The Coombes and many WBC schools in the last two years
- The falling roll at the school due to the Ofsted rating in 2017 and subsequent change to sponsored status.

The impact of the lower pupil numbers over the last couple of years show a predicted reduction in pupil numbers over the next 4 years from 416 to 345 pupils. There were only 41 pupils allocated to Reception in September 2019, despite a PAN of 75. This will result in a further reduction of £207,000 in funding by 2024/2025.

Even before the opening of a new school in close proximity to The Coombes, the projection of falling numbers over the next 4 years is shown below:

Year Group	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Reception	41	45	55	55	55
Year 1	49	39	45	55	55
Year 2	51	46	39	45	55
Year 3	70	50	46	39	45
Year 4	74	71	50	46	39
Year 5	73	75	71	50	46
Year 6	58	75	75	71	50
TOTAL	416	401	381	361	345

(Figure 1 – these figures are based on a reduced reception intake of 45 out of 75 places for 2020/2021 increasing to 55 for the following three years.)

This is having a significant impact on the funding to the school and the level of resources that could be deployed in the school and a further reduction will only exacerbate the situation,

Alternative option to the opening of the new Arborfield Primary School in September 2021

The Keys Academy Trust acknowledges the need for the expansion of Farley Hill due to the smaller size of the four Key Stage 2 classrooms and deteriorating facilities. However, if Farley Hill is relocated to the new school on the planned occupation date of September 2021, this would have a significant detrimental effect on the pupil numbers at The Coombes and hence reduce funding even further.

The alternative option proposed by The Keys Academy Trust is to accommodate the additional pupils new to the area in an existing school within the borough. These pupils could easily be accommodated within The Coombes as whilst the current PAN is 75, there is the potential to revert the admission number back to the previous PAN of 90. This would create an additional 105 new spaces on top of the existing surplus capacity of 107, and so generating 212 additional spaces in total.

The projection of pupil numbers within an existing school is shown below:

Year Group	2021	2022	2023	2024
Reception	90	90	90	90
Year 1	50	90	90	90
Year 2	50	50	90	90
Year 3	50	50	50	90
Year 4	50	50	50	50
Year 5	71	50	50	50
Year 6	75	71	50	50
TOTAL	436	451	470	516

Figure 2

By placing the additional pupil places in The Coombes rather than Farley Hill, this would allow the school to increase its capacity back to a full school within four years and then the school could reassess the PAN based on current demand at that time.

The consultation proposal outlines the projection for additional places in Figure 3 of the document and there are only two years with a deficit of pupil places which would affect 9 places at most. These places are in 2021/2022 and 2025/2026 and could be accommodated at The Coombes with the increase in PAN to 90 places.

This option has not been explored in the consultation document but has significant benefits to not only The Coombes, but to Wokingham Borough Council and new families moving in to the area.

Benefits of deferring the opening of the new Arborfield Primary School

- 1) Supporting an existing school with this additional capacity would safeguard against a multi-academy trust working against the interests of education across the Wokingham Borough as is being experienced in the secondary sector.
- 2) One of the weaknesses identified in the consultation document is responding quickly to changes in pupil numbers to meet demand of new families. The extensive school grounds at The Coombes are more than adequate to accommodate additional buildings should they become necessary. Within the last ten years, The Coombes benefited from investment in its Key Stage 2

buildings and as an academy within The Keys Academy Trust, the Trust will bid for Condition Improvement Funding to complete the rationalisation of the premises should this be required.

- 3) One of the challenges of the surplus capacity at The Coombes is the number of children that are diverted from Reading Borough Council. Since September 2019 there have been 38 number of children which have been diverted to The Coombes. These are generally short term placements and this mobility is disruptive to both the existing pupils and teachers and more importantly masks the surplus capacity for families moving into the Arborfield area.
- 4) When new families move into the area, The Coombes will be able to offer places across the year groups until full to capacity which will reduce the travel disruption. This however would not be the case if as the consultation suggests, "total capacity in the Arborfield area can be "frozen" to ensure that the new premises do not create high levels of surplus places in local schools. This would be damaging to the education of children on the rolls of the schools with reduced rolls".
- 5) Additional funding gained through increased pupil numbers will secure the future of The Coombes.
- 6) The Keys has already secured rapid improvements at the school as evidenced by the Local Authority Review in December 2019. By supporting the existing school it creates confidence in the local authority from the parent community.
- 7) Although both The Coombes and Farley Hill primary schools are used by children living in the Arborfield Garrison area, neither has good walking accessibility. However, The Coombes is on the edge of the neighbouring Arborfield Cross community and is within statutory walking distance (for children under the age of 8) of the northern part of the Arborfield Garrison SDL. Although Farley Hill is a similar distance from the new community, there are no safe walking routes from the Arborfield area to where Farley Hill is currently situated.
- 8) The deferral allows Wokingham Borough Council to only open a new school once demand is guaranteed. The deferral of opening the primary school in Arborfield may release growth funding for existing pupils within WBC.

Conclusion

This option of deferring the opening of a new primary school in Arborfield until the Coombes is full to capacity, mitigates against the undue pressures identified as a weakness in having a new school building underused whilst school numbers in the Arborfield area are “frozen”. WBC is well versed on the uncertainty of new families moving into the area converting to “real” school places as evidenced by the deferral of opening of the Shinfield West primary school.

We strongly concur with the consultation document that there is a moral imperative to ensure that new capacity is aligned to local need, as early delivery of new capacity could cause significant damage and prejudice the efficient education of those pupils attending The Coombes at this crucial point in its school improvement journey.