

3 April 2018

Mr Jared Nehra
Area Education Officer - West Kent
Kent County Council

Dear Sir

New 2-Form Entry Primary School in Hawkenbury

I am writing to you today, on behalf of the residents of Hawkenbury Village, concerning the new primary school that is due to be built in Hawkenbury.

Your proposal is for a 1 form entry primary school with a 2 form entry core. As part of the planning application, outline planning permission was granted for a 2 form entry primary school on the Hawkenbury Farm site. The local residents were also promised a 2 form entry school as part of the Hawkenbury Farm housing development.

Background

Berkeley Homes are building 235 new homes on the site known as Hawkenbury Farm. These houses are scheduled to be completed by September 2021. The Leader of the Tunbridge Wells Borough Council received an undertaking from the Leader of Kent County Council in 2015 that a new 2FE school would be built, as part of the development. This was widely reported in the local newspapers.

The planning application (16/07023/HYBRID) submitted by Berkeley Homes includes outline planning permission for a 2 form entry primary school on the Hawkenbury Farm site. The full application, including outline planning permission for the primary school was approved by the Planning Committee on 15 February 2017.

Berkeley Homes have agreed that it will cover the cost of site enablement, including roads and sewer services, and then transfer of the site to KCC at no cost, as part of the planning application. In addition, Berkeley Homes are making a financial contribution in excess of £1.5 million to the build cost of the new 2 form entry primary school, under a S106 agreement.

Current Situation

KCC has carried out a consultation on the new primary school. KCC is proposing to build a 1-form entry school with a 2-form core. It is further proposed that St Peter's CoE primary school be relocated to this site. Our concerns are that the new school, whilst absorbing the existing school, will fail to meet the needs of both existing residents and of those moving into the new homes, being built by Berkeley Homes and other developers in the area.

School Places

St Peter's currently has 20 reception places available and maintains class levels of 20 pupils per year. The current proposal to move St Peter's, will only allow the school to provide an additional 10 reception places per year. Each year group will increase by 10 places annually on a rolling basis. The school will be at capacity class size in 7 years. The effect of this proposal is that children will continue to be taught in mixed classes which are not educationally beneficial for children, as well as creating difficulties for effective curriculum delivery.

We do not believe that the current proposal delivers the best solution for Hawkenbury or St Peter's.

Available reception places

St Peter's CoE Primary School is already over-subscribed. Adding 10 Reception places to the school will not meet the demand in 2019, when the school is scheduled to open. St Peter's already struggles to accept new pupils beyond siblings of existing pupils and this situation will worsen. Historically, a large number of the available reception places are taken by siblings of pupils, already at the school. With a number of new housing developments coming online in the locality, these additional places will soon be filled, creating the same problem again.

There are a number of young families in Hawkenbury that have contacted us and they are concerned that they will not be able to get their children into the school, when it opens. These parents live less than half a mile from the proposed school and would safely fall into the catchment area. If the school opens as 1-form entry, they will need to drive their children to schools further afield.

Berkeley Homes will start delivering homes on the site in 2018 and will continue to do so until 2021. Very few of these new residents will be able to get their children into the proposed school. Berkeley Homes have made a considerable financial contribution to the new school and they will be relying heavily on the local school catchment area to drive interest in these properties.

The proposal does not take into account any housing developments taking place in the local area, particularly in the Weald, as this is a separate district council. However, the Weald developments are less than 1 mile from the new school. These developments will be available for occupancy prior to the completion of the Berkeley Homes development and there will be demand from these parents for school places. KCC may need to change its admission policies to exclude these homes.

The Local Plan for Tunbridge Wells 2033, plans to deliver housing for the Borough in line with the government's target for housing needs. Currently, there are in excess of 1500 homes under construction in the Borough, with a further 1500 homes that have been granted planning permission, but where work has not yet started. These developments will all impact on the availability of school places.

Disruption to learning

KCC has the perfect opportunity to build a new 2-form entry primary school, without any upheaval to pupils, teachers and parents. St Peter's will continue to function in its existing building whilst the new school is built. Planning to expand the school at a later date misses an opportunity. Pupils, teachers and parents will have to endure the noise and inconvenience of learning and working on a building site. This is aptly demonstrated by the new Langley Park Primary Academy, in Maidstone, that has had to expand to a 2-form entry, after only being open for 1 year. Local residents will also be impacted by any expansion works.

Cost of construction

Building extra classrooms is cheaper when you already have contractors on site. Having to bring back contractors at a later date is more expensive. You need to consider the cost of the upheaval to the school and the neighbouring residents. Adding infrastructure into existing infrastructure is also more expensive. Whilst there will be the cost of additional buildings, it will be cheaper to build them once, than to come back and add to it.

Travel

Parents will be forced to seek places for their children further afield and they will need to get their children to school. This will increase the number of journeys undertaken and add to congestion on Tunbridge Wells roads. Parents will have to drive past a small primary school, 500 yards from their front door, to drop their child at an alternative school. It may even be that they are dropping a sibling off at the new school, and then driving to another primary school.

Having children at 2 primary schools adds to the stress and time constraints that parents are under. One child may need to be dropped off early to ensure that the other child arrives at school on time. It adds to journey times and congestion of Tunbridge Wells roads.

Given the opportunity, parents may wish to move their children to a school closer to home, thus reducing travel time and perhaps freeing up places in other schools, that can be utilised by people living closer to those schools.

Flawed Consultation

We are of the opinion that the current consultation is flawed and biased. KCC chose to engage primarily with parents that already have children in the school. The consultation has not taken into consideration the views and needs of parents that do not currently have children at the school or children that are not yet of a school going age. The HVA, as the largest residents group in the area, was not consulted or given an opportunity to canvas our members for their opinions on the proposal.

The consultation is framed in such a way that the outcome of the consultation is biased. All the parents who currently have children in the school would like to move their children from the current, rundown buildings over 3 sites to a new purpose built school. However, most parents would not want their children taught in mixed group classes or not be able to get a sibling into the school. The questions within the consultation do not allow for this and are structured in such a way as to be misleading and to secure a predefined outcome.

A number of assumptions within the consultation are also wrong.

Conclusion

We would ask that KCC reconsider its proposal on the following grounds:

- A 2-form entry school was promised as part of the planning process. TWBC and Berkeley Homes have contributed financially to a 2 form entry primary school.
- Outline planning permission has been granted for a 2 form entry primary school.
- Berkeley Homes have made a considerable financial contribution on the basis that a 2 form entry school would be built.
- The current proposal will not deliver sufficient school places for existing and new residents.
- Mixed teaching classes of 2 year groups will continue.
- Expansion at a later date will cause inconvenience to pupils, teachers, parents and local residents.
- Expansion at a later date will be more costly and require a further planning application.
- Local parents will have to travel further to get their children to school.
- It may wish to consider creating a new free school, as per the stated policy, and close St Peter's CoE primary school at its present location.

I thank you for your time and would welcome the opportunity to discuss our concerns with you.

Yours sincerely

Dean Kenward
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CC Mr Greg Clark – MP for Tunbridge Wells
 Mr Paul Carter CBE – Leader for Kent County Council
 Mr David Jukes – Leader of Tunbridge Wells Borough Council
 Mr Roger Gough – Cabinet Member for Children, Young People and Education
 Cllr Catherine Rankin – County Councillor and Park Ward councillor, TWBC
 Cllr Tracy Moore – Park Ward Councillor, TWBC
 Cllr Peter Bulman – Park Ward Councillor, TWBC
 Mr Robert Franks – Senior Planning Manager, Berkeley Homes
 Councillors of Tunbridge Wells Borough Council Planning Committee
 Members of the Tunbridge Wells Town Forum
 Members of the Hawkenbury Village Association