

Dear Councillor,

I am writing to you about the provision of secondary education in the area and particularly the potential crisis for pupils scheduled to transfer in September 2019. I write individually and as Chairman of local residents group, Right School Right Place, a group that has a substantial membership drawn largely from areas that are affected by education provision in and around Harpenden.

There are a number of salient points:

- In 2018 the Authorities (HCC, DfE and the Trusts involved in promoting the new school) put absolute faith in the delivery of interim provision for 180 entrants on their preferred site being in place for September 2018.
- The plan relied on a hopelessly ambitious construction plan which involved partial site construction, the erection of a Sports Hall (over 10m high) and its temporary internal fit out with classrooms in five months. The plan was abandoned by the developers as undeliverable in late March 2018.
- By the time the plan was abandoned parents had received allocations – some receiving two allocations – through the standard system. Those with allocations had to choose in early March which to accept with no certainty of provision, and many chose to hold two options pending clarity. At the same time the nature of the allocation process, with a ‘distance from school’ criteria applied independently to the new school, meant more distant pupils were not allocated to any of the schools in their Planning area and were obliged to either accept out of area of places or face a lottery of availability when those who held two places released one for reallocation (the Continuing Interest system)
- A last ditch provision of additional places at the existing schools, coupled with the take up of 39 places at Sandringham school in St Albans (part of a planned interim provision of 55 places largely targeted at Wheathampstead resident pupils), meant 2018 entry was allocated without the expected additional 180 places.
- The Local Education Authority (HCC) has warned the coming year (September 2019 transfer) is a peak year with high demand.
- For 2019 the LEA has made plans that assumed full operation of Katherine Warrington School (KWS) on the Batford Farm site as an established school. This involved incorporating the School into the standard applications process and the LEA agreeing to release Sandringham School from their agreement to provide additional interim places to Wheathampstead and Harpenden resident children.
- The developers (HCC and DfE), having abandoned the quick build as impractical, subsequently stated that in order to establish the same interim provision for September 2019 opening they require not 5 months, but 13 months to deliver the same partial build school provision. This quantum leap was identified in statements made to Court in May and required, in the developers’ words, work to commence on site by July 2018.
- With the imminent opening of the secondary transfer programme on 1 September no work has begun on site. No work has begun because as yet the developers have failed to discharge pre-commencement conditions to start work.

In summary the approach for 2018 provision relied on a hopelessly optimistic expectation on the part of the promoters of the new Katherine Warrington School that within five months, from scratch, a major development could be sufficiently constructed and adapted for use safely while

construction continued. This was coupled with a laudable, if totally impractical, insistence on the part of the Trust to only consider temporary provision on the school's permanent site. The one lesson to be learnt was that the approach adopted failed abysmally and the same mistakes should not be repeated.

The questions to be considered are one of whether the current programme has similar unrealistic expectations, and, if there is **any** concern about ability to provide education for local children going into secondary education from September 2019, then what contingencies can be put in place now.

On the first point RSRP noted in a press release earlier this month that the sister project in Croxley Green, which was jointly put forward by HCC with the Harpenden project in 2013 and has the same main contractor – Kier, commenced work on site (April 2018) and, on the advice of the contractor, has already flagged a likely delay in the school being ready for occupation in September 2019 – with a likely slippage to Half term. Fortunately there is other provision for the pupils attending that school, which by 2019 will be taking its third year of entry. The provision is however off-site and will involve pupils relocating to the permanent site at some point in the 2019-20 year.

This parallel example is pertinent, as it is for an almost identical size school, and provides two areas of concern for Harpenden. First the contractor is indicating a minimum of 18 months as a more realistic build programme from commencement of site works; and second the reliance on contingency provision in the interim. A solution to the second point has the ability to relieve pressure on the first point. The steps towards providing a solution to the second point are:

- The Trust should recognise that the insistence on only starting on the permanent site has failed and should consider off-site provision for the first year. This would have the added benefit of removing schoolchildren from both a construction site environment and requiring them to access via what is acknowledged to be one of the busiest B roads in the county while construction traffic is at its peak.
- The Government's annual School Census undertaken in January 2018 shows that the Harpenden Academy – a Primary Free school in the centre of Harpenden – is operating at below 50% of its capacity. HCC's allocation figures suggest this will continue (as 20 out of 60 places for 2018 start were allocated in April) and the forecast for 2019/20 indicates a continued substantial excess of Primary places in the area. With an identified capacity of 14 forms that is less than half occupied, the school has potential to accommodate the up to 6 Forms of Entry that is sought for interim provision in the fourth secondary school.
- Harpenden Academy became a member of the Scholars Education Trust in 2016 alongside Sir John Lawes School that was one of the three Harpenden Secondary Schools that came together to develop the proposed fourth Harpenden Secondary School. The Trust has experience of running Primary and Secondary education in the same site in another of its schools – Samuel Ryder.
- The site, which would likely require some adaptation for purpose, is centrally located in Harpenden and is close to all three current secondary schools for initial support.
- An alternative option is to consider the school that provided interim space for Harpenden Academy while it awaited its permanent site – St Lukes in Redbourn. This is a former secondary school which now provides specialist SEN services, but often has significant excess capacity. As it has hosted a temporary use previously it has potential to repeat this for a year of secondary intake.

As regards the first point there has to be considerable scepticism about the ability to deliver, and safely deliver, a working solution for a school by September 2019. None of the conditions placed on

the Planning permission announced by HCC in February have yet been discharged. Local residents have enduring memories of the last local authority sponsored project in the area – Lea Springs Flexicare accommodation – a significant build opposite the site on a pre-existing development that took nearly three years to complete. Add this to Kier’s already stated doubts to complete a similar project with fewer complications in a longer timescale and only the wildly optimistic would be convinced that the project would be sufficiently complete to allow partial safe occupation 12 months from now. The absence of the overflow capacity at Sandringham, which was largely taken up by Wheathampstead pupils in previous years, will increase the impact of any shortfall.

The time is right to plan now for alternative provision for pupils in the Harpenden Education Planning Area. The duty to ensure sufficient education places are provided is the Local Education Authority’s – in this case Hertfordshire County Council. The request is therefore being sent to HCC elected representatives for the area and members of the Education, Libraries and Localism Cabinet Panel which next meets on 21 September. However it is not our expectation that HCC will voluntarily act on this matter – our past experience is one in which material has been submitted to the Council and subsequent Freedom of Information Requests have shown that submissions were simply ignored (including suggestions of alternative permanent sites and supporting logic) and requests to address the Council have been mishandled leading to failure to consider petitions on time (confirmed by upheld formal complaints) – and therefore we are calling on all Councillors in other tiers of local government to press for a workable solution as a matter of urgency.

The time to act is now as prospective parents will need to make their secondary transfer choices in September and October and it is only reasonable that for these parents who are your constituents some certainty is available. The opportunity exists to avoid the fiasco of last March being repeated in March 2019 and a common-sense approach which provides deliverable contingency can be achieved if you act now. We see no reason why such contingency arrangements cannot be put in place and no reason why such contingency provision cannot stand in its own right irrespective of any other ongoing matters concerning the permanent site – the duty of all representatives is to ensure education is provided when needed.

Yours Sincerely

, Chairman Right School Right Place

Note: This letter has been sent to Councillors in local government at District, Town and Parish levels in areas known to be affected by the school development i.e. areas whose constituents are affected directly. Additionally the letter has been sent to selected County Councillors including members of the relevant Cabinet Panel and Local Members, as well as to the Chair of the Harpenden Secondary Education Trust as the letter clearly calls for a change in their previous position on interim provision.