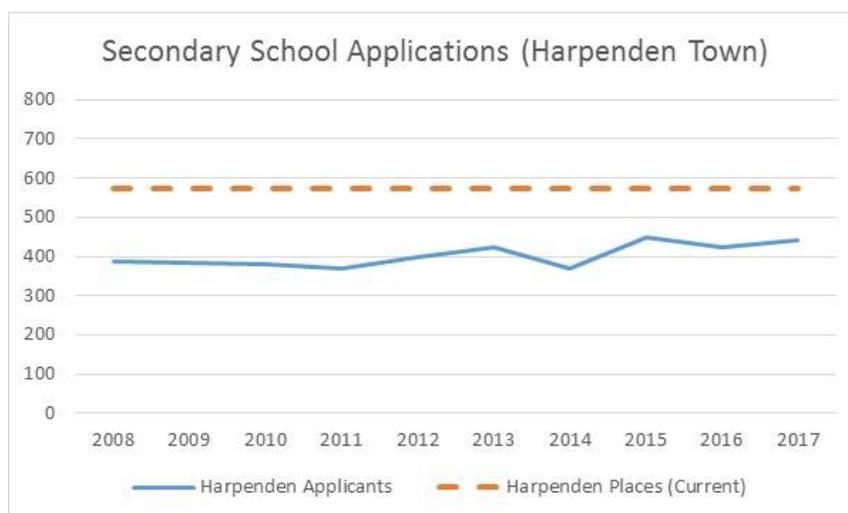


Demand for School Places – Exploding the Myth

At the heart of the case for a new secondary school in Harpenden has been the assertion that there is a huge gap between places in Harpenden and need in Harpenden. The LEA - Hertfordshire County Council (HCC) - has forecast a period of rapid growth peaking at a projected need of 820 places per year, before settling permanently at 5 forms of entry more than the capacity of the existing 3 secondary schools ⁽¹⁾. Capacity of the existing schools (Sir John Lawes, St Georges and Roundwood Park) is 572 and, in effect, HCC expect a minimum of 720 as the base going forward.

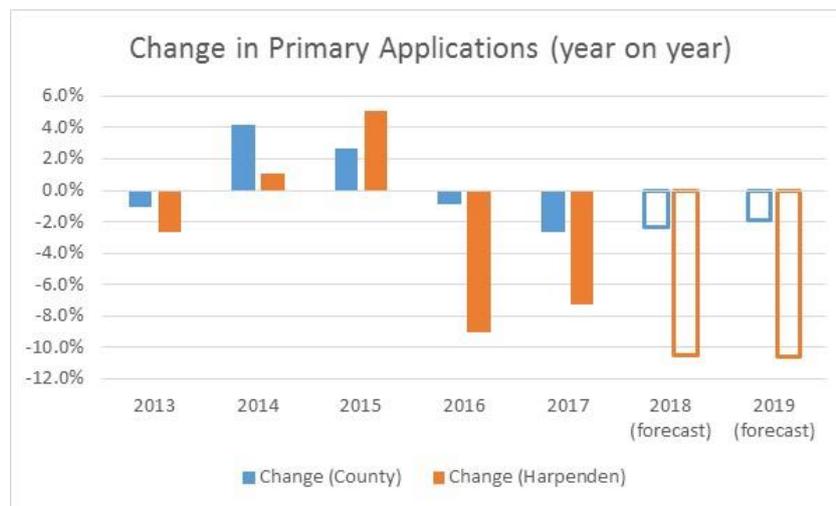
Four years of admissions have occurred since HCC brought its proposals for land acquisition forward and 10 years of admissions data is now published on HCC's website⁽⁴⁾. Data published includes accurate figures of how many applications are received by Town or Parish of residence – both for secondary and for junior, who become the core of secondary applications seven years later. Applications from Harpenden Town residents for the past decade have seen some increases, but these are moderate – an average of 10% higher in the second five year period (2013-17) compared to previous five years (2008-12). The average number of applicants from 2013 to 2017 was 422 per year from Harpenden Town – 150 (five forms of entry) less than the places available.



In practice applicants covers any applicant applying to HCC for a place – this includes those who apply for (and get) places in the two single sex schools in the 'Priority Area' – both of which (STAGS and Veralum) are located in St Albans. Similarly the figure includes those applying to HCC but ultimately taking a place in a private sector school. HCC do not publish figures showing where the allocations to each school reside, but via Freedom of Information requests made about data presented by HCC to a meeting in Harpenden in February 2016,

RSRP learnt that following all iterations of the allocation process in 2015, the total number of Harpenden Town residents taking up places at the three secondary schools was 398 – a little under 70% of the available places.

HCC's latest forecasts ⁽²⁾ identify a maximum demand in 2019 for which the Harpenden Town element is expected to be 455 ⁽³⁾, more than 120 places below the current provision. Going forward the applications for Primary places indicate what can be expected – in the chart below 2013 Primary School applicants are compared to 2012 and so on. As 2012 intake will form the basis of the 2019 Secondary transfers, the changes reflect the expected change going forward. In the chart the comparison is between Harpenden applications and the overall applications across the County – which are significantly different.



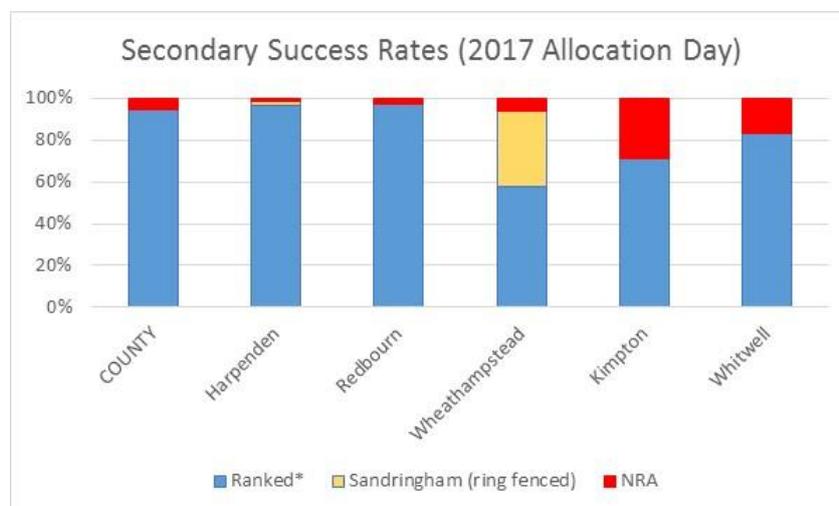
In practice 2017 saw the second substantial fall in Primary School applications in succession and the final two years (taken from HCC forecasts) show a continuation of this dramatic reduction. Essentially there is only one conclusion from this:

There is not, never has been, nor is there forecast to be more secondary applicants than current places in Harpenden Town

However the difficulties experienced by some parents in getting places in the three secondary schools were not imagined – HCC adopted an approach to school place planning and allocation many years ago that failed to give proper weight and balance to pupils who live outside Harpenden. HCC School Planning is organised by 22 Planning Areas across the County – one of these (Area 11) is the Harpenden Schools Planning Area, sometimes referred to the Harpenden Education Planning Area by HCC. It is effectively a horseshoe shaped area with Harpenden Town occupying the central section and areas to the East and West of the Town, both of which stretch northwards. Each of the outlying districts has one large village area – Whethampstead to the East and Redbourn to the West and further outlying areas with smaller villages and hamlets – Kimpton and Whitwell in 'The Waldens' to the North East, Flamstead and Markyate to the North West in 'Hemel Rural North'. The recognised travel routes from each of the outlying areas to Harpenden lead through or close by the larger villages in the respective areas. While the sub areas are considered on a stand-alone basis for Primary School place planning, since the closure of secondary schools in both

Wheathampstead and Redbourn, all area demand has been directed towards Harpenden. While the idea of concentrating the residual demand in the centre of an area may have some merit when the residual demand is small, it becomes illogical when there are large numbers of pupils expected to travel in on a daily basis – by the mid-2000s there were in excess of one third of pupils travelling in to Harpenden’s three schools, and as numbers rose the village requirements rose above 200 per annum and in HCC’s forecast for the new school over 320 pupils per annum were expected from outside Harpenden Town.

In practice the allocation rules have been highly influential in the fortunes of applicants for school places in Harpenden. Going into the build to the peak, places for children in the villages began to reduce as the underlying deciding factor in success of an application was distance from the school. St Georges originally ‘reserved’ places for qualifying applicants (Faith grounds) for pupils from the villages – however these were initially cut back to 20% (about half the proportion in the planning area) and then, in 2017, to a pure ‘distance from school’ criterion. The effect is not immediate as the rules do not affect Siblings, one of the two largest groups of applicants, in the same way. Generally Sibling entries – where a child qualifies for a place on the basis of an elder sibling attending the school – are amongst the top half of allocations. However the distance factor affects the next category of applicants and here distant applicants are progressively less successful – this has the effect of removing eldest children from these areas and thereby reducing the sibling numbers from the same areas in the years that follow. The situation has been aggravated by the success of Harpenden’s schools – making them attractive to applicants from outside the Planning Area and in turn opening up places to further Siblings. As the number pressures grew, the restriction on available places for local residents was greater than the numbers would have suggested, but ‘first-time’ applicants from out of area would be the first to fail to secure places and as the rings of exclusion progressively tightened, Harpenden Town applicants would be expected to achieve higher success levels with applications. This appears to be borne out in the measures of success used by HCC for allocations – % of applicants receiving a “ranked” or “non-ranked” allocation (ranked being one of the four choices a parent can make when applying for a secondary transfer).



Note: * Ranked figures exclude ring-fenced temporary places at Sandringham

Ring fenced places were initially introduced in 2015 for Wheathampstead residents, following 80% success in the largest of the villages. Under the scheme HCC asked Sandringham School to advance its plans for expansion and make 25 of the new places available to Wheathampstead applicants. This was repeated in 2016 and for 2017 HCC asked for the scheme to be extended by a further 30 places, split 15 for Wheathampstead and 15 for Harpenden Town. Other areas, such as Kimpton with substantially lower success rates were not included in the extended offer. Harpenden applicants were offered 8 of the available 15 places on Allocation Day, after continuing Interest rounds 4 places (0.9% of Harpenden applications) remain allocated to Harpenden pupils. With similar disproportionate success rates in previous years it is clear that:

The burden of any shortfalls in school places is borne by children in the Villages outside Harpenden and particularly to the East of the town in Wheathampstead, Kimpton and The Waldens

A key factor in the significantly poorer success rates for Village pupils in attaining allocations to Harpenden Town schools is the distance – the three schools operate under two slightly different sets of rules – St Georges, located slightly to the east of central Harpenden, draws pupils from the whole town, while the two standard Co-educational schools effectively give preference on the basis of the nearest to place of residence. This has the effect of creating a dividing line through the town, however it is not an equal division and Sir John Lawes is the nearest co-educational secondary school for a greater proportion of homes. The most obvious effect of this is that Roundwood Park is the ‘nearest’ such school for Redbourn and is generally able to accommodate applicants from Redbourn. The distance effect has been known to kick in for more distant applicants in Flamstead and Markyate to the west of Harpenden.

Under the current allocation rules a new village applicant looking to Harpenden’s three secondary schools will find they are further down the queue for places than all Harpenden residents for two of the three schools, and for the remaining school they will be behind a significant proportion of the Town’s applicants – more for eastern villages than western in the Harpenden Schools Planning Area. Adding a fourth school in Harpenden Town will exaggerate this effect as village applicants will be further down the queue for three of four schools and still be behind some Town residents for places at their ‘nearest’ school.

Is there sufficient demand in any of the villages for a school? Application data published by HCC indicates applications for Primary school places from residents of Wheathampstead has averaged over 100 for the past 5 years, while Kimpton and The Waldens – the villages furthest east of Harpenden – typically have 45-50 applicants. In essence the villages to the east of Harpenden Town produce around 5 Forms of Entry for senior transfer each year – sufficient for a sustainable secondary school located where the majority of the demand is – Wheathampstead. The villages to the west provide 120-130 applicants, but the physical location of the current co-educational schools is such that a significant number of pupils secure places at Roundwood Park on a regular basis (but are still behind all Harpenden residents for places at the other schools), therefore while each area would justify a local secondary school in the largest local village, the case for Wheathampstead is the stronger.

With HCC's plans exclusively limited to Harpenden Town pupils from villages to the east of the town will effectively be directed to the new proposed school but in doing so will form the overwhelming majority of attendees at the new school, involving longer travel with all its incumbent problems. However of greater concern is that as the total demand falls away – per HCC's latest published forecasts – there will be significant excess capacity in the Town which is likely to result in one of the following:

- Short term recruitment of pupils from much further afield – from other HCC areas and out of County – with further travel issues in the short term and potential loss of places in future to siblings from remote pupils.
- Capacity reduction – managed reduction at all schools to maintain capacity for subsequent expansion
- Capacity reduction – removal of block of capacity on permanent basis.

Any of the above will have a detrimental effect on the position of applicants in the villages as all will result in some squeezing of capacity and, once again, the village applicants will be the first to experience any detrimental effect. The current HCC forecasts suggest an extended bulge in demand for around 5 years, on this basis there are grounds that establishing a school, possibly smaller than the HCC core model, located in the eastern Villages to serve the village needs would produce a sustainable solution that also addressed the inherent inequalities in the current allocation process.

Demand in Wheathampstead and The Waldens exists and is sufficient to make a school in the immediate locality justifiable and sustainable.

Throughout the formulation of plans for a potential new school HCC has referred to demand in the Planning Area as demand for Harpenden as though all demand was in the Town – to the point that groups briefed by HCC were talking of hundreds of Harpenden children being bussed across the county for schooling. This is, and always has been, a myth. In practice far from exporting pupils, Harpenden has for many years drawn pupils in – up to 40% of Secondary school pupils in the town travel in and far from addressing a localised shortage, HCC's plans would lead to approximately 2 places for every Harpenden Town resident pupil if progressed. Perhaps more surprising is that Primary places in the Town, where expected pupil travel distances are lower, are also subject to excess provision – with 421 'Town' applications for 2017, the available places number 517 – 22% more than local demand. However this year 468 allocations were made on Allocation Day and the extra capacity is split fairly evenly between out of Town applicants and spare capacity. Previously there have been well documented difficulties in getting places at the more popular schools, which, given there has been historic provision beyond the immediate local needs, suggest that the same demand profiles and the knock-on effects of Sibling preferences have been the main cause of local placement difficulties. However as indicated in HCC forecasts the demand is set to plummet in the coming years, further alleviating local concerns but potentially opening up to the next wave of more distant applicants.

In summary HCC, and other interest groups, have been happy for picture to be painted of massive permanent shortages of school places in Harpenden, which can only be addressed

by continually increasing the number of places in the Town. However the direct consequence of this approach has been to create a level of over provision that has had catastrophic effects on both local and distant pupils, in turn sparking hysteria about subsequent ability to secure places. The knee jerk solutions proposed and implemented have served to accentuate problems and failed to address inherent inequalities in the allocation process. It is time

- to properly recognise the nature of need and align the provision of places to need
- to plan to sensibly meet the future fluctuations in demand in an even-handed manner
- to provide more equality of access to all pupils, by facilitating schools that allow continuity of entry
- to manage the full estate of education property to make best use of public funds

and this starts by dispelling the myth that for each school year there are over 700 pupils in Harpenden – there are 400-450 in Harpenden and the remaining 250-300 are in villages round Harpenden.

¹ Minutes HCC Cabinet 13 September 2013 (Item 8 - Reasons for Decision)

² HCC website 'School Planning' page (links to forecasts – Summer 2016-17 at time of writing – are in section headed 'How we decide how many school places we need')

³ HCC estimated demand based on Primary School place occupancy in its Forecast of Pupil Places for Transport Appraisals (available on HCC website in New Schools section) produced in association with Site reports in February 2015 (managed by Vincent & Gorbings as commissioned by HCC) – the methodology used has been applied to current peak estimate. (Note – definitions were postcode based and include some areas outside Harpenden Town within Harpenden count)

⁴ HCC website 'School Admissions – previous years' statistics' page (multiple reports available by year of entry)