

TITLE	Farley Hill Primary School Organisation Changes
FOR CONSIDERATION BY	The Executive on Thursday, 25 November 2021
WARD	Arborfield; Barkham; Finchampstead South; Swallowfield;
LEAD OFFICER	Director, Children's Services - Carol Cammiss
LEAD MEMBER	Executive Member for Children's Services - Graham Howe

PURPOSE OF REPORT (INC STRATEGIC OUTCOMES)

To modify proposals already agreed and partly enacted relating to Farley Hill Primary School to better serve the local community and release a valuable asset from education use for re-use or sale.

RECOMMENDATION

That the Executive:

- 1) approves formal consultation on the proposal that the proposals agreed by Executive on 30th January 2020 for the expansion of the Farley Hill Primary School in stages on two sites be replaced by a new proposal that Farley Hill Primary School expands to 420 places (plus a nursery) from September 2022, and that the former school site in Farley Hill Village be formally closed;
- 2) endorses proposed changes to 2022/23 School Admission arrangements to ensure that all children living in homes on or in immediate proximity to the Arborfield Garrison Strategic Development Location are within the Farley Hill Primary School Designated Area;
- 3) delegates authority to the Director of Children's Services, in consultation with the Executive Member for Children's Services, to determine the proposal.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

On 30th January 2020 Executive approved consultation on a proposal to expand Farley Hill Primary school to 630 places and the occupation of a new school site in Arborfield Village (but retaining the Farley Hill Village site).

It is now proposed to amend this proposal to bring forward the expansion to Farley Hill Primary School to September 2022, to formally close the Farley Hill Village Primary School site and to limit agreed expansion to 420 places plus a nursery, at this point.

In parallel with this action under the School Organisation Regulations, the Council will seek to amend the 2022/23 Admissions Arrangements to include a number of homes that are within or are closely associated with the Arborfield Garrison SDL area (the garrison area) and to confirm the formal school site address for admissions purposes. The Council has no power to amend these arrangements directly but can seek the School Adjudicator's agreement to the change.

As previously agreed, the Farley Hill Primary School relocated to the new Arborfield Village primary school premises in September 2021. The school was oversubscribed, and the majority of children admitted in September are resident in the garrison area. The majority of the admitted children living in the garrison area live in the south of the garrison area. A significant number of children living in the north of the garrison area could not be admitted to the school, including children living around the new school site. Expansion to 60 places and confirmation of revised admissions arrangements would enable children living in the north to be admitted to the school and do as much as is in the Council's gift to ensure that children living in the south of the garrison area continue to be admitted.

The earlier decision enabled the future growth back into the old school site. However, analysis of applicant numbers indicates there are more than sufficient children living on the garrison area to fill an enlarged school (and there were insufficient children living in the rural area that the school serves to fill one class per year) so reopening the site would lead to children being driven out of the garrison to Farley Hill Village. This would be contrary to the interests of both garrison and Farley Hill Village residents. It is therefore proposed that this link is formally broken, so the Council can seek a long-term use for the current Farley Hill site.

It is noted that the Coombes CoE Primary School has a reduced admission number of 60 for the 2022/23 year (compared to 75 in earlier years). This reduction helps mitigate the risks of local oversupply of places associated with the proposed expansion of Farley Hill School. Given its location in a major development area, with the construction of new homes and new resident families expected by September 2022, it is possible that all local places will be required.

If the expansion and other changes are not agreed the likely consequences are:

- A very high risk of there being too few school places available in the South-West schools planning area as roll numbers rise as the development of the garrison continues and additional families move to the area.
- A risk of further damage to the relationship between the Council and the new Arborfield Green community and associated wider adverse publicity, because local residents with children have a reasonable expectation that built capacity will be available for use.
- The longer-term future of the former Farley Hill Primary School site in Farley Hill cannot be resolved.

These risks must be set against the risk of additional capacity in Farley Hill Primary School (a popular school) leading to damaging deficits in other local schools.

The proposal entails no additional spend from the Council's General Fund. It would though require financial support from the Dedicated Schools Grant Growth Fund and future expansion (beyond 420 places) would require agreement to additional capital spend. The Growth Fund is part of the Dedicated Schools Grant Schools Block. It is agreed by Schools Forum and its purpose is to enable the creation of new school places through school expansion and the opening of new schools.

The Director of Childrens Services, acting in consultation with the Executive Member for Childrens Services will consider all responses received, including from parents, local

schools and from the School's Forum concerning the use of the growth fund for this purpose.

BACKGROUND

As set out above the Council has partly enacted proposals agreed on 30th January 2020 regarding Farley Hill Primary School. It is now proposed that these arrangements be modified to bring forward expansion to 2022 and to release the Farley Hill village school site.

These changes are prescribed changes under the School Organisation (prescribed alterations to Maintained schools) (England) Regulation 2013, which can be determined by the Council, after the completion of a statutory consultation process. These are linked to proposals made under the School Admissions (Admission Arrangements and Co-ordination of Admission Arrangements) (England) Regulations 2012. These proposals relate to changes to the 2022/23 admissions arrangements, including increasing the determined admission number to 60 (for that year alone), confirming that measurements will be made from the current school site and that residents in a number of new homes associated with the garrison are included in the school's Designated Area. These changes cannot be agreed by the Council and can only be made by the School Adjudicator.

It is anticipated that alongside consultation on the new school organisation arrangements, the Council will take steps to withdraw the previously determined arrangements.

There are two key reasons for proposing these changes. These are that early expansion will meet local community needs and that releasing the former school site enables beneficial use to be made of a valuable asset.

When allocations to the Farley Hill Primary School were made in 2021, a number of local residents were concerned that many local children could not be admitted to the school, including children living around the new school site in the northern part of the SDL area. This was because (a) the original admission number of 30 was retained (because of concerns over the impact of early expansion of the Farley Hill Primary School on other local schools) and (b) measurements used to prioritise children in the admissions process were made from the original Farley Hill Village site (as this was the address at the point the 2021/22 admission arrangements for the school were determined) and this site is to the south of the garrison area.

Parental concern was expressed through both direct contact with the council and also through the media. If the school does not expand as proposed it is likely there will be further adverse publicity and a more organised campaign to ensure that all available places at the new school are offered. Alternative offers would be of schools in nearby communities that most parents will see as schools that are only accessible by car, whether or not they are by law within walking distance of their homes.

Analysis of allocations made by September 2021 showed that 90 children lived in homes with garrison area post codes, and 53 of these has first preference applications for the Farley Hill Primary School. If 2022 figures follow this pattern, it is likely that without an expansion of the number admitted, children from wither the north or the south of the garrison area would not be admitted to the school. This would undoubtedly expose the council to further public criticism.

Expanding the school will enable an increased number of children from the garrison area (from both the north and south areas) to be admitted. This might not mean that all

garrison children would be admitted, or even that all allocations would be to garrison resident children, but it would mean that the Council had done all it could to answer local needs.

Releasing the current school site means that the asset can be repurposed or sold and the Council does not carry the burden of maintaining and protecting the current premises in case of possible re-use. Legal advice has confirmed that the S106 agreement and the site hand over agreement (the new premises are on a site provided through a S106 agreement and much of the funding comes from the same source) do not preclude this action or create a financial risk to the council (risk of reclaim of S106 monies).

Agreeing the expansion as planned would require funding from the Dedicated Schools Grant Growth Fund. This budget is approved by the Schools Forum and their view on the use of the fund for this purpose (noting that other school places are likely to be available, if not necessarily places at schools within distances parents are normally prepared to walk) will need to be taken into account by the Director.

It is not proposed that the proposal should be brought back to the Council's Executive after the consultation exercise is complete. However, it may be necessary to amend the proposal, in the light of responses received or additional information becoming available between the determination of this report by Executive and the completion of the statutory consultation exercise by the Council (noting that "on time application" for September 2022 Reception places have to be made between 13/11/21 and 15/01/22). In this case it may be necessary to bring a new proposal to Executive to consider.

Appendix one shows the school sites in the context of the Arborfield Garrison and other local schools.

BUSINESS CASE

While the current School Roll Projections do not support immediate expansion, these are limited in that they are based on data from January 2021 and do not take account of the full possible impact of new home development. In particular the arrival, of new families in the development and younger children who have already arrived aging into the 2022/23 Reception admission cohort. Both are important because our new home survey data points to a significant number of younger children (including children in the early years cohorts) moving into new developments.

While there are two other schools within statutory walking distance (of most homes, at least) of the garrison, they are at a distance where national and local evidence points to most parents making the school trip by car, rather than walking. Relying on these schools to provide school places for the garrison would create additional school run traffic.

Given the current circumstances, the only identified option would be to retain the current admission number and to retain the former site for possible re-use. This is not recommended because this would not meet local needs and would entail the Council in further spend to maintain an inactive asset.

The risks are (a) that application numbers may fall back rather than increase and (b) of objections from key local stakeholders. Although both are real the risk of having insufficient local places is seen as outweighing the risk of over supply.

The timetable for school organisation changes would be:

Task Name	Start	Finish
Preparation of consultation documents	Mon 04/10/21	Fri 15/10/21
Pre notice consultation	Mon 18/10/21	Fri 12/11/21
<i>Exec Meeting</i>	<i>Thu 25/11/21</i>	<i>Thu 25/11/21</i>
Formal Notice	Thu 25/11/21	Wed 29/12/21
Decision	Thu 30/12/21	Wed 12/01/22
Statutory information	Thu 06/01/22	Wed 26/01/22

The timetable for school admissions changes would be.

Task Name	Start	Finish
Preparation of application case	Mon 04/10/21	Fri 15/10/21
Pre notice consultation & information	Mon 18/10/21	Fri 05/11/21
Application to the SA	Mon 08/11/21	Mon 08/11/21
<i>Admissions on line opens</i>	<i>Sat 13/11/21</i>	<i>Sat 13/11/21</i>
SA decision (8 weeks allowed, no formal time)	Mon 08/11/21	Fri 31/12/21
<i>Closing date for admissions</i>	<i>Sat 15/01/21</i>	<i>Sat 15/01/21</i>
<i>Offer day</i>	<i>Sat 16/04/22</i>	<i>Sat 16/04/22</i>

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE RECOMMENDATION

The Council faces severe funding pressures, particularly in the face of the COVID-19 crisis. It is therefore imperative that Council resources are focused on the vulnerable and on its highest priorities.

	How much will it Cost/ (Save)	Is there sufficient funding – if not quantify the Shortfall	Revenue or Capital?
Current Financial Year (Year 1)	£0	Yes	
Next Financial Year (Year 2)	£50K	Yes	From the DSG Growth Fund
Following Financial Year (Year 3)	£50K	Yes	From the DSG Growth Fund

Other Financial Information

The DSG Growth Fund is an allocation made from the Schools Block each year to support new and growing schools. Approval of the total value of the Growth Fund is required annually through Schools Forum as part of Schools Block budget setting. Modelling undertaken to date indicates a significantly increased Growth Fund requirement for the 2022/23 financial year in comparison to that in recent years, and work is therefore ongoing with the Schools Block Task & Finish Group (a sub-group of Schools Forum) to review this prior to final approval being sought in January 2022.

Stakeholder Considerations and Consultation
Statutory process with a formal Notice in a local newspaper, on line information and involvement of local stakeholders

Public Sector Equality Duty
Equalities Impact Assessment to be completed

Climate Emergency – <i>This Council has declared a climate emergency and is committed to playing as full a role as possible – leading by example as well as by exhortation – in achieving a carbon neutral Wokingham Borough by 2030</i>
This would help by enabling additional children to walk to school.

List of Background Papers
None

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