

READING BOROUGH COUNCIL

ADULT SOCIAL CARE, CHILDREN'S SERVICES AND EDUCATION COMMITTEE

7 JULY 2014

QUESTION in accordance with Standing Order No.36

John Popplewell to ask the Chair of the Committee:

School Places in North West Caversham

There is an acute shortage of school places in North West Caversham. This year there were 94 children who did not get a place at existing schools, with 50 of these children offered places at the new Heights Free School and 30 children being offered places at very short notice, at the Hill school in a bulge class following support from the Head Teacher and Governors.

The Heights school permanent site was announced last month as High Ridge on Upper Warren Avenue. Local residents were shocked and saddened by the Education Funding Agency's choice of site as they feel it is unsuitable for the following reasons:

1. There are no pavements on Upper Warren Avenue, so the children would not have a safe walking route to school.
2. The site is too small; five times smaller than the EFA's minimum guidelines for the number of pupils.
3. The site is steeply sloping with a 19 meter fall, presenting major operational challenges and expensive design challenges.
4. The road is less than 3 meters wide, so it would be difficult for cars to pass at pick up and drop off times.
5. There is no mains sewerage, and inadequate electricity and gas supplies to the sites. Installing these services would be prohibitively expensive and would result in damage to the tree roots of the mature avenue trees.

Over 500 residents attended the public meeting on 17 June called by Cllr Isobel Ballsdon, with over 200 turned away. The feeling of the meeting was to strongly support a new school in the area, but very few residents supported the proposed High Ridge site. A resident suggested that Mapledurham Playing Fields would be a better site, as a new school would only take up a small fraction of the Playing Fields and a new school would be a tremendous benefit to the community. Since the meeting, I have delivered 400 letters to local residents asking for support to form an Action Group to investigate building a school on Mapledurham Playing Fields, and have received more than 50 emails and letters of support.

I ask that Reading Borough Council prepare a feasibility study for a school to be built by the EFA on Mapledurham Playing Fields ?

**REPLY:**

There is pressure on school places across the Borough as discussed widely in 2012 via the Let's Talk Education events run by the Council. That process of consultation led to the development of a strategic plan to provide 2930 more primary school places, with 420 coming in Caversham via a new "free school" proposal. The Heights Trust have worked tirelessly to secure a school with 350 places to serve north west Caversham and the commitment for it to open in September 2014 is welcome. The Council is spending £65m to deliver a further 2520 places with many schemes now at detailed design stage.

The Council is continuing to review the forecast of demand to ensure that every child continues to be offered a school place as has always been the case, however we recognise that the pressure for places, particularly in Caversham and the central area of the town, continues to be a concern for families.

The Education Funding Agency (EFA) are committed to providing a permanent school building for The Heights and their current preferred location of High Ridge gives rise to many questions as you rightly outline. The planning process will give the opportunity for those issues to be considered and discussed in detail. The Council hopes that the EFA are considering alternative options to ensure that The Heights school is successful. The Council's education team is willing to work with the EFA on the development of a feasibility study for a school at Mapledurham Playing Fields if they so wish.