A site for the Heights Primary School

An announcement was made on 5 June 2014 that the Education Funding Agency (EFA) had secured a site on Highridge, Upper Warren Avenue for the permanent location of the school. This followed an examination of 40 potential sites. Councillors Ballsdon and Hopper arranged a public meeting on 17 June 2014 for local people to hear more about the proposal and to have their say. St Andrew's Church was full to bursting and large numbers of people, who had queued to enter, had to be turned away. The meeting was chaired by MP Rob Wilson.

The queue to enter

The background to the formation of the Free School

In October 2012, the Caversham and District Residents Association (CADRA) held an open meeting entitled, "Planning More School Places." Following that meeting, a group of parents formed a group to consider setting up a Free School for Caversham Heights. Detailed work progressed through 2013 and early 2014, including open meetings and public consultations. The Department of Education determined that there was a justifiable demand for the school and instructed the EFA to find and purchase a site. Following a formal consultation with the community on whether The Heights Primary should open, the Funding Agreement was signed with the Department for Education.

The school will open September 2014 with two Reception classes and one Year 1 class in temporary accommodation at the old Caversham Nursery, just off Gosbrook Road.

The demand for school places

To meet the growing demand, two bulge classes in Caversham were created for September 2013. When application forms were received at the start of 2014, there was a shortfall of 94 places north of the river. In addition to the 50 places on the temporary site for the Heights Primary School places an additional class will be available at The Hill Primary School. It is expected that two additional classes will be required for both September 2015 and 2016.

Early in the meeting, a show of hands was taken indicating clear acknowledgement of the need for a new school.

The role of the Borough Council

The role of the Reading Borough Council is to provide sufficient school places for local children. A range of data is used to plan ahead but exact numbers are only known when parents make their

application in January. Following the Council consultation, "Let's Talk Education", the Council's preferred method of meeting the increased demand was for a group to submit a bid to the Department for Education to set up a new primary under the Free School process. The Council reported that, following the change in regulations in 2010, they are no longer able to bring forward plans for a new school and the Free School model is being adopted elsewhere in Reading.

The Council put forward sites for consideration by the EFA. These included: BBC owned land, Hills Meadow, Mapledurham Playing Fields, Highdown School, Gravel Hill, Albert Road Recreation and Caversham Court.

The meeting in St Andrew's Church

The Upper Warren Avenue Site

Many of the points raised covered the problems of developing the Highridge, Upper Warren site for a two form entry primary school and views are strongly held. The site is small at one acre, steeply sloped and without mains drainage. The approach on Upper Warren Avenue is narrow for two cars, badly lit with no pavements and has steep gradients and no turning circle. This would be extremely difficult for both the school and local residents. It was not known what feasibility studies had been conducted by the EFA but Rob Wilson hoped to receive more information and had requested that all information without commercial sensitivity should be made public.

Mapledurham Playing Fields

The possibility of using part of the Mapledurham Playing Fields for the school was raised a number of times. This had been considered and rejected by the EFA – possibly because of the long and uncertain process required. A consultation in 2006 showed overwhelming opposition to moving Caversham Primary to the playing fields and selling the Caversham Primary site for housing. A show of hands indicated a substantial number of people in favour of a school on the playing fields and a substantial number against it.

Alternative sites discussed

Following major concerns about the closure of the Arthur Clark home and the Albert Road Day Centre, RBC have committed to retain that site for services for older people. The Albert Road

Recreation Ground was likely to be fiercely defended by local people. The site previously identified for a school at Bugs Bottom is on the edge of catchment and was sold and built on.

The Planning Process

The EFA had indicated they would hold a pre-application consultation when plans were sufficiently advanced. A full planning application would follow in the normal way, which would include an assessment by RBC Highways. Councillors on the Planning Applications Committee had to be cautious of 'predetermination' as, if they adopted a firm view before seeing the full assessment, they would be barred from participating in the debate and the vote.

The Way Forward?

Rob Wilson confirmed that he had raised a question in the House of Commons, would be meeting with the EFA Monday 23 June and that the Secretary of State, Michael Gove had agreed to meet a small group of key people from Caversham. He said that it was urgent that the community come together to find a workable solution to meet the needs of local children. Rob had requested that non-commercial information from the EFA be placed in the public domain and undertook to keep local people informed.

Following the meeting

A group of concerned parents (not Trustees) made contact with other interest groups to explore whether the community could come together as requested. As a result, a meeting took place between the parents, WADRA, the groups opposing the use of the Upper Warren site and CADRA which is concerned to promote calm community engagement on a difficult issue. This wider group is in regular contact with MP Rob Wilson who is currently waiting for clarification from the EFA.

1 July 2014