

The proposed expansion of primary and secondary schools in West Sussex from September 2019

Comments from The Midhurst Society

It is reassuring to know that WSCC is considering evidence relating to further growth in the number of children likely to be making use of state-funded school places and looking at how an increase in demand for these can best be accommodated. Forward planning of this nature is never wasted and is to be commended. We would, however, question the initial consultation window of just four weeks - the shortest time legally permitted - and why, with proposals having potentially far-reaching effects, proper public consultation meetings have not been organised for each of the areas involved. We are aware that these may well happen, depending on the response from a limited number of the public, but would argue that some proposals deserve more consideration than others in this respect because of the possible implications of their implementation.

Commenting specifically on the proposals for the expansion of Easebourne CE Primary School, we would agree that the site has available accommodation which could be adapted for teaching space. However, the question we would ask is *should* this happen? Why has Easebourne Primary been selected as the sole candidate for expansion with seemingly no consideration given to extending facilities at other primary schools in the Midhurst area? There was little to see at the public drop-in session we attended on 13th November, other than a plan of the main school showing which areas it uses at present and how it might move into spaces which are currently off-limits. The WSCC personnel in attendance were helpful and willing to engage in conversation.

The consultation booklet www.westsussex.gov.uk/schoolexpansions19 is somewhat confusing in that it appears to conflate Midhurst and Easebourne. It would be useful to know which 'parts of Midhurst, and the surrounding planning area' are included in the designated catchment area for Easebourne School. The table on page 8 gives 2014 to 2022 numbers of 'places available at reception in Midhurst'; also the 'number of children in Midhurst eligible for reception places'. If these available reception figures represent the pupil admission numbers for Easebourne and Midhurst Primary Schools - i.e. in the Midhurst *area* - it is surprising that no information relating to Stedham Primary would seem to have been included as the three schools exist in close proximity.

It is, perhaps, less easy to make proposals for dealing with primary age pupils; those of secondary school age are usually more established as individuals and can, in the main, hold their own in a school environment. Concentrating primary age pupils in large schools and classes can be detrimental to some who find such a situation unsettling and thus fail to thrive as they should. Ideally, in order for a school to gain the whole picture of an individual child, a multi-service community hub should be easily accessible, to allow for the earliest possible intervention where it is needed, and it is to be hoped that any plans for expansion of existing schools should take into consideration the provision of such a facility. It would be reassuring to think that, with increasing numbers and, potentially, more instances of disturbed or needy pupils becoming apparent, careful consideration is being given to how schools will be able to manage pupils of all abilities, temperaments and lifestyles. Funding for a realistic and supportive increase in staff numbers should be high on the agenda.

It is heartening to read that Mr Richard Burnett, Cabinet Member for Education and Skills, values our opinions, and that these will influence how and where school places are provided. With three excellent state primary schools in the Midhurst area we would certainly not wish to see the loss of any one due to the expansion of another. However, we acknowledge that proposed plans for an increase in housing stock will possibly bring more primary aged children into the area and that there will need to be suitable, quality education establishments in which to accommodate them. Transport implications associated with these proposed changes will certainly need to be afforded considerable thought.

We would therefore, in the name of transparency and openness, request that the predicted numbers of children needing reception places up until 2021/22 be published on a school by school basis, available for anyone to access, and also to be informed about how WSCC has taken into account the new homes proposed for the Midhurst area. Additionally, we would request information relating to the implications of a larger number of reception class pupils moving through each of the schools; how this would impact on each school's total number of pupils, year on year; and whether each school would have the physical capacity (including, where necessary, new buildings) to cope with such an increase in numbers.

Since schools are not always provided with sufficient funding at the moment, we would wish to see guaranteed provision of a sensible funding allowance for any expanding schools which is not only available in the first year as 'growth funding'. Growing schools will have year on year extra costs which will need to be addressed, other than through the pupil funding formula, if children are to have a fair chance in life - and our Midhurst area ones deserve nothing less.

The Midhurst Society is pleased to submit these comments for your consideration.

Sue Edwards (Chair)