

Mr Matthew Burns
Reading Borough Council
Planning
Civic Offices
Bridge Street
READING
RG1 2LU

24 October 2024

Dear Mr Burns,

The Heights Primary School Planning Application: ref 231023FUL

We are writing in regards to the above planning application and to provide additional information to support the request to adjust the planning condition on the school to admit 60 pupils on entry, rather than the current 50 pupils.

Background

The Heights Primary School was opened with two reception classes in September 2014 to meet the shortage of primary school places in the Caversham Heights area of Reading. The school moved into its new building during the summer 2021. While the building was built to accommodate 60 pupils per year, with an overall capacity of 420 pupils, the description of development limited the school to an overall capacity of 350 pupils.

The current planning application, which was submitted on 23 July 2023, is to amend the description of development to a school capacity of 420 pupils - i.e. 60 pupils per year group - as this is the standard entry number for all state-funded two-form entry primary schools.

In this letter, we would like to update and restate our rationale for this application to admit 10 more pupils per year to The Heights Primary School. It is also an opportunity to introduce Bellevue Place Education Trust (BPET) as The Heights Primary School joined BPET on 1 December 2023, after the planning application was submitted.

Introducing Bellevue Place Education Trust (BPET)

BPET is a multi academy trust of 12 primary schools across London and Berkshire, which The Heights Primary School Trustees elected to join and converted on 1 December 2023. As part of this conversion, BPET has taken responsibility as the legal entity for The Heights Primary School, which includes the lease for the buildings.

As part of our role, BPET is responsible to the Department for Education for the safety, education and achievement of all pupils at the school. BPET has taken over this role from the trustees of The Height Primary School Trust.

Through this letter, BPET would like to clarify the reason why we are making this planning application with a view to increase the pupil number allocation for the school and, in turn, its overall capacity.



1. Expanding a good and popular school

The Heights Primary School is a popular school, and this planning application is to expand a high achieving and over-subscribed school. The Heights is full in every year group, with 50 pupils joining in September 2024. In this round of admissions, the school received 142 preferences, of which 60 were first choices. The school received similar preference rates in 2023 and the year before. We have a waiting list for every class.

The Local Authority has a statutory duty to provide a sufficient number of school places. While this duty has been met in the Caversham area, the Local Authority is also measured on how many parents received their first school choice in each admissions round. In 2024, 93.3% of parents received their first choice. This planning application would increase this percentage, thus increasing the schools and Local Authority's capacity to provide first choice primary school choices.

By expanding The Heights Primary School, more parents will receive their first choice school for their child.

2. Educational standards

The Heights Primary School is a high performing school, with 81% of pupils achieving the expected standards in reading, writing and maths combined at the end of Year 6. This is 20% above the national average (2024).

Ofsted judged the school to be Outstanding in 2017. The school recently received a new Ofsted inspection (15 & 16 October 2024) confirming the high standards are being maintained across the school. The report will be published in November 2024. We believe the new Ofsted report will only increase the level of popularity of The Heights Primary School amongst the local community.

The Heights Primary School is a high achieving school in educational performance and having been judged to be delivering an Outstanding education by Ofsted.

3. Buildings

The Height Primary School building has been built to accommodate 420 pupils across the school, with each classroom built to accommodate 30 pupils.

This proposal requires no capital investment to add a total of 70 more high quality primary school places. The school, with its building, facilities and staffing structures, can accommodate 70 more children immediately, and with no adjustments.



4. Planning impacts

Prior to the current application being submitted, the school sought pre-application advice from the Local Planning Authority. The advice reiterated the guidance in the National Planning Policy Framework (para 99) that strongly supports school proposals that widen parental choice while also seeking to address potential planning impacts around transport and noise.

Accordingly, the application was accompanied by detailed transport and noise impact statements. An updated school travel plan was subsequently submitted, and additional cycle/scooter racks were installed to ensure full compliance with RBC's parking standards. The tight catchment of the school and the high level of walking and scooting/cycling to school mean that there is minimal adverse impact on local highways and the playing fields car park at school arrival and departure times. Minor adjustments to the footway in the access road from Upper Woodcote Road have been agreed to avoid conflict between pedestrians and vehicle turning movements.

Further information was also provided in relation to noise, resulting in agreement to install an acoustic fence along the western boundary of the school adjoining 28 and 29 Hewett Avenue - to be secured by planning condition.

Alongside the application, adjustments have also been made to the MUGA lighting to avoid light spillage to neighbouring gardens.

It is notable that the Local Authority at pre-application stage expressed a neutral position on the proposal. When consulted on the application later submitted, it expressed concerns about potential impact on other local schools. Further information on the geographical distribution of school places has been provided to demonstrate that not meeting the need for primary school place in NW Caversham would serve only to increase adverse planning impacts as pupils would otherwise have to travel out of catchment to/from school, adding to existing highway congestion in this part of North Reading. In addition it is in the interest of pupils that high performing schools are allowed to expand, to increase the quality of education provided. Pupil numbers in high performing schools should not be kept artificially low just to support less popular, lower performing schools.

Importantly, therefore, there are no planning grounds that justify refusing planning permission for this application. This applies equally to the physical presence of the school (transport, noise, lighting) and to the educational impacts - since NPPF para 99 actively promotes widening choice in school provision.

The school has met all the planning conditions set out and required.



5. Removing financial security argument

The previous application and correspondence included arguments that this planning application is required to ensure the financial security of the school. Having taken over the budgeting and having studied the finances, we are no longer making this argument: there are plans in place to make adjustments to the staffing of the school if the expansion is not granted (again, the school is staffed for 420 pupils, with only 350 pupils on roll). In the current structure, there is a strong likelihood that redundancies will be made; however, we will be able to add these positions back into the staffing structure if the school does expand.

Therefore, to be clear, we wish to expand The Heights Primary School to 420 pupils - taking 60 pupils each year - in order to expand a good and popular school, providing the local community with the places they request.

We hope this additional information and further explanation of our plans will enable the application to be considered in the positive light in which we aim to offer this. We believe the parents and wider community will welcome the additional high quality primary school places in their area (which can easily be achieved with no further financial investment or facilities adjustments).

Thank you for taking the time to consider our application and further information. We hope this letter will help support our application to be considered in a timely manner.

With best wishes



Mark Greatrex
Chief Executive

Cc: Brian Grady, Director of Education, Brighter Futures for Children (BFfC)