

Peter Ainsworth MP
House of Commons
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xx The Meades
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07 November 2007

Dear Mr Ainsworth,

Re: Admissions Arrangements for Oxted School

You were kind enough to support my objection to the revised admission criteria adopted by Surrey County Council (SCC) following changes to the admissions policy for 2007. You will probably be aware that the Schools Adjudicator upheld my own and other parents' objections and revised criteria have been imposed for 2008 (copy enclosed [1]).

The effect of the tie-breaker in the revised criteria as originally published ("...furthest away from the nearest alternative school at which there are places available...") would have been that Lingfield and Dormansland children would stand a reasonable chance of gaining admission to Oxted if they could not get into Sackville School in East Grinstead. (NB: There is a second school in East Grinstead, Imberhorne, but it is virtually impossible for Lingfield and Dormansland children to gain admission.) Although not ideal, I considered this to be a reasonable compromise.

However, SCC subsequently persuaded the Adjudicator to remove the words "at which there are places available" from the Determination. My suspicion is that SCC's intentions are that the proximity of Sackville School to Lingfield and Dormansland count against children from these areas applying for Oxted School whether Sackville have places for them or not, effectively neutralising the Determination. The Office of the Schools Adjudicator and the Adjudicator himself have been curiously reluctant to provide a full and proper explanation for the change (see copy of e-mail correspondence enclosed [2]). When some form of explanation was eventually forthcoming, SCC's reason for the change appeared rather feeble to me (it would surely be a trivial matter to establish whether any school was full and then manually apply the tie breaker for the relatively small number of children that would likely be involved), and I can't help feeling that the Adjudicator has either been naive or has colluded with SCC. It seems unfair and undemocratic that SCC can have the Determination 'doctored' while objectors have no right of appeal. Hence my first question to you is:

Q1. Is there any way in which either to you as an MP or we as parents can challenge the change to the wording of the Determination?

My suspicions over SCC's intentions have recently been reinforced by the publication of the Officer Report to the 6th November SCC Executive (copy of extract enclosed [3]), which is proposing new arrangements for Oxted School which involve the application of a catchment area which excludes Lingfield and Dormansland.

While I do appreciate that there is a problem that needs to be addressed, I am concerned that there are some fundamental flaws in SCC's reasoning behind their current recommendation for Oxted School for 2009 admissions:

- Firstly, there is much talk about distances and this where Lingfield and Dormansland children are at a disadvantage (their own, local secondary school having been closed by SCC in 1974). Distance, however, is only a crude indication of the time, expense or difficulty of the journey to/from school which is what actually matters. The problem here is that SCC maintain that, being around the same distance as Oxted School, Oakwood School at Horley is a viable alternative for Lingfield and Dormansland children. This, of course, completely ignores the fact that Oxted is a 10 minute train ride from Lingfield and Dormansland, whereas Oakwood is all but inaccessible by public transport and a 40 minute (minimum) drive away. Not only would this mean the expense and pollution of

additional road traffic (school bus, taxis, private cars), children would be disadvantaged through not be able to take part in after school activities.

- Secondly, part of SCC's reasoning for excluding Lingfield and Dormansland children from Oxted School is their access to schools in East Grinstead. While reasonable access undoubtedly has been available in the past, SCC do not appear to have considered the effect of the additional children that would otherwise have gone to Oxted, or the housing developments ongoing and planned for the East Grinstead area. In other words, if not in 2008, then soon after East Grinstead Schools are likely to be heavily oversubscribed. As out-of-county applicants, Lingfield and Dormansland children are at the bottom of the priority list and will stand virtually no chance at East Grinstead schools.
- This brings me to my final point. As I understand it, SCC has a legal duty to find places for all Surrey children. It therefore appears perverse that, under the proposed admissions criteria for Oxted, children in Kent will be given higher priority than the Surrey children of Lingfield and Dormansland. And the rationale behind this policy is that Lingfield and Dormansland children can be dumped onto West Sussex schools in East Grinstead! This is surely absurd.

To summarise what I believe the future holds for Lingfield and Dormansland children; SCC want to exclude them from Oxted, they can't get into Imberhorn now and, if not in 2008, Sackville will very soon be oversubscribed, and Oakwood at Horley is totally unacceptable for significant practical reasons. So much for parental choice! In Lingfield and Dormansland it seems that we will be very lucky to have any viable school at all if SCC have their way.

I will, of course make representations to SCC during the consultation process that is promised. However, I have to say that I am not optimistic of a fair hearing given their behaviour in relation to the 2008 admissions policy. First of all they undemocratically 'doctored' the Officer Report in closed session to remove the option for change (to the 2007 admissions policy), and then went on to submit blatantly false testimony to the Adjudicator (they claimed that Oakwood is nearer to Lingfield and Dormansland than Oxted, contradicting the distance calculator on their own website, and also denied the existence of the railway line linking Lingfield and Dormansland to Oxted! – see copy of their letter enclosed with the 'offending' text highlighted [4]).

So, my final question for you is:

Q2. What advice and/or support are you able to offer Lingfield and Dormansland parents in respect of challenging SCC's proposed 2009 admissions policy for Oxted School? For example, should we write to the Minister for Education directly, or would this be better done through your own good offices?

With apologies for the length of this letter, but it did all need saying.

Yours sincerely,

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Copy Cllr. Ken Rimington