

Downshire Hill Residents' Association

Abacas School on site of the old Police Station

Catchment consultation

You may or may not be aware that there are plans to house the Belsize Park Abacus free school in the old police station building at the top of Downshire Hill. It is proposed that the school will have an annual two form intake with a maximum capacity, once it has been running a few years, of 420 pupils. It is currently planned that the school will open in September 2017. The school has been established as a non religious school that will serve the Belsize Park area. At the moment the catchment area excludes Downshire Hill and its environs. The school will need to obtain planning permission but this will be considered later.

The school is currently running a consultation on its intended admissions criteria and is inviting affected parties to comment on its proposed revisions to its admissions policy. **Comments must be received by 29th January 2016** so we do not have long.

On Sunday evening, (17th January) the Downshire Hill Residents' Association met to discuss the school generally and how we should respond to the consultation. (minutes on www.downshirehillra.com). Given the tight time line the DHRA, after debate, decided to respond to the proposal as below. The DHRA response to any planning application for the school will only be resolved after a special meeting of any interested residents.

Siting a school at the top of Downshire Hill

It was agreed, reluctantly, by the committee that we should object at the planning stage to the establishment of such a large school on this site, especially as it does not serve the community in which it is located. The effect that a school of this size will have on traffic in Downshire Hill, Thurlow Road and environs would be significant, and the restricted area for parents to drop off children, it is felt, would cause increased congestion at an already overused intersection. Safety in the road is likely to be affected. We do intend to call an extraordinary meeting of DHRA in the next few weeks to discuss the DHRA position on the School, if necessary carrying out a comprehensive traffic survey to show the possible extent of the increase in traffic and how safety in the road could be compromised. Given there have been 2 recent fatalities on the road this needs to be looked at carefully. In the meantime, we need to respond to the catchment area consultation now.

The admissions consultation.

The full consultation notice can be found on the school website at this link <http://www.abacus-cfbt.org/Admissions>

Currently their catchment covers mostly Belize Park, extending to Swiss Cottage in the South and Pond Street in the North. The first change to the policy that affects Downshire Hill is the proposal to extend their catchment area to the North to include the top of Downshire Hill only – the outer boundary veers right down Keats Grove so the bottom of Downshire Hill is NOT included in the revised catchment.

The second admissions policy change that affects Downshire Hill is that, if your house is NOT situated within the catchment area (ie it sits in the lower half of Downshire Hill) and you apply to the school, you will be judged by the distance that your house is situated from St Peter's Church in Belsize Square. This point is 0.7 miles from the proposed school site and is located here, we are told, to reflect the fact that it is Belsize Park that needs a non-denomination school not Hampstead, and hence the catchment area has been chosen to reflect this. It does mean, in our view, that most children will be driven to school as it is mostly too far for 5-11 year olds to walk.

In addition, places are allocated on a random allocation system. If your family resides within the catchment area but more children apply than there are places to offer, places are allocated at random. This means you might live next door to the school but a child from Swiss Cottage might get a place at the school at the expense of your child.

Our proposed response to the consultation regarding the proposed changes to the catchment area:

- 1) We feel, that given that residents of all of Downshire Hill will bear the brunt of increased traffic and road congestion as a result of drop off and pick ups at the new school, it is grossly unfair that the whole road is not included in the catchment area. In addition, the previous catchment area, established when the school was located at Hampstead Town Hall, included streets in all directions radiating from the building edges for at least 0.2 miles (the minimum distance being from the Town Hall to the upper end of Pond Street). We are proposing suggesting that the full length of Downshire Hill be included in the catchment area.
- 2) Re. the proposed use of St Peter's Church in Belsize Park as the central point for calculating distance if families reside outside the catchment area, we feel that the central data point for calculating distance should be measured to the proposed site of the school. This will encourage local families to apply and support the school's mantra as a local community school. It will also enhance community interaction, making it a school for the local community rather than a community elsewhere. Over time as more local families apply to the school, fewer pupils will need to be driven to school, lessening the impact on traffic in the road.

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Hon Treasurer M Dennis

The Downshire Hill Residents Association will be responding to the consultation stating that we believe all of Downshire Hill should be in the catchment area and that the central point for calculating distances should be the new school location itself. If you agree with these points or have others to add, please do respond to the consultation personally. The more of us that respond in a similar vein, the better chance we have of getting the proposed policy amended.

Please note that by commenting on admission criteria, the DHRA are not implying that they agree or disagree with a school in that location in the first place. However, we need to show Abacus that we are very engaged throughout their process and that our concerns re traffic, should a school ultimately secure planning permission, are well founded. As stated above we will be holding a residents meeting in the future to gauge everyone's views so that these can be reflected in our response to their intended application for planning permission.

To respond to the admissions consultation please email your views to admin@abacus-cfbt.org marking ADMISSIONS CONSULTATION RESPONSE in the title line

Or write to Admissions Consultation,
 Abacus Belsize Primary School
 Jubilee Waterside Centre
 105 Camley Street
 London N1C 4PF

Again, the final date for submission of comments is 29th January 2016. If you want more detail go to the Abacus Belsize Park web site and follow "admissions" (the link is <http://www.abacus-cfbt.org/Admissions>)

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Hon Treasurer M Dennis