

# WOOLMER GREEN PARISH COUNCIL

## Questions & Comments from Public Meeting 9 February 2011

1. WNAS claim 1,200 people have signed their petition however on the copy in the public domain there are only just over 500 names which include people not living in the area and children. Can WNAS explain the discrepancy?

WNAS: The WNAS petition started off on paper but when the website was launched an online petition was created for those who had not yet signed the paper version. The online petition has collected a further 500+ signatures and this is the figure in the public domain. There are a further 700+ names from the paper edition, which need to be fully verified. One cannot control who signs petitions, so it is inevitable some people who feel strongly but are from outside the area will sign too. In our case, these numbers are small. An opposing petition, called "We don't want a school" has collected many signatures from people who don't live in Hertfordshire, including Cornwall, Yorkshire, New Zealand, Notts, Suffolk and Northants. It also has names of children.

2. Will the school be a secular or faith school?

WNAS: The school will be secular.

3. There is a difference between "need" and "want" that seems to be getting confused. There is an HCC consultation currently taking place on school places. I urge both groups to respond. Have WNAS responded already or will they be responding before the deadline?

WNAS: We understand the HCC consultation concerns specific locations mentioned on their consultation document and it is mostly concerning primary schools. The document doesn't appear to request input regarding locations not mentioned. One thing that is certain is that HCC needs to find 5000 new school places across Herts in the next 2 years, as stated in their most recent assessment. Obviously it would assist with this challenge if village children didn't all have to take up places at town schools. Previous HCC assessments of need were based on incorrect population projections which wrongly indicated declining demand for school places. The opposite turned out to be true and there is an increased and growing demand for places.

HCC are considering enlarging primary schools in WGC and Stevenage in line with the national problem of finding 500,000 additional places by 2018. All of these children will then go on to require places at secondary schools. In the 2012/13 admissions consultation, Woolmer Green and Knebworth have been nominated as priority areas. Clearly, HCC acknowledge the need to prioritise admissions in this area - something WNAS has been saying for two years now.

As a local example of the pressure on schools, Monks Walk were asked to find an extra 20 places this year but were unable to because of "Insufficient core, specialist and/or general teaching space to accommodate more pupils". In 2010 the school received 655 applications for 210 available places, and this was during a relatively small academic year group.

The key driver for increasing demand on school places is clearly population growth. Villages have grown with lots of small housing developments over the last 10 to 20 years, but not as much as the towns, which are where the schools are located. The Office for National Statistics revealed Welwyn Hatfield had the 6th highest population growth in the UK over the past decade and will continue to grow well into the future (+16.1% by 2018). Where are all these children supposed to go to school if we already have allocation problems in 2011? Furthermore, travel to school will become more costly for parents as subsidies across the county are about to be cut. HCC needs to save £150m from its budget.

WNAS has recently made submissions to HCC along these lines.

4. Are there circumstances where Welwyn Garden City and Stevenage children could be accepted into the catchment area of the new school?

WNAS: The plan for admissions criteria is for the children of the five villages to be given priority followed by the primary schools of Knebworth, WG, Oaklands, Codicote and Datchworth to become feeder schools for the new secondary school, with the aim being that attendance at one of those schools would give priority for obtaining a place at the secondary school. After that, nearness to school would become the deciding factor filling any remaining places.

5. If school places are needed in the area why is Heathcote closing? Have WNAS considered applying to use the Heathcote buildings for their new school?

WNAS: The decision to close Heathcote was undertaken by the county council, but it was probably not done because of a lack of demand. Heathcote is one of the many options being investigated by the DfE agency involved in the decision about possible sites for the school. It may be a viable option. However, being based in Stevenage, there is a real danger that it could soon become just another part of the Stevenage system, even if we were able to insist on certain admissions criteria. A legal challenge to those criteria would be easy to make and might well succeed, in which case nothing would have been solved for our village children, because those pupils closest would once again have priority. There are also moral questions about barring children from a school they live near to. We are of the view that a more local solution would be better if one can be found.

6. How can children walk or cycle from Datchworth when there is no footpath and the roads are dangerous?

WNAS: Children would be less likely to walk or cycle from Datchworth than from Knebworth, Woolmer Green and Oaklands. However, numbers from Datchworth would be small and could easily be catered for using the school bus.

7. I have lived in Woolmer Green for 30 years and consider it a paradise. I wrote to Mr Wallace who owns the land who replied that he had heard of no proposal to build on his land. Woolmer Green is a very small village and it does not need a swimming pool, theatre, café and other facilities which we can access in nearby towns. The countryside is precious and needed for relaxation. I would prefer to keep the "Green" in Woolmer Green- Why bring the town into the countryside?

WNAS: No proposal exists for any site as yet. WNAS were specifically asked by the Dept for Education not to propose individual sites. What they wanted from us was the idea (ie a secondary school to serve village children) backed up by evidence of demand and need. Their own agency will do the research and make the site decision.

8. WNAS say that their meeting in Woolmer Green in Sept. 2009 was well attended and warmly received. I find it hard to believe as most people here oppose the idea of a school. What evidence do either side have for popular support for their campaign in Woolmer Green?

WNAS: Over 100 people attended the Woolmer Green meeting in Sept 2009 and not one person said they opposed the school. Opposition has largely arisen since the Save Woolmer Green campaign published their leaflet, containing a map which had no basis in fact whatsoever and which was clearly designed to frighten people. We have large numbers of signatories to both our petition and our register of interest in sending children to the proposed school: [www.wneedaschool.org/REGISTER](http://www.wneedaschool.org/REGISTER).

9. I attended a meeting in September 2009 and another in Datchworth in June 2010; since then plans have gone further. Why have WNAS not come back for another meeting to discuss the plans with Woolmer Green residents?

WNAS: Our plans have not really changed since then. They remain simply an idea. We are awaiting decisions from various authorities to see what they want to do with our idea and whether or not they think it might be viable. The recent progress to the business case stage was simply a recognition that our idea had some promise and so warranted further examination. If a site is found to be suitable, we will hold a full and thorough public consultation process shortly after that decision is made.

10. The campaign has moved on since 2009 and there seems to be a lot of mis-information or no information from the WNAS. The map that showed sites in Woolmer Green was a surprise to everyone. What actions are going to be taken to give residents the correct information?

WNAS: The map you mention was not spread about by WNAS. It had no basis in fact whatsoever and was clearly designed to scare as many people as possible. We do not have funds for widespread leafleting and so have to rely on our website to give correct information. Everything we know about the project is detailed openly there: [www.wneedaschool.org](http://www.wneedaschool.org). When funds are available, and plans more fully developed, we will do more leafleting to ensure all residents have accurate and up-to-date information.

11. The old sewage system will need a big new main and the electrics in the village are not adequate; a new sub station will be needed to cope with an 800 children school. Who will pay for upgrading these services in the village?

WNAS: These issues and many others are currently being examined by Partnership for Schools as part of their investigation into suitable sites for the proposed school.

12. You can't destroy a forest to make a zoo. How can creating an artificial landscape be a substitute for natural bio diversity?

WNAS: Experts have assured us that agricultural, non-organic, arable fields have surprisingly little biodiversity on them, so there would be little to replace in this regard. Our architect's plans for the school include significant numbers of trees and grassland areas, so biodiversity would actually be improved.

13. In their statement WNAS claim that 75% of children around Nobel school walk or cycle. Would WNAS agree that it is inaccurate to compare the new school in a rural area with Nobel as that is in a dense residential area?

WNAS: The point we were making was simply that here is a local example of very high incidence of walking to school among pupils who live within 2km of it, as most of the pupils at the proposed school would also.

14. You say 75% of children walk to Nobel School and 75% of children will live within walking distance of the new school. This means that 75% of 75% will walk to school which is 56.25%. Do WNAS agree with this calculation?

WNAS: If 56% of our villages' secondary school children walked to school it would be a great improvement on the current percentage, which is, of course, zero. There are ways to make this figure even higher too and if you add on top the number who would use public transport, the school bus or bicycles, we are starting to be able to see the possibility that there would not be a significant number of children arriving by car. Non-essential car usage would certainly be strongly discouraged. There might be something in the region of 50-60 staff cars too, but bearing in mind that over 12,000 car journeys are made down the London Rd every weekday, it

is perhaps worth considering whether any small increase caused by the school might, in reality, be tolerable in light of the enormous benefits the school would bring.

15. It is one thing to build a school but another thing to run it. WNAS say they will select teachers who live near the new school. However, shouldn't they be choosing teachers with the most appropriate qualifications? As a Deputy Head I know they will need professional backing beyond the setting up stage- where are they intending to get this professional advice from?

WNAS: Rest assured that appropriate qualifications among applicant teachers would have more influence than simply living near the school, but the latter might be decisive, all other things being equal. As far as professional backing, assuming a site is found to be suitable, we will be able to appoint an organisation of educational and other experts dedicated to the task of setting up new schools, either permanently, or on a temporary basis until the school is firmly on its feet. There would obviously also be a head teacher, deputy, other teachers and a board of governors, as all schools have, and probably a business manager too. Other staff would also be required too, providing local employment opportunities – it will need caretakers, chefs, dinner ladies, cleaners, secretaries and IT specialists to name just a few.

16. It is not easy to understand who runs any of the campaign organisations or how to contact them, how to become a member, how they make decisions and if they have a constitution. Are they going to publish this information?

WNAS: You can contact us anytime via our website: [www.wneedaschool.org](http://www.wneedaschool.org). We would welcome anyone who wanted to join the campaign team, so do get in touch. We do not have a constitution as such. We have so far simply suggested an idea on how to solve real and growing problems with secondary education provision in our community. We are now investigating that idea further, by putting together a business case. It will then be up to the authorities to make decisions as to whether our idea is ultimately worth pursuing. WNAS is not a decision-making body in this regard.

17. I have seen a film of Juliet Pomerance standing in a field that is to be the location for the school. Are they going to retract this information?

WNAS: This was probably the site by the railway line in Knebworth offered to us by the landowner there before the change of government changed the way we could fund the school. The change meant that, thankfully, we could totally drop the idea of building houses, the sale of which was proposed as a funding method for the school. It is possible that the site in question may still be under investigation by Partnership for Schools – the sole agency in charge of finding a suitable site – but we would not be aware of this.

18. Woolmer Green is at the centre of the area where the school should be located. Are there any other potential sites available, for instance to the North of Knebworth? Why choose Woolmer Green? Could WNAS publish a list of all the sites they have considered and the reasons for accepting or rejecting them as "potential sites?"

WNAS: We would refer you to several previous answers given above. WNAS has no say in the site decision and has not proposed any site to the DfE, because they specifically asked us not to.

19. Why not use Heathcote as the Free School instead of building a new one? This would be a brownfield site and be a better use of money.

WNAS: Heathcote is one of the many options being investigated by the DfE agency involved in the decision about possible sites for the school. It may be a viable option. However, being based in Stevenage, there is a real danger that it could soon become just another part of the Stevenage system, even if we were able to insist on certain admissions criteria. A legal challenge to those criteria would be easy to make and might well succeed, in which case

nothing would have been solved for our village children, because pupils closest to the school would once again have priority. We are of the view that a more local solution would be better if one can be found.

19. Wouldn't it be cheaper to spend tax payers' money on upgrading Heathcote?

WNAS: Possibly, but this would not solve the problem of inadequate choice for local parents, because Heathcote would rapidly be populated by children local to it once again, and it would not provide the local solution we believe would be best for our communities in the long run.

20. From a survey conducted by Welwyn Hatfield Council it was found that people do not like coalescence and water, electricity and sewage are big problems in the area. Why has no one from WNAS had the common courtesy to come to Welwyn Hatfield Borough Council about building a school within their jurisdiction?

WNAS: We met with the Head of Planning at Welwyn Hatfield Council on the 30th July 2009 and they were very interested in our ideas. We have also sent regular updates to Welwyn Hatfield Borough Council about our ideas, but until we know where the site will be we do not know that it will be within that jurisdiction. Relevant councils will of course become more involved during the public consultation and planning processes, should the proposal reach that stage.

21. There have been recent meetings in Knebworth and Datchworth; has there been any communications with the residents of Oaklands and Mardley Heath and what plans are there to consult people living in these areas?

WNAS: In April 2010 WNAS planned an open evening at Oaklands school. However, for some reason unexplained to us, the school advised us that we could not now have the room so the event had to be cancelled. We had also planned an open evening in the summer for Datchworth and decided to turn it into a joint Datchworth and Oaklands event. It was open to all parents from Oaklands and Datchworth. We advertised this through posters and via our mailing list of people who expressed interest in the school – many from Oaklands/Mardley Heath. Posters were also given to all of the shops in Woolmer Green and St Michaels school (who displayed it on their noticeboard) to extend the invitation to Woolmer Green too.

23. If the majority of residents in Woolmer Green do not want a school here what will WNAS do?

WNAS: Once we hear about the site then we will all be in a better position to decide who wants what. To dismiss an idea with so much potential to enrich our communities educationally, culturally, socially, and financially, without waiting to hear what is truly being offered or where, would be a great shame. However, if it was decided that Woolmer Green could host the school and it was proved to us that once the proposals were fully developed that the majority of residents there really didn't want it to go ahead, then we would not press for it to be in Woolmer Green.

24. If the school goes ahead then there will be less funding and less children going to the surrounding schools. Will this school be detrimental to other schools in the area?

WNAS: If this school goes ahead it will not reduce funding to other schools. The funding for free schools comes from a different pot. If the funding doesn't go to this free school, it will go to another free school. All the proposed school will do is relieve pressure on these already oversubscribed schools, which is a major aim of the solution we are proposing.

25. WNAS want a low impact school and suggest a footprint no bigger than Monread Lodge. However, modern planning regulations suggest a much bigger footprint would be needed. How have they arrived at their conclusion?

WNAS: This simply isn't true. Modern schools are much more space-efficient than older schools even from a decade ago. The comparison with Monread Lodge came direct from our architect, who has designed several similar schools in recent years.

26. Why not ask the children if they want this school or prefer to gain independence?

WNAS: Children will still be gaining independence by attending the proposed school. That won't change just because it is nearer to their homes.

27. The school will not help children broaden their horizons and make new friends. Is it possible that some children will want to go to schools outside Woolmer Green?

WNAS: Good schools always broaden children's horizons and allow them to make new friends. The pupil population will be made up of children from at least five villages. If parents choose, they will still have the current school options in Hertfordshire available to them. This is all about choice.

28. My daughter prefers to go to Stevenage and make new friends. Distance is a key part of how school places are allocated and, depending on where the new school is, it may be that people from Codicote will not get in to the new school. Have WNAS made its supporters in Codicote aware of this, and what was the reaction?

WNAS: The plan for admissions criteria are for the children of the five villages, then the primary schools, including Codicote, to become feeder schools for the new secondary school, with the aim being that living in one of the villages and/or attendance at one of those schools would be a priority for obtaining a place at the secondary school. After that, nearness to school would become the deciding factor filling any remaining places.

29. I go to Richard Hale and I couldn't wait to get out of the village and away from my parents. I was excited, it was an adventure, it helps you grow up.

WNAS: It's great to hear of such positive experiences. Richard Hale is a fine school and will still be an option if the proposed school goes ahead. Not everyone wants to travel so far to school though, and having a more local option we think will be popular. Recently, an Oaklands resident pointed out to us that the cost of sending children on these long journeys to school can be over £400 per year per child. Imagine the savings if you choose to send your child to a school just up the road.

30. Improving existing schools should be looked at before building new schools. Wouldn't it be better to put the proposed investment into the existing schools in the area?

WNAS: The funding for free schools comes from a different pot. . If the funding doesn't go to this free school, it will go to another free school Funding for existing schools is in local authority hands whereas free school funding comes from central government. We make no value judgement about the policy, but we do feel it would be wise to at least consider trying to obtain some of the investment on offer for our community.

31. In the end, will the Parish only be able to object to the plans for the school, not the school itself?

WNAS: If a site is found to be suitable for the school, then there will be a full and thorough planning and public consultation process, during which anyone in the parish can voice their opinions about any aspect of the plans for the school, including whether the school should come into being. That process cannot begin until a site is available, because until we know where it will be (if it will be anywhere) we don't know with whom we will need to consult.

Questions received by letter/e-mail:

1. I am neither for or against the school but I do need one point clarified. I have noted that there is a possibility of 300/500 extra cars in use should this proposal go ahead but will the dropping off and collection points for these cars be on the school premises or on the public road?

WNAS: We don't think it should be possible for parents to drop children off on the road, but this will be for the Highways Agency to decide. We want to discourage non-essential car usage wherever possible and we do not want the school to create traffic problems. The figures available suggest that it won't, but a full traffic assessment will be made by the appropriate authorities as part of the inquiry into whether the school should go ahead.

2. If the school is to be built in Woolmer Green, is site A (the most Northerly one, between Knebworth and Woolmenr Green) the most favoured?

WNAS: WNAS would favour a site on brownfield land and the PfS is currently investigating all possibilities. WNAS has no say in the decision and PfS are currently undergoing a thorough investigation of all sites in the area.

3. Will it be considered that the proposed school has ample parking for parents to drop off and pick up pupils without having to park on the road and also to charge parents for this facility? This would be the only way to encourage parents to get pupils to walk and would provide useful revenue for the proposed school.

WNAS: These are interesting ideas; we will encourage all ideas such as this if a site for the school is found. Traffic issues will be thoroughly investigated by the relevant authorities. We will discourage non-essential car usage at every opportunity.

4. Will the Swimming Pool be a definite facility?

WNAS: We cannot promise facilities until we know what funding we will receive; it is our hope to be able to provide a swimming pool for community use if possible.

5. It is 'hearsay' that one of the proposed areas of farmland is owned or associated with a member of the WNAS group. I would like to know if there is any substance to this allegation or not?

WNAS: There is absolutely no substance to this suggestion whatsoever.

6. I would like to know where the attendee figures come from with regard to the children that would attend this school. Is there evidence that there are significant pupils within the catchment area to attend such a large school?

WNAS: There are currently some 1200 pupils at the five primary schools we hope will feed into the proposed secondary school. All of these children will need a secondary school place. The proposed school would provide 800 places. This is the smallest school which the government says works effectively and efficiently.

7. Would parents within the catchment area of this new school be happy to send their children to a "Free School" which is government funded yet may not be required to employ qualified teachers?

WNAS: We want the best teachers, we want inspiring teachers and aim to employ qualified teachers. We aspire to create a school of excellent educational and behavioural standards which would soon become an attractive option for parents in our villages.