

Proposal to restrict the sibling link to children living within the community area:

In recent years there has been pressure on places in rural schools in a number of parts of the county. This has at least partly been as a result of families in urban areas choosing to send their children to rural schools rather than making use of schools in the town where they live. This fills the rural schools in the initial allocation process, leaving it difficult for them to accommodate children moving into the community area at a later date.

For September 2015 the situation in the rural schools surrounding Hastings and Bexhill is that, including siblings of existing pupils, over 40% of children allocated places lived outside the community area for the school in question. Sedlescombe CE Primary School had twenty of its thirty places filled by children living outside the community area in the initial allocation process.

This is just the most extreme example but a similar situation persists elsewhere in the county, notably at Herstmonceux (fourteen out of area children), and Pevensey & Westham (25 out of area children).

Clearly we cannot refuse children places at out of area schools if there are spaces available (the School Admissions Code does not allow this), and nor would we wish to do so (this would have a potentially serious impact on school budgets). However, we do recognise that rural schools in particular serve a local community and that the needs of the local community should be prioritised ahead of those living outside the community area who choose to use the school as a result of preference rather than need.

One proposal to alleviate this problem is to prioritise children living in the community area ahead of children with a sibling link who live outside the area. This would not prevent out of area siblings from being offered a place, but they would only be offered a place if all children living in the area had been offered a place already. This model is already in use at Frant CE Primary School, where it has had some impact on the number of places available to local children. If we were to explain to parents that if their older child is offered a place at their preferred school, there is no guarantee that the younger one will be able to follow them, this could act as a disincentive for parents to send their child further afield, freeing up places for local children moving into the area.

The introduction of this measure would not necessarily prevent families from outside the area from applying for rural schools, or obtaining places at them, but it would enable those schools to serve their local community as a priority in years when they are oversubscribed.

This strategy is not without risk: parents of existing pupils living outside the area may feel aggrieved that the priorities have changed since their older child was offered a place and for this reason it is recommended that we phase the proposal in by limiting it to families whose older child was admitted after 1 September 2017 (although this would limit its effectiveness for seven years). Furthermore there are always families who will be insecurely housed and may find themselves obliged to move out of the rural area in question, thus compromising their younger child's ability to attend the same school as the older one. However this needs to be set against the hardship faced by rural families who are unable to access their local school as there are no spaces available in the child's year group.

Initial feedback from some schools indicates that this would be a popular move with those parents who are unhappy about rising class sizes and feel aggrieved that families living in the area often move out once they have secured a place for their eldest child, vacating a property which is then often occupied by another family requiring a place.