

Some response is needed to the statement by the ‘WBC Development Team’ to the comments on applications 241861 and 241862 (Spencers Wood Primary School) in response to the statement by Shinfield Parish Council (hereafter SPC). I had a small hand in writing the SPC submission but the comments which follow are submitted in my own name and do not represent the position of SPC. Nor do they purport to represent the views of any political organisation of which I might be a member.

It is necessary to write because the WBC response contains statements which I think are at best questionable and at worse wrong. The case for the needs of Shinfield, Spencers Wood, Three Miles Cross and Swallowfield needs to be made.

In fact this is the first of two submissions in response to WBC’s paper. It deals with the numbers of school places needed in Shinfield, Spencers Wood, Three Miles Cross and Swallowfield. A second statement deals with the history of the parcels of land reserved for the use of the school. I do not discuss the technical aspects of the school building, for which see a response from Mr Darrell Lias which has also been posted on the planning portal.

It is acknowledged in other WBC strategy papers that there is a shortage of school places in Shinfield and that this marks Shinfield out from other parts of the borough where there is an emerging problem of oversupply.¹ It may be held that it is politically difficult to reduce numbers in some parts of the borough – entailing as reduction in the numbers recruited into some schools and even selective school closures – whilst at the same time building a new school in another part of the borough. But this reflects the very uneven distribution of housebuilding over the borough in the last decade, and the deliberate decision to locate many of those houses in Shinfield. There is one new primary school in Shinfield – Alder Grove – and the projected school under discussion here would be the second which would serve west Shinfield, Spencers Wood and Three Miles Cross (although Three Miles Cross parents have the option of Grazeley Primary School). It would also serve Swallowfield which lacks any form of school, primary or secondary.

It is also widely accepted that primary schools should be relatively small and local to the place of residence of the children attending the school. It is this unexceptional state of affairs we wish to see established in Shinfield. Swallowfield, obviously, presents other problems.

The strategy paper as quoted in this submission argued that there might be a justification for a one-entry primary school (i.e. seven classes of 30 pupils makes a total roll of 210). It would be conceded that this is implausibly small from the management point of view, hence the option is offered that it might be attached to Alder Grove in some way. (Alder Grove appears not to have been party to any discussions about this.) But the paper hides behind ‘the *forecast* need for additional capacity within the Shinfield area’ (response 2) without recognising how unsatisfactory the current situation is. One might reasonably dispute the forecast situation but here we are talking about the *current* situation as well as the *future* situation.

There is a question of the area that this projected school is supposed to serve. The new WBC submission is confused about this. It implies at one moment that a one-form entry school is sufficient to deal with the needs of the ‘application development’, i.e. the Taylor (T-W)

¹ ‘Wokingham Borough School Places Strategy 2024/25 to 2029/30’ (rev. Apr. 2025) and see in particular Appendix 1 (p. 22).

development at Croft Gardens. It then talks about a one form entry school being sufficient to deal with the needs of the Shinfield area. It then says that the option to have a two- or three-form school was there in case 'the council wished to meet the needs of a wider community ... in this location'. (all comments in section 2). It is this last option that WBC seems to have decided is not necessary to pursue and we are left with a hasty, completely minimal going-through-the-motions application, brought forwards, we assume, to avoid repaying the S106 money for the school to T-W as provided for in para. 5.12 of the S106 agreement (pp. 22-3).

We regard this as the school for the western part of Shinfield, Spencers Wood, Three Mile Cross and Swallowfield, that is, that it serves the third option mentioned in the WBC paper ('the wider community').

The present situation.

The data available to us (via an FOI application) is problematic. It is only at ward level, the wards being those in existence before May 2024. Shinfield North Ward is excluded from the analysis. The former ward of Shinfield South did not include that part of Spencers Wood south of Hyde End Road. This area was in Swallowfield Ward. We discovered at the Trowes Lane Planning enquiry which was held on 26 June to 3 July 2024 that whilst students from Swallowfield ward attended Lambs Lane School, students from Swallowfield *village* did not (with one or two exceptions, including a child who went for specialist teaching) because they were crowded out by children from the southern part of Spencers Wood who lived nearer the school. Primary age children from Swallowfield village were widely dispersed including to schools in West Berkshire. There is no school in Swallowfield *civil parish* or serving Swallowfield *village*. It seems that around half the children from Swallowfield Ward are actually from the southern part of Spencers Wood (i.e. north of the River Lodden.) Swallowfield *ward* should therefore be treated with Shinfield village, Spencers Wood and Three Miles Cross, that is the former Shinfield South ward.

The table (see end) shows that there is a shortfall in the school places available in Shinfield. The size of this has differed from year to year. In Shinfield South the shortfall, i.e. children living in Shinfield South who could not be accommodated in schools in Shinfield South, has varied between 19 and 60. When Swallowfield is factored in, the shortfall has varied between 56 and 82. This is easily a two-form entry school.

It goes without saying that the two wards have the lowest proportion of children allocated to their first-choice schools, so over the borough 90 per cent (26 wards) are allocated to their first preference schools. Sixteen wards exceed this. In Shinfield South the figure is 75.6 per cent and in Swallowfield 73.1 per cent. These are 2023-4 figures but this pattern has been established for some years.

In most wards this may be thought unexceptionable: that children move across ward boundaries (and indeed local authority boundaries) to go to school. Why this matters in Shinfield is firstly, distance to neighbouring schools and secondly, the fact that there are no neighbouring local schools which are not already full (for instance Hillside and Whiteknights). There is no capacity at Farley Hill for Swallowfield children and they are increasingly inched out by the proximity rule. We therefore have children going to Coombes in Arborfield and from Swallowfield crossing the borough border to Mortimer.

Within Shinfield the catchments are extremely small. With the exception of Grazeley, all are under a mile. The 'catchment' for Alder Grove (i.e. the distance from which the most distant

pupil was admitted) in the 2023-4 round was 0.430 miles. It is a matter of local comment that people who can see the school from their houses cannot get their children into it. There are therefore large parts of the parish in which there is *no chance* of a child going to go to their nearest school, They are therefore allocated to geographically more distant schools (The Coombes for instance) with the with the dislocation and inconvenience that that implies.

The catchment for Lambs Lane School is 0.858 miles which excludes Swallowfield Village. The catchment for Farley Hill school is 0.772 miles which also excludes Swallowfield village. Again, there is no prospect of children from Swallowfield going to their nearest school.

There are therefore two questions.

First, given that there is a shortage of school provision within Shinfield and no provision within Swallowfield, what distance is it reasonable for a parent and child to travel to primary school given, of course that they are probably driving past a nearer school to get to one which is more distant? This seems to me to be a matter of simple equity for residents of Shinfield.

Second, will those more distant schools always be available to take the overflow from Shinfield? I say that this is questionable given that development is happening all over the southern part of the borough. I predict that over a period of time, there will be a much reduced possibility of using The Coombes as an overflow for Shinfield in just the same way as there is now little prospect of Swallowfield children getting into Farley Hill.

I acknowledge that the planning of school places is on the one hand now sophisticated and on the other hand still imperfect. It rests on the age structure of the resident population which in turn is partly dependent on the character of the houses erected by the developers. This will change if the LPU is adopted, for it proposes that a much higher proportion of ‘starter’ or ‘affordable’ homes and this will attract a much larger number of families with young children than estates of four-bedroom houses where the children may be older, and, indeed, may have passed school age.

First, this raises the question of whether the demand for primary places will decline as the current cohort of children resident in the area reach secondary age. That might be expected, but there is some anecdotal evidence of parents moving away from Shinfield, Spencers Wood etc because of the lack of local secondary provision (Oakbank being discounted by many local parents). The numbers of families with very young children moving in to replace those who have moved out to secure better schooling elsewhere may be larger than supposed.

Second, the Shinfield Parish Council submission has laid out the scale of continuing building in Shinfield. We also have to recognize that the DEPZ may not be the restraint on building that we have imagined for some years, so that Spencers Wood, rather than being sanitised by the DEPZ, may well be exposed to large scale building granted on appeal to the Planning Inspectorate no matter what AWE might wish. There is then Swallowfield which, following the Inspector’s decision at the Trowes Lane enquiry last year, is just waiting to be developed. There is no school in Swallowfield although there is an evident need for one, and this will grow over time. Both Grazeley and Lambs Lane lie within the boundaries of the DEPZ. Even if AWE would consent, it is hard to see that Grazeley primary would attract any investment to increase its intake given its location, and the Lamb’s Lane site is entirely built up.

That whilst WBC has placed all its eggs in a basket called Hall Farm, there is no guarantee that the Hall Farm development will go ahead in the form and at the pace suggested in the draft LPU. Even in the present plans, there is a gap between the commencement of building and the provision of schools which implies that existing schools will be under considerable pressure for a period.

Given that building is also proceeding at some pace to the east of Shinfield in Arborfield and elsewhere, it is our belief that the schools which currently take children from the west of Shinfield civil parish, Spencers Wood, Three Mile Cross and Swallowfield parish will not be able to do so indefinitely and will prefer children from their immediate locality.

The WBC response still seems to harbour the idea that the T-W money for the new school could be diverted to building an annex at Alder Grove. Other than what appears to a coolness on the part of Alder Grove, we do not favour this on simple locational grounds. It is poorly situated for Spencers Wood and Three Miles Cross and children from further afield. It is plain that the Alder Grove site is a poorly located at the end of residential streets and lacks the access to deal with car traffic at the school opening and closing times. We have also been told by people with a direct line to Taylor-Wimpey that they will not assign the £3.25m they have paid under the terms of the S106 agreement to additional buildings at Alder Grove, we presume that if this option is taken the money will be reclaimed by T-W and lost to the council. The whole charge will therefore fall on the council and it will have to explain to the public how it managed to forfeit a very large sum (if no longer a large enough sum to pay for the school as envisaged). If the school is not built, then we assume that T-W will ultimately sue for its return and again, WBC will have some explaining to do to the people of Shinfield who want the school built. This is a very considerable political problem which has been made for the elected administration of the borough by its officers.

It is therefore our contention that there is a *current* need for at least a two-form entry school in Spencers Wood which would serve Spencers Wood, Three Miles Cross and Swallowfield, in short the B3349 corridor. A one form entry school would be too small. For reasons we have offered, we do not see this need diminishing in the foreseeable future.

It is, then, quite clear to those of us who live here that the need is for a two-form entry school to allow Shinfield children to be educated in Shinfield, and Swallowfield children to be educated as near to home as possible. As some money is available for a school, it seems entirely reasonable that Shinfield children should be entitled to something which is regarded as unexceptional elsewhere. The alternative is to return the money to Taylor-Wimpey.

R. W. Hoyle
Spencers Wood
15 January 2025

1 Number of first choice applications received by Shinfield Schools and number of pupils allocated with ward totals.

2

	2021		2022		2023		2024	
	Number of first choice applications	Allocated	Number of first choice applications	Allocated	Number of first choice applications	Allocated	Number of first choice applications	Allocated
Alder Grove	75	59	70	59	115	59	96	59
Shinfield Infants	68	77	69	77	65	76	69	80
Lambs Lane	15	15	14	17	14	18	10	16
Grazeley	18	23	18	21	12	24	13	25
subtotal four Shinfield Schools	176	174	171	174	206	177	188	180
Other schools	30		22		27		33	
Total number of applications	206		193		237		221	
Shortfall in places	32		19		60		41	

3

4 Shinfield South and Swallowfield

	2021		2022		2023		2024	
	Number of first choice applications	Allocated	Number of first choice applications	Allocated	Number of first choice applications	Allocated	Number of first choice applications	Allocated
Total number of Applications from Shinfield South Ward	206		193		237		221	
Total number of applications from Swallowfield Ward	39		37		37		41	
Total applications	245		230		274		262	

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Shortfall								
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