

Summary of Informal Education Consultation Responses

KCC conducted an informal local consultation that ran for 6 weeks from 11 March to 22 April 2026. The following stakeholders were consulted:

- Schools in Tunbridge Wells, Tonbridge and Malling and Maidstone Districts
- Elected Members (Kent County Council, Tunbridge Wells Borough Council)
- Parish and Town Councils
- Local MP
- Dioceses of Canterbury and Rochester and Archdiocese of Southwark
- Residents Groups
- Local Community Groups

All stakeholders were be able to access copies of the key documents on the KCC website.

Additionally, the Assistant Director of Education held a discussion with representatives from the 13 most local schools, their MAT representatives where applicable and the Diocese of Rochester. This provided those attending with as much information and data as possible to inform their responses to the consultation.

Main Summary:

This summary includes information from all the responses received during the 6 weeks consultation period. There were 35 responses received via emails and digital response forms.

	Support	Against	Undecided	Total
Local residents	14	2	1	17
Parents/carers	9	0	0	9
Members of staff at a local school	1	2	0	3
Other interested parties	5	1	0	6
Total	29	5	1	35

Comments given by respondents who indicated 'support' for the expansion:

- Support the expansion as it provides the school places needed to meet the demand generated by local housing development in Paddock Wood/provides needed places for local children (14)
- The vast majority of Local residents and parents were support of the need for a new primary school, but registered concerned regarding increased traffic and parking issues (8).

Comments given by respondents who indicated they were 'against' the expansion:

- Concern about the impact on other local schools (4)
- Concern regarding parking during pick up and drop off (3)
- Site too small/compact (2)
- Site on a flood plain (2)

Note: The numbers in brackets shown below represent the occurrence of broadly aligned comments.

The Rochester Diocese registered the following response:

As discussed at the meeting on 27th March, I have significant concerns about the impact of the proposed new school at Paddock Wood on the surrounding small, rural Church of England Schools. It is likely that this development will affect St Peter and St Paul Yalding, Collier Street St Margarets and Laddingford St Mary's, as well as possibly affecting those slightly further afield such as Brenchley and Matfield.

The consultation document itself lacks sufficient data to enable a thorough and reasoned response. For example, within the Kent Commissioning Plan Pages 111-118, it can be seen clearly that the birth rate has been in decline and indeed the projections are for this to fall further from the 2023 data shown. Specifically, (KCP) in 2015 the birth rate spiked upwards to give a birth rate of 61, yet by 2023 this has dropped to 53. I expect a further fall in 2024 and 2025 is known about but not referred to in this paper.

In order to compare the available school places currently in Paddock Wood, within a three mile radius of the proposed site, we would need to have access to the 4FE Primary School already there and small schools in the immediacy. These small schools are in adjacent planning areas, yet, must be referenced, none are shown.

When we met on the 27th March, this was explored further, but I am unable to reference the figures we were given, as despite assurances that they would be, these slides were not circulated following the meeting. However, in the figures we were shown, the stand out factor was that there seemed to be very significant assumptions being made about the increase in the size of a birth year cohort between the ages of 0 and 4 – I did not come away from this meeting confident that there was any concrete evidence to support this predicted cohort growth.

I would also like to comment on the equality impact assessment of the consultation, I do not agree with the assumptions made or the conclusions drawn, with regard to race/ethnicity. Many of the small rural schools serve significant Gypsy Roma Traveller populations. They are a marginalised group that would be severely disadvantaged should their local Church School close as a result of this decision. I firmly believe that they would be disproportionately impacted and given that they are an often hard to reach group, would question whether their views been captured by this consultation?

Whilst I fully understand that KCC have a duty to ensure enough school places I do not believe the underpinning assumptions used to project future school place need, give sufficient confidence. This is not acceptable, if it transpires these assumptions are incorrect – as they were 10 years ago in Tunbridge Wells, there is significant risk that this proposal would negatively impact many small rural schools within the local area. Specifically I believe this proposal poses an existential threat to Laddingford St Mary's, and there is a considerable likelihood that it would result in the closure of this currently thriving village school.

This is not the first time we have had these discussions, both about the school at Paddock wood, and the expansion of other local schools. In 2024 there was a proposal by KCC to enlarge Coxheath Primary school by 1FE, again, on that paper there was neither individual school data nor reference to the falling birth rate. When the falling birth rate data was known, the enlargement was shelved.

As such, I do not support this proposal at this time. I believe that it should at the very least be delayed for a year, until we have a better understanding of how the falling birth rate is impacting, and what the actual mobility of children into the new housing looks like.

Local Rural Schools Responses:

We are very concerned about the impact that this will have on local schools. Several local schools are not full, with some reducing their PAN as a result. Building another school will further put pressure on existing schools. As a headteacher in a local school, we have a number of families already travelling from Paddock Wood and it is highly likely that they may be attracted to a closer school. Also there will be great appeal of a brand new building, making our older building a less attractive prospect. Many local schools have capacity, and some of us have capacity to extend 9or others to reduce to their additional PAN). Building another school is a waste of resources at a time when rolls are falling due to falling birth rates. This feels ill-timed and unnecessary. I would like to know how local schools will be supported if this happens, as they will inevitably face falling roles, reduced budgets leading to restructure and redundancy. Also, the new school is likely to be a Trust - having 2 Trust schools in close proximity will offer very little options to families. Also, the current trust's practice is to pass on challenging children to local maintained schools (including refusing to meet need for children with complex additional need), should this practice continue to happen - and possibly be mirrored by the new school, then local schools will be receiving complex children, providing a detrimental imbalance, and potentially more migration of existing pupils.

School2:

Lots of other schools have spaces that need to be filled first. Waste of money which should be put into improving or expanding other local schools

Leigh Academies Trust (LAT):

Leigh Academies Trust (LAT) welcomes the opportunity to respond to this consultation. We support the principle that Paddock Wood requires additional primary provision to meet forecast demand. We write both as a consultee and as an academy trust with a direct interest in education provision in the area.

LAT currently operates two academies in Paddock Wood: Leigh Academy Paddock Wood (LAPW), a primary academy, and Leigh Academy Mascalls, a secondary academy. We also operate a network of 33 academies across Kent, Medway, and South East London, including two Outstanding special academies with nationally recognised SEND expertise. We set out below our comments on the proposal and two alternative approaches we invite KCC to consider.

1. Support for the Need

The demand data in the consultation document is clear. The pre-school population in Paddock Wood has grown by 43% since 2020 and is forecast to continue rising. Without intervention, KCC's own projections show a Reception place deficit of 50 by 2028/29, rising to 49 by 2034/35. We accept that additional provision is needed. The question is how best to deliver it.

2. Concern Regarding Pupil Number Impact on Leigh Academy Paddock Wood We ask KCC to consider the risk that a new 1FE academy, if opened before housing development generates sufficient additional demand, could reduce first-choice preferences at LAPW. This would affect pupil numbers, funding, and the financial sustainability of an academy that currently serves the community well.

The consultation document notes that the proposed site at Mascalls Grange is part of a phased housing development. We would welcome confirmation from KCC of the anticipated phasing and occupancy timeline for that development, and assurance that commissioning of additional capacity will be aligned with actual, rather than forecast, demand. We raise this not to obstruct the proposal but to ensure the delivery model protects the viability of existing provision.

3.LAT's Interest in Operating the New Academy

Should KCC proceed with a Free School Presumption process, LAT would wish to be considered as the sponsoring trust. We are already embedded in Paddock Wood and Central Kent. Operating both LAPW and a new primary academy in close proximity would generate meaningful economies of scale in leadership, staffing, resource management, and back-office functions. This would support the financial viability of a 1FE model during the period before the housing development generates full demand.

LAT has a strong track record in primary education. All our inspected primary academies are rated Good or Outstanding. We deliver the IB Primary Years Programme (IBPYP) across our primary network, providing a distinctive, internationally recognised curriculum offer that has received strong community support in areas where we operate.

Our two Outstanding special academies, Leigh Academy Milestone and Leigh Academy Snowfields, give LAT established SEND expertise that would directly benefit the proposed 14-place Specialist Resource Provision. We are confident we can ensure the SRP is effective from the point of opening.

4.Alternative Option: Use of Land at Mascalls

LAT owns land at the Mascalls Academy site. We invite KCC to explore whether the new primary academy could be built on or adjacent to this land. This may offer a cost reduction for the county council compared to the currently identified site, while still serving the Mascalls Grange development catchment. We would be happy to discuss this with KCC officers prior to any formal presumption decision.

5.Preferred Alternative: Extension of Leigh Academy Mascalls to All-Through

Our preferred approach, which we ask KCC to consider, would be to extend the age range of Leigh Academy Mascalls to include primary-age children from Reception upwards, creating an all-through academy. This model is already in operation within LAT at Leigh Academy Hundred of Hoo, which operates successfully from Reception to Year 13.

An all-through Mascalls would: remove the need for a separate Free School Presumption process and the associated commissioning timescales; serve the growing Paddock Wood community within an established academy; deliver primary provision under the IBPYP, consistent with LAT's primary model across the Trust; create a through-education pathway from Reception to Year 13; and make efficient use of existing site infrastructure and leadership capacity.

We believe this approach could meet the identified demand more quickly and with less risk than establishing a new, standalone academy. We would welcome the opportunity to discuss this with the KCC Cabinet Member for Education and Skills and relevant KCC officers before the May decision point.

Conclusion

LAT supports the need for additional primary provision in Paddock Wood. We ask KCC to consider our concerns about the impact on existing provision and to engage with us on the two alternatives set out above before proceeding to a formal presumption competition.

We are committed to serving the Paddock Wood community and believe LAT is well-placed to deliver the new provision, in whatever form KCC determines is most appropriate. We would welcome a meeting to discuss our proposals at your earliest convenience.

View of the Assistant Director of Education

Consultation responses from the Diocese of Rochester, local rural schools and Leigh Academies Trust (LAT) raise a number of interrelated concerns, principally focused on the impact of additional provision on existing schools, the robustness of the demand evidence, and the timing of delivery. Officers have considered these issues carefully

The Diocese places particular reliance on declining birth rates at borough level. Officers recognise this trend and confirm that it is reflected within the Council's forecasting. However, borough-level data does not accurately represent conditions within Paddock Wood itself. Evidence presented during the informal consultation demonstrates that the pre-school population within Paddock Wood has increased significantly in recent years, driven by housing delivery and population movement. Officers therefore consider that reliance on aggregated data provides an incomplete assessment of local demand, where Paddock Wood is a discrete and growing town some distance from other existing towns.

More broadly, officers do not agree that the assumptions underpinning cohort growth are unsupported. Forecasts are based on established methodology, including observed pre-school population growth, historic reception participation patterns and housing trajectories. Evidence indicates that demand pressure is already present within younger cohorts and is expected to result in sustained reception deficits. This reflects observed change rather than speculative future growth.

Concerns have been raised by both the Diocese and local schools that additional provision will negatively impact rural schools, including the potential for falling rolls and financial pressure. Officers recognise that the introduction of new capacity can affect pupil distribution, particularly in the short term. Local school responses also highlight existing surplus capacity, recent reductions in PAN elsewhere, and the risk that parental preference may shift towards a new school, particularly one with a new building.

Officers consider these to be valid considerations. There is a credible risk that, if additional capacity is introduced ahead of realised demand, some schools may experience short-term reductions in pupil numbers. However, evidence indicates that the majority of children resident in Paddock Wood already attend schools within the town or very close to it, suggesting that the proposal is responding to localised demand rather than creating significant displacement from rural schools.

The Diocese raises the possibility that the proposal could lead to the closure of specific rural schools. Officers do not consider that there is evidence to support this assertion. No decisions regarding school closure are proposed, and any such change would

require a separate statutory process, including consultation and further assessment, including equality considerations.

Concerns have also been raised regarding fairness between education providers, including the concentration of more complex pupils in local authority maintained schools and the role of academy trusts. Officers note these concerns but do not consider that sufficient evidence has been presented to demonstrate that the proposal would directly create systemic imbalance. Admissions and SEND duties will continue to operate within the existing statutory framework.

LAT's response supports the need for additional provision but raises concerns about timing, particularly in relation to the potential impact on Leigh Academy Paddock Wood. Officers recognise this as a legitimate delivery consideration and agree that alignment between capacity delivery and housing occupation will be critical. This reflects standard commissioning practice and will continue to be managed through ongoing monitoring and review.

LAT has also put forward alternative delivery options, including the use of land at Mascalls and the potential development of an all-through model. Officers recognise the constructive intent of these proposals and the potential operational benefits that could arise from a more integrated model, including efficiencies in leadership, staffing and resource use. However, officers do not consider that these options align fully with the commissioning principles adopted by Kent County Council, which prioritise clarity of phase-specific provision, transparency of decision-making, and the ability to respond flexibly to changing demand. Officers also consider that such approaches are not necessary to meet the identified need at this stage and may introduce additional complexity or constraint.

In addition, officers consider that any decision regarding the future operation of a new primary school is best determined through the appropriate statutory process, including the free school presumption and open competition. This approach ensures fairness, transparency and the opportunity to secure the strongest possible provider. Officers therefore do not consider that changes to the age range or structure of an existing secondary school represent the most appropriate route to delivery at this point.

It is important to consider these responses within their wider historical context. The need for additional provision in Paddock Wood has been identified over a number of years, but Kent County Council has previously deferred progression of proposals specifically to avoid unnecessary disruption to existing schools when demand was less clear. Officers consider that this demonstrates a cautious and proportionate approach. The current proposal reflects a position where circumstances have changed materially, including substantial housing delivery and significant growth in the pre-school population, resulting in sustained forecast deficits.

In this context, officers consider that further delay would now increase the risk of under-provision, leading to reliance on temporary or unplanned solutions. By contrast, the risks identified by consultees, while valid, are considered to be manageable through phased delivery, ongoing monitoring and established school organisation mechanisms and have a low likelihood of occurring. .

Overall, officers' view is that the concerns raised by the Diocese, local schools and LAT highlight important delivery and implementation considerations. However, they do not provide sufficient evidence to outweigh the Council's statutory duty to secure

sufficient school places, nor do they undermine the core case for additional provision within the Paddock Wood planning area.

Implications and actions

- The Committee is advised that while short-term impact on some existing schools is a recognised risk with all commissioning decisions, it is considered manageable within existing commissioning and school organisation frameworks.
- Officers will ensure that delivery of new provision is aligned as closely as possible to housing occupation and realised demand, to minimise destabilisation. The proposed timing of the new school already aligns with this.
- Continued engagement with local schools, trusts and the Diocese will be maintained to monitor pupil flows, capacity and financial impacts.
- Alternative delivery approaches raised through consultation will be considered at the appropriate stage, but do not alter the requirement for additional capacity.
- Should Members agree to proceed, further detail and scrutiny will be provided through the statutory free school presumption process.