

'Catchment Areas' and choosing your child's first Primary School

On 7th. November the County Council issued the following:

Parents in Cambridgeshire who have a child born between 1 September 2007 and 31 August 2008 are reminded that they must submit an application for their child to start school in September 2012.

The process, which opens on 14 November 2011, can be completed online at www.cambridgeshire.gov.uk/admissions or by returning a paper form, which can be obtained from any primary school and returned to the Admissions Team at Cambridgeshire County Council.

The completed form must be received by the Admissions Team by the close of business on the national closing date, 15 January 2012.

If parents submit their applications late - or do not make an application - there is a risk that their child will not offered a place at one of their preferred schools, including their catchment school, as other children's applications (those received by the deadline) will be processed ahead of theirs.

I print this knowing that by the time you read it, there will not be much time to make your Application if you haven't done it. We do our best to make everyone aware of the process but the County knows that there will be some who miss out, mainly because they move to Cambourne after the deadline. Please contact me if this applies to you.

There are 3 Primary Schools to choose from.: The Vine (an inter-Church faith school), Jeavons Wood, and Monkfield Park. From September 2012 Jeavons Wood will be in a splendid new building surrounded by trees. If you look on-line you will see where the Catchment Area boundaries have been drawn for the Primary Schools in Cambourne:

<http://www.cambridgeshire.gov.uk/education/parents/admission/catchmentsearch.htm>

A zoomable map has also been produced by a Cambourne resident and can be seen at:

<http://homepage.ntlworld.com/tim.morley2/perm/catchments/cambourne.html>

So what does this mean for you? First of all, I am opposed to the setting of Catchment Areas for any schools. This is because I have an unshakeable belief that people should be able to make choices for themselves, not have someone else tell them that they can't. So if a resident of Lower Cambourne wants to choose The Vine then they should be allowed to even though it means passing the fronts of two other schools to get there. In the same way, parents in Upper Cambourne should be able to send their children to Monkfield Park.

Looking at the Catchment Areas set down in September 2007, you might think that a family from Upper Cambourne couldn't send their child to Monkfield Park because they live in the Catchment Area of The Vine and Jeavons Wood. This is not the case. You can make a free choice. In fact, The Vine is open to all Cambourne residents wherever they live. This is because it is a faith school and some parents want this kind of education. Many children from Lower Cambourne already attend The Vine. So my demand for parents to choose is met.

There is only one reason where I would accept the enforcement of Catchment Areas and that is if one school is full. The maximum size of each Primary School in Cambourne is 420. For September 2012 none of the Schools is full and so parents can send their children to the school of their choice. For the record, Jeavons Wood will have 206, Monkfield Park 406 and The Vine 406. Some parents may also choose Hardwick which will have 245.

Making Catchment Areas is done for purely practical reasons i.e. to make sure one school doesn't face over-large classes whilst another has empty rooms. But I would also support competition between schools so that popular schools are allowed to expand and failing ones close. All Cambourne's schools are thriving and very popular so this doesn't apply here.

The County Council as Education Authority must also follow the DfE Code:

"2.40 The 1997 Rotherham Judgment confirmed that there is nothing unlawful in the principle of admission authorities operating catchment areas as part of their oversubscription criteria and thereby giving priority to local children whose parents have expressed a preference for the school. However, admission authorities must not guarantee places to parents in a local catchment area, in case the pattern of preferences expressed does not allow this guarantee to be met. In drawing up catchment areas, admission authorities should ensure that they reflect the diversity of the community served by the school, and must not exclude particular housing estates or addresses in a way that might disadvantage particular social groups. A catchment area does not prevent parents expressing a preference for the school if they do not live in the area.

2.41 Local authorities and admission authorities must not suggest that parents are required to express a preference for the school in whose catchment area they live, or that they have been allocated a place at that school before they have expressed a preference. Local authorities must be clear that parents have a statutory right to express a preference for any school they choose, although they must explain the possible consequences of not expressing a preference for a school in whose catchment area they live."

So I can emphasise that catchment areas only really come into play when a school is oversubscribed and then the County has to determine priority for admission against the published criteria (which includes Catchment Areas).

If parents living in The Vine/Jeavons Wood joint catchment area want to apply for a place at Monkfield Park they can do so and we have a duty to try to meet that preference. However, if Monkfield Park is oversubscribed they would be lower down the priority list than someone living in Monkfield Park's catchment area.

Lister Wilson
County Councillor for the Bourn Division
Cambridgeshire County Council
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