

16 October 2008

Dear Parents / Guardians

CROFTON SCHOOL – PROPOSAL TO ESTABLISH PROVISION FOR STUDENTS WITH AUTISTIC SPECTRUM DISORDER

Introduction

1. We write to inform you that the Governing Body of Crofton School is in discussion with Hampshire County Council over a proposal to establish specialist provision at the school for students with Autistic Spectrum Disorder, or ASD.

2. This letter details precisely what is being proposed. It also explains why we believe that this venture is the right thing to do; not just from the perspective of the young people who would benefit directly from it, but also in terms of the wider community at Crofton. In proposing a development as significant as this, we would wish, and indeed are obliged, to initiate a process of consultation. You are therefore invited to forward any comments or queries you might have on the proposal and to attend a Public Meeting to be held at Crofton on 13 November 2008. Details are given towards the end of this letter.

The Proposal

3. The proposal being considered centres on the construction of a specially designed, single storey facility within the school grounds for use by up to 12 young people, between the ages of 11 and 16. Subject to approval and funding, we anticipate that building work would commence in the summer of 2009, with the aim of opening the new facility in time for the start of term in September 2010. The young people given the opportunity of a place at this new facility would be full time students of Crofton School, joining in Year 7 and leaving after Year 11. This means that the facility would not reach full capacity before 2014, by which time there would be an even distribution of students across the year groups.

What is Autism?

4. The National Autistic Society describes autism as being 'a lifelong developmental disability that affects the way a person communicates and relates to people around them'.¹ People with autism have no discernable physical disability but do encounter difficulty in 3 key areas: social communication, social interaction and social imagination. Asperger's Syndrome is a form of autism. In broad terms, young people with these special educational needs do not always understand what would be regarded as everyday social conventions unless they are specifically taught. They sometimes have difficulty with speech and

¹ The National Autistic Society (www.nas.org.uk) and the Hampshire Autistic Society (www.has.org.uk) describe in more detail the nature of ASD and the characteristics associated with it.

language, making friends, team activities, crowds, sudden noises, behaviour and almost always need to be prepared for unexpected changes, however small: routines are very important to people with ASD.

How will the Proposal Work in Practice?

5. All the pupils awarded a place would have general ability within the normal range of Crofton School. They would also all have a statement of special educational needs, which would identify ASD as the primary focus of their need and require their placement in a mainstream school with a facility for students with this condition. The purpose of this proposed ASD provision is to enable the students to achieve their individual potential, while also helping them to develop strategies to cope in the real world. This is why a mainstream experience is so important. One of the principal criteria for selecting students for a place at Crofton would be that he or she would be capable of undertaking the intellectual demands of mainstream education, but with specialist support.

6. An obvious question is how would we integrate students with ASD into the new facility and into the wider school environment? The key factor to success here would be in ensuring that new students feel both secure and properly supported. To that end, we would look to recruit a Senior Manager and sufficient specialist staff to deliver one to one support to all students when they need it. This is a very generous staffing level. We would initiate a recruiting programme such that the Senior Manager could be in post from January 2010, to oversee the commissioning of the new building, with a team of specialist staff joining from summer 2010. Other staff members would be recruited over time in line with the planned increase in student numbers.

7. Some students might spend the whole day working in the new building, although it is anticipated that this would be for a minority, particularly as students become older and move up the school. Most of the students would attend mainstream lessons for a good proportion of the school day. The specialist learning support staff would attend classes with the students (hence the one to one ratio), though this would be flexible to reflect individual needs. All subjects would be incorporated into their personalised timetables and most students could potentially follow nearly as many GCSEs as their mainstream counterparts within Year 10. It is already apparent that close co-ordination and interaction would need to be developed between specialist support staff, core teaching staff and the existing learning support team.

8. The proposed facility would be an integral part of Crofton School, with the Senior Manager directly accountable to Matthew Leeming as Crofton's Headteacher. Students would wear Crofton uniforms, participate in a range of extra-curricular activities and play a full part in the life of the school community.

Funding Arrangements

9. Hampshire County Council (HCC) is looking to fund the full capital outlay of this project, a figure of some £800,000. The responsibility for letting the contract for the build, overseeing construction and delivering the completed facility on time and to the agreed standard would rest entirely with the Council. There would be no financial commitment or liability on Crofton's part during the building stage. Equally, HCC would provide year-on-year funding to cover all staff and running costs of a new facility.

10. The Governing Body has already negotiated additional support from the Council in the event of the project being approved. This would include funded provision for specialist speech, language and occupational therapy. The Council has also agreed to fund and provide annual training for the entire teaching and support staff at Crofton. This latter provision would be critical as it would ensure that everyone in the team (be they newly arrived in post or long established) received training in the characteristics of ASD as well as the skills necessary to communicate effectively with students and react appropriately to their particular needs and circumstances. Finally, the Council has committed to allocating 2 places on a focused ASD course for members of Crofton's existing special educational needs team. This would be at no cost to the school. It would enable us to develop a core group of qualified specialists who could assist in raising awareness of ASD amongst the staff. Perhaps more importantly, these specialists would also be able to develop new PHSE programmes to educate our existing student body such that they could be empowered to understand and support their fellow students.

Why Crofton?

11. From the County Council's perspective, the proposal forms a key part of its strategy to cater for pupils with ASD in specially resourced centres around the county. Secondary level provision already exists in both the north and west of the county, at Odiham and Romsey respectively, but there is none in South East Hampshire. In our area, however, there is primary level provision at Heathfield special school in Fareham and Further Education provision at a special centre within Fareham College. A new facility at Crofton would therefore fill the vacant secondary provision in our part of the county, while our location adjacent to Baycroft special school would offer an ideal opportunity to consolidate our existing liaison, especially with respect to ASD.

12. Given that this proposal fits the County Council's purposes, we need to address the issue from Crofton's own perspective. The Governing Body has engaged in significant debate and research in reaching its current position of recommending that we pursue this project wholeheartedly. We have been engaged in outline discussions with project officers from HCC since May 2008 and more recently with Baycroft School and the Hampshire Autistic Society. Governors and Crofton staff members visited the ASD facility at Romsey Community College in June and October. They were unanimously struck by the achievements of that unit and its dedicated support team. Above all they met some quite remarkable young people, who were diligently getting on with their learning in a safe, structured and supportive environment. The manager of the Romsey facility, Mrs Jo West, will attend the Public Meeting at Crofton on 13 November.

13. We at Crofton believe that the school, our staff and – most importantly – our outstanding student body have the capacity, capability and willingness to deliver this project such that we can make a lasting contribution to young people’s lives. In line with our strategic plan to make Crofton even better, we are looking to develop our role as a major stakeholder in the local community of Stubbington and its environs. In our view, we therefore have a duty to offer a service to the local community and we have rapidly come to the conclusion that such a duty extends to ensuring that all young people have the opportunity to learn and grow in a welcoming and effective learning community, within their local area.²

14. The opportunity to embrace and work with a new and special group of students fits this philosophy completely. But the advantages are not just one-way. From our discussions and experience at the facility in Romsey, we can anticipate a positive impact on the rest of the school. This would include a more tolerant and inclusive ethos; higher standards of teaching and learning (thanks to the extra training and the need for teaching staff to adapt their approaches and extend their skills); the spin-off effects of better resourcing across Learning Support generally, and, of course, the invaluable opportunity for our existing students to interact with young people different to themselves.

Next Steps

15. We have already established a special ASD Project Committee within the Governing Body. The role of this committee is to develop the project parameters and lead on the consultation process. It would also be tasked to oversee the project, should formal approval to proceed be granted. The Chair of the Committee is Darren Bone, the Vice Chair of the Governing Body and a Parent Governor. Members of Crofton’s teaching staff and colleagues from HCC have been co-opted onto this Committee. Darren will lead the team in working with HCC and other partners in developing the proposal and overseeing its delivery.

16. Hampshire County Council’s Executive Lead Member for Children’s Services, Councillor David Kirk, discussed this proposal on 16 October 2008 and endorsed it in principle. The report by the HCC’s Director of Children’s Services can be found on the HCC website.³ Final agreement to proceed remains subject to the allocation of sufficient funding and to the outcome of a process of public consultation.

17. Should you wish to express a view or seek clarification on any aspect of this proposal, you should write to the Governing Body, c/o Mrs S Harvey, Clerk to the Governors, at the address at the top of this letter.⁴ Correspondence should arrive at the school by 7 November 2008. Issues submitted in writing will be addressed as part of the Public Meeting to be held at the school on Thursday 13 November 2008 at 7:00pm. Darren Bone and his colleagues from the ASD Project Committee will host the evening. Representatives from the County Council will also be in attendance, as will a number of specialists with practical

² Our experience from Romsey and discussions with HCC officials has already highlighted that some young people with ASD are commuting daily from Portsmouth to Romsey, while others have had to be allocated residential places outside of HCC provision, due to the lack of available specialist places.

³ ‘Proposal for a new Special Provision at Crofton School’ dated 16 October 2008. It is available via both the council and school’s websites: www.hants.gov.uk or www.croftonschool.co.uk

⁴ Or email: s.harvey@crofton.hants.sch.uk

experience of ASD, either from the perspective of support organisations or from working in the type of facility which we are seeking to develop at Crofton. There will be opportunities both during the meeting and in private to raise further questions about this specific proposal, as well as to discuss autism in general.

18. The Full Governing Body will subsequently take a decision as to whether to endorse this proposal at its meeting on 26 November 2008. Should the decision be a positive one, public notices will be published in the locality, giving a final opportunity for formal representations to be made before a final decision is made by HCC with regards to the allocation of funds.

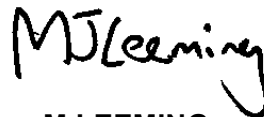
Conclusion

19. The Governing Body, Headteacher and staff view this as an exciting proposal for Crofton. We believe that the project would represent a natural extension to Crofton's ethos, in which consideration, achievement, respect and enthusiasm matter for everyone within our school community, every day. We look forward to hearing your views and to meeting you at Crofton on 13 November to discuss the proposal.

Yours faithfully



C HARDY
Chair of Governors



M LEEMING
Headteacher