

Meeting the Belsize need for primary education

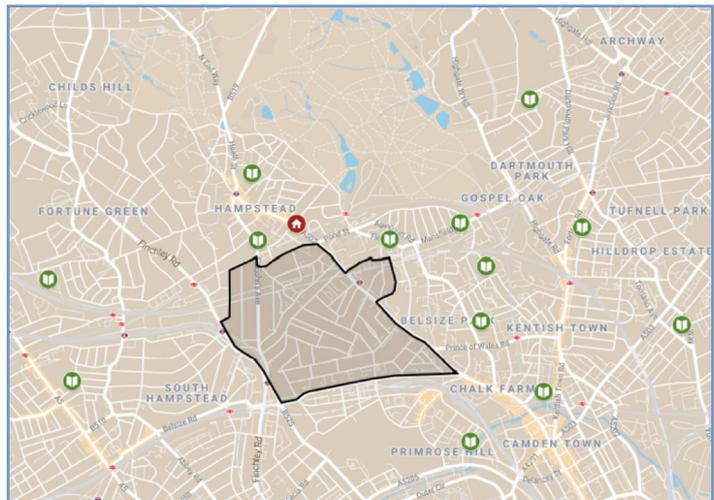
After more than six years serving the children and families of Belsize, Abacus Belsize Primary School has just seen its founding families settling into Year 6 as the school welcomes a new Reception class entirely from within its catchment area. Some people, however, still suggest Abacus isn't needed or talk as if it won't even exist until it moves to Rosslyn Hill. In fact it is fully-established, successful and popular, and when it moves to its permanent home will be full of children from the catchment it was established to serve.

Why Abacus Belsize Primary is needed

Although most of what we call Belsize today was built between 1840 and 1910, there has never been a non-church-based state school in the area and, over recent decades, more and more Belsize families found their choice of primary school becoming even more limited. Some weren't offered a place at a local school at all, or if they were it was a faith school. Some felt forced to move out of the area to find anything suitable for their children.

The growing population of young families campaigned for a new secular state school to be provided and it was on the basis of both educational need and choice that the Department for Education gave the go-ahead to open Abacus Belsize in 2013, with a catchment area that avoided any undue impact on the intake of other state schools in the area.

The map shows the school's Belsize catchment area shaded, with its permanent home at the Police Station in red. The green sites show how sparsely distributed other non-faith state primary schools are across a wide area.



Successful and popular

Despite being in temporary accommodation from the start, the school has become ever more popular with the catchment area it was established to serve and it is consistently in the top performing group of schools in Camden. Last year the Reception class was the highest performing in the borough, and its Ofsted Outstanding rating testifies to why it has become the 'go to' school for Belsize Park families.

More than 150 borough families applied to send their children to Abacus this year. Seventy were from the Belsize catchment and 24 of the 30 Reception places went to those children. The remaining six places went to siblings of children already at the school who currently live outside the catchment.

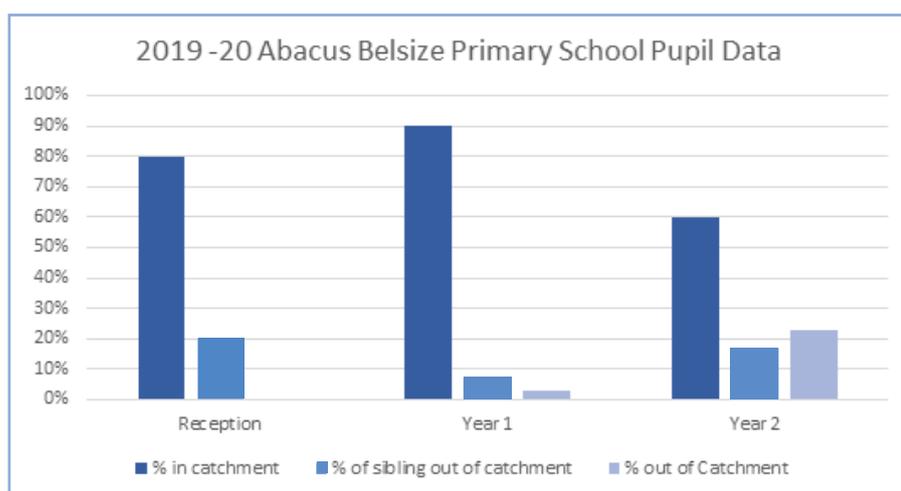
For each of the last three years, with that small exception for siblings, the new intake has come entirely from within the catchment area and it is clear the school is successfully meeting a substantial local need.

Meeting an ongoing need

Abacus is already part of the education landscape in Camden and fully part of the borough's pupil place-planning. It serves its own catchment area as other local schools serve theirs. If it did not exist, as some people seem to wish, Camden's place-planning figures show that there simply aren't the places available to accommodate the school children appropriately elsewhere.

Some have argued that New End Primary has spare spaces, but these are scattered across the school, are not in Reception and Year 1 at all, and are nowhere near the numbers required to take a full school. At Fitzjohn's school, just to the north of the catchment area, last year's Reception class was taken up with no less than 27 siblings of children already at the school, making it all but impossible for any other families to get a place. With the closure of St Aloysius in the south of the borough and its 300 children requiring places elsewhere, it will soon become even harder for the borough to meet its needs.

Some people suggest that changing demographics and dramatic falls in the birth-rate have resulted in less demand for primary places from Belsize, meaning Abacus won't be needed in the future. Although the south of the borough has witnessed a big drop in births, that is not the experience in Belsize. The reason demand for spare primary school places from Belsize has dropped is not because birth-rate has fallen, nor because Belsize children have been taking places in other local schools, but because Abacus exists and has been educating children from the Belsize community for more than six years. In fact, a sustained and growing demand for places at the school and evidence from feeder nursery schools in the catchment area shows that Abacus has more than enough 2, 3 and 4 year old children in the area to fill its Reception class for the foreseeable future.



Before Abacus existed, Belsize was an unstable community with young families frequently moving away to find a school place elsewhere in the borough or beyond. By successfully meeting the community's need for a good local state education, Abacus is reversing historical trends and encouraging families to stay in Belsize, happy to raise their children in the safe, supportive and stable community it has become.

Abacus Belsize is fully-established, hugely successful and over-subscribed. Now more than ever, it is vital for the school to be able to create a permanent home close to the community it was founded to serve. By the time it is ready to move to its permanent home on Rosslyn Hill, it will be a single-form entry school full of Belsize children from its catchment – fully realising the purpose for which it was established and continuing to make a positive contribution to the wellbeing of the educational environment and the stability of communities in Camden.