

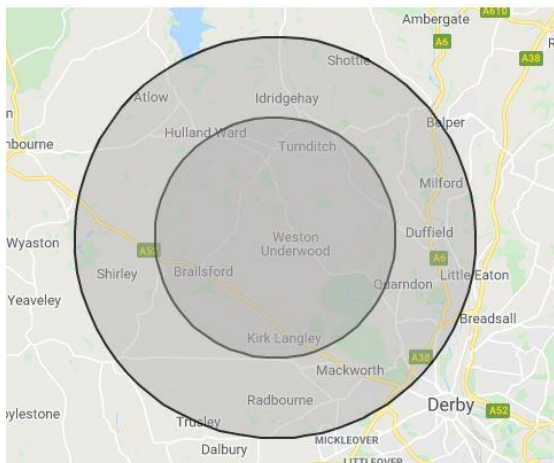
School survives and thrives over a decade

As a new decade dawns, it is useful to reflect on the achievements and challenges of the past 10 years in preparation for the changes that will inevitably be required to ensure survival until 2030.

Just over 10 years ago, the Governors of Mugginton CofE Primary School set in place a long-term strategy to ensure the future of the school.

At that time, most pupils were “local”. They either walked to school (some would have had to be fairly energetic) or came from neighbouring hamlets and villages. Very few travelled more than 2 or 3 miles to get to the school.

In analysing the school population, and particularly the future school population, Governors (and all references to Governors here, includes the Headteacher and staff) realised that this demographic would not continue. House ownership churn in the local area was very low which was likely to continue, so local residents producing pupils for a primary school would become increasingly improbable. (This analysis has proved to be startlingly accurate with, in 2019-2020, only one pupil truly walking to school and fewer than 20 pupils living within a three-mile radius; and there is almost no prospect of a significant change.)



Governors accepted that, to maintain sustainable pupil numbers, Mugginton Primary would have to appeal to families well outside the historic feeder area. The graphic alongside illustrates how difficult this strategy was likely to be with 5 competing schools inside the 3-mile circle and many more within 5 miles of Mugginton.

Then, the financial arrangements for schools had also changed and little emotion on the part of the Local Authority was associated with the viability of schools: if the school roll was not big enough to warrant a sustainable budget then the school would have to make alternative arrangements, closure being the obvious one. The problem then, and now, is that small pupil numbers result in a low

level of income with no means of funding a suitable staff roll, producing poor pupil outcomes, leading to an even lower pupil roll (as families opt for alternative provision) and a rapid downward spiral into oblivion.

At that stage, over a decade ago, a low future pupil roll was recognised as the most significant threat to the future of the school.

How then, to attract more pupils who would traditionally not have included Mugginton as an option in the rich mix of possibilities? It was accepted that, if families were determined to walk to their local school, then they were unlikely to be tempted to consider Mugginton no matter what it had to offer, but once pupils were put in a car to get to school then it would be added to the list of possibilities.

The attack, therefore, was two-fold:

- To provide an education at a level of excellence unparalleled in similar schools to get on the *non-walk to school* list and
- To embark on a marketing campaign to get Mugginton “known” in the wider area.

As anyone in education can confirm, the first is a difficult exercise involving exceptional commitments from all stakeholders over a sustained period of time. Thanks to a series of outstanding professional practitioners who have worked tirelessly over this past decade, this ongoing project is bearing fruit. Among a stellar set of outcomes in 2018, the Key Stage 2 maths progress was the best in the entire county, unfortunately a difficult feat to repeat. The 2019 metrics were way above both county and national averages indicating that the very high academic standards are being maintained. And the school curriculum does not stop there; it is filled with rich and varied experiences for the pupils both sporting and cultural as the school calendar will confirm. It is truly a comprehensive school. Neither is it in any way selective – there are pupils from all walks of life and with a full range of abilities.

Mugginton now has an unrivalled reputation that stretches far and wide. Some pupils travel more than 10 miles to avail themselves of the unique product the school has to offer. Far from low numbers being a threat, the management of high numbers is now a real challenge – but a very welcome one. The school no longer engages in explicit marketing; the dedicated marketing committee has been subsumed into the school improvement committee but it was not always the case. In the past marketing efforts have included adverts in the educational press, event specific posters, actively promoting the school in local newspapers with OpEd pieces and just about anything anyone could think of.

There have also been strategic decisions along the way that have contributed to the sustainability of the school.

- While the school now enjoys a healthy budget position, a decade ago it was difficult to match income and expenditure so the finance team scrutinised expenses and dispensed with what was not absolutely necessary. Many costly functions, e.g. preparing the budget, were brought in-house. This relentless pursuit of financial probity continues.
- Again, with strategic forethought, Teaching Assistants were encouraged to become Higher-Level Teaching Assistants so they could cover for teachers being absent thus saving substantial sums compared to other schools.
- Even with historically high pupil numbers overall, the variation in numbers in present year groups is very variable which means managing this aspect of school operations is a challenge. At the end of the 2019/2020 school year, 13 year 6 pupils will leave. If the historic pattern of 4 pupils entering Reception in September 2020 materialises, the school will suffer a net loss of 9 on the roll with all the attendant consequences for budgets. One way to mitigate this situation is to boost overall numbers at times when large net losses are anticipated – a process in train in 2020. This aspect of school policy has been discussed with school stakeholders at the regular Mugginton Forum (held on the last day of every odd-numbered term).
- In September 2015, the then Headteacher announced that she was going to retire in December. Then there was considerable pressure on schools such as Mugginton to consider forms of leadership other than replacing the Headteacher; formal collaborations, Federations, membership of Multi-academy Trusts etc. The Governors wisely resisted these pressures and put their faith in Mr Green to continue to build on the legacy established. This proved to be an inspired decision with the school continuing its upward journey. Several other schools that made a different decision at the same time have not been so fortunate.
- There has been an ongoing programme to upgrade the physical amenities at the school. The entrance and office have been rebuilt and reorganised, the dividing wall between the classrooms has been replaced with a soundproof and fireproof division, the toilet blocks have been upgraded, the Rainbow Room and new side room materialised out of the old kitchen and the Infant classroom was extended in 2019 to provide welcome extra teaching space. The school furniture has also been replaced at regular intervals. All these projects have been funded internally, very rare for a school of this size, but possible because of extremely careful financial management.

Has the progress been seamless and painless – hardly. Have there been inconveniences – some. There are seldom perfect solutions to problems (or challenges as they are now). Like engineering, all these decisions are compromises. If the school is to be sustainable it needs pupils, and as many as it can possibly deal with. The irritations that are a consequence of those decisions need to be weighed up against the benefits that accrue. There are no free lunches!! (Unless you are in Key Stage1.)

Has the journey ended? It never does and never will. Institutions like schools have only two directions of travel – up or down – hardly ever sideways.

The school has re-invented itself over the past ten years – it will have to do so again in the next decade, and the one after that.