

Children and Young People's Services Scrutiny Committee

17 January 2024

Planning School Places across West Sussex

Report by the Director of Children, Young People and Learning

Electoral division(s): ALL

Summary

West Sussex County Council (WSSCC) has a legal duty to provide sufficient school places for all children. This is carried out by reviewing past trends in admissions, forecasting pupil numbers from new housing developments agreed by District and Borough Councils, and reviewing trends in data.

The County Council's strategic approach in recent years has been to focus on filling surplus places and reducing the level of surplus places across the county as opposed to creating additional places to meet parental preference. This approach does not require significant capital expenditure to enable the successful delivery of school places.

Whilst all children were offered a place at a school for September 2023, parental concerns led to an external report being commissioned to look specifically at the arrangements in the Shoreham area and to ensure lessons were learnt for future pupil place planning. A [full response to the recommendations](#) was published on 4 October 2023 and widely circulated to interested stakeholders. This report has been considered by the Cabinet & Executive Leadership Team and the recommendations outlined within the report will be considered for future school place planning and admission processes. The independent report has enabled WSSCC to react positively to the lessons learnt from the Shoreham area applications for secondary transfer in September 2023 and to introduce a variety of new arrangements to ensure communication is improved.

Focus for Scrutiny

The Committee is asked to assess the County Council's approach to school place planning as set out in the draft Planning School Places Document 2024 (Appendix A).

Key Lines of Enquiry:

Key areas for scrutiny to consider and comment on include:

- The current position, future pressures, and challenges for school organisation, in particular for reception and year 7. Are these clearly identified and understood within the draft Planning School Places Document 2024?
- The plans in place to communicate with parents/carers, schools and local members about potential pressure on secondary and primary school places in future years. Are these robust and timely?

- Any further comments on the draft Planning School Places Document 2024 for consideration by the Cabinet Member prior to its publication.

1 Background and context

- 1.1 Local authorities, under section 14 of the Education Act 1996, are legally responsible for making sure there are enough places for all children to attend good schools. The Department for Education (DfE) allocates capital funding and oversees the national provision of school places. It is therefore the role of the County Council to plan, organise and commission places for all maintained schools in the county, in a way that raises standards, manages rising as well as declining pupil numbers and creates a diverse community of schools. WSCC seeks to exercise this function in partnership with dioceses, academy sponsors, multi-academy trusts, governing bodies of schools, headteachers, local communities and other key stakeholders.
- 1.2 The need for school places changes in response to population movements and birth rate variations. Significant increases in demand can lead to the expansion of existing schools by adding permanent or temporary accommodation, or a new school could be built to meet demand. Any review of school provision undertaken by the County Council (such as the opening, closing, federating, amalgamating, expanding or contracting of schools) will, in a large part, be led by forecast pupil numbers. Predicting school place demand is a complex task. Where children go to school involves a range of factors such as housing growth, inward and outward migration and parental preference. As a result, planning for school places is based on probabilities and not certainties, and while pupil forecasts may be derived from sound methodology, they come without guarantees and are subject to local variation.
- 1.3 Forecasting pupil numbers is reliant on accurate birth data collected by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) by electoral ward. Data on pupil movement trends is collected from the School Census and examines pupil movement between schools, localities, in and out of the county and between educational stages, for example, transferring from primary, including infant/junior, to secondary school. These trends are combined with birth and housing data to create pupil projections or forecasts. More detail on the process of using data to influence pupil place planning is provided in the County Council's Planning School Places Report (attached at Appendix A). The Planning School Places Report is not a statutory requirement but has been produced annually to help explain the County Council's approach to school place planning and also to demonstrate to developers why developer contributions are needed to mitigate the impact of their developments. The content of the report serves many different purposes and is therefore written for multiple audiences.
- 1.4 Although school place demand is based on planning areas, or localities, there is no direct link between the number of children living in a particular area and the number of school places available there. This is because, when it comes to applying for a school place, parents/carers are under no obligation to apply for their nearest school and could instead express a preference for a school outside of their town, borough/district or county, or choose home schooling or independent provision for their child.
- 1.5 Annually, almost 9,000 starting school applications (Year R entry at 4 years of age) are made; in 2023 only 153 (1.7%) were unsuccessful in securing one of their three preferences. Just over 9,000 secondary school applications (Year 6

transfer to secondary school) are made; in 2023 only 372 (3.9%) were unsuccessful in securing one of their three preferences. Whilst over 97% of all applications to schools are successful in securing one of their three preferences, it is recognised that any unsuccessful application is problematic for the children and parent/carer involved. This was highlighted when, in March 2023, a small number of children in parts of Southwater and Shoreham were unable to secure places at their preferred schools and this led to intense scrutiny by parents and schools who were seeking certainty over pupil placements.

2 Current position

- 2.1 Across the 286 maintained educational establishments in West Sussex (as of the October 2023 Census) there were 129,527 available places and 118,424 pupils. This is a small increase on the October 2022 data of 129,069 and 118,276 respectively and suggests the percentage of surplus places has increased from 8.4% in 2022 to 8.6% in 2023.
- 2.2 Not all unfilled places in a school are surplus places; some margin of capacity is necessary to allow parents to exercise a preference, given that there will be volatility in preferences from one year to the next, and to allow for differences in the size of individual cohorts. The County Council's position is that a school should normally be considered as full when it has less than 5% of its places unfilled. This is also a figure recognised by the DfE following a 2013 National Audit Office Report on capital funding for new school places:
<http://www.educationengland.org.uk/documents/pdfs/2013-nao-school-places.pdf>

3 Future pressures

- 3.1 Current predictions for up to the next 15 years take account of the predictions in each of the District & Borough Local Plans, that suggest by 2032 there will be some 70,000 additional homes across West Sussex. The Planning School Places Report details the expected provision over the next 5 years by district and borough council areas. The standard formula for assessing future demand, based on regional factors, is that up to 30 pupils per year group can be expected from every 1,000 homes. Based on that formula, this would be the equivalent of 35 new 2 form entry (420 places) primary schools being needed across West Sussex by 2032. With each new primary school being cautiously estimated at approximately £10m-£12m this would require a capital outlay of up to £400m and so new places should only be created where there is a specific and pressing need.
- 3.2 Concern is often expressed by parents that the planning of places does not provide sufficient places at their local school; or in some cases, that too many places have been created. However, before expanding the number of places, the County Council must ensure that there is strong evidence that sustainable demand is prevalent to support an expansion of a school. By creating extra places in a locality, the County Council has to ensure there would not be too many places that could lead to schools not filling to their published admission number and thereby creating organisational and financial challenges; or that too few places are provided and children have to be offered places at alternative schools, perhaps further afield, as happened in Shoreham for September 2023 entry. The accuracy of school place planning is dependent on a multitude of demographic and economic factors, many of which are beyond the County Council's control.

- 3.3 Recently there has been a drop nationally in primary pupil numbers and this is expected to continue for the next 4 to 5 years, although there are still some pockets of growth in secondary places and this trend is likely to continue for the next few years. This will be significantly affected by population demography, together with the proposed timing, size, tenure and location of future housing developments.
- 3.4 Across West Sussex the risk of under-capacity at primary level is limited and whilst areas such as Haywards Heath require the DfE to deliver the Hurst Farm Primary Free School to help meet the growth in primary demand, this is not the case everywhere. At secondary level, there are several areas of pressure where additional capacity is sought. These are Burgess Hill, where the proposed Bedelands Secondary School has been delayed due to cost increases; Crawley, where the long awaited Forge Wood Secondary Free School has yet to be confirmed by the DfE; Arun, where the County Council has been trying to secure from Arun District Council a new secondary school site, and without that provision pupils may need to be transported to other localities; Horsham, where there is a local expectation of a new secondary school being needed and Southwater is an expected site; Shoreham, where pressure on places in 2023 highlighted a pupil demand in excess of available places; and East Grinstead, where increased movement into the area has necessitated considering expansion of secondary places. The annual Planning School Places Report references each of these areas in the 2024 version and is attached at Appendix A. In response to the [recommendations in the Independent Report](#), the Planning School Places Report has had additional summary information added in each district & borough council section to identify for both starting school and secondary school transfer, the areas where pressure is expected. This will allow parents/carers to be better informed of where preferences are likely to exceed available places in the locality.
- 3.5 Initial analysis of on-time parental preferences for secondary admission in September 2024 suggests there will be pressure on secondary places in Shoreham, Burgess Hill, East Grinstead and Crawley and Horsham. A further update on areas of pressure will be available in February 2024 once all late applications and exchanges with neighbouring councils have been processed and prior to parents being notified on 1 March 2024. Following updated data, the situation at some or all of the localities listed above may change.
- 3.6 Discussions with Shoreham Academy & Sir Robert Woodard Academy have been continuing and the Headteacher of Sir Robert Woodard Academy agreed to offer a further 70 places for September 2024 entry. This increases the intake from the PAN (Published Admission Number) of 240 to 310; the school also launched a public consultation on its admissions policy during November 2023-January 2024 which, if changed, will take effect from September 2025 entry. Furthermore, the County Council has commissioned feasibility studies at both Shoreham Academy and Sir Robert Woodard Academy to determine how both schools could be expanded further and what the implications would be. The feasibility studies are expected to be complete during Spring 2024. In addition, there is current and future engagement planned with Millais Girls' School in Horsham to help address the challenges of lower pupil numbers.

4 Challenges for school organisation

- 4.1 Whilst the County Council is responsible for the overall provision of school places it must work in collaboration with own admission authorities, such as all

academies and free schools together with voluntary aided church schools. There is no requirement upon own admission authorities to provide additional places and in situations such as in Shoreham, if an academy is not prepared to admit extra pupils the County Council has no option but to look for places at the next nearest school, even if this may be some distance away.

- 4.2 To reflect the challenges of a changing pupil population there will need to be a regular review of provision to ensure that the removal (where appropriate) of surplus provision takes place without compromising the need for school places in an area. The recent review of primary school provision across Worthing was undertaken in collaboration with the schools and will lead to the phased removal of over 900 surplus places by 2027. This approach of involving schools closely with the discussions is recommended for all future area reviews that may be undertaken, although it is recognised that the impact of reducing places or closing schools can be highly sensitive in local communities.

5 Improving the awareness of school place planning

- 5.1 Within the Independent Report on school place planning in Shoreham there was a recommendation to ensure parents/carers and other stakeholders such as Schools, Members etc are aware of the likely areas of pressure in their district/borough council area. This has been met by an indication in each district/borough council section of the Planning School Places Report of expected pressures in both primary and secondary schools. A briefing session for all Members was offered on 6 October 2023 and the Cabinet Member for Children, Young People and Learning & Skills sent an update to all Members on 20 December 2023 detailing areas of the county where pressure on places might be experienced. It is proposed that this format for updating Members is repeated each year.
- 5.2 The Independent Report also recommended that additional information was provided for parents in areas where there was a likelihood of multiple parents/carers not being successful with one of their three preferences. Parents/carers in Shoreham received two information sessions about expected secondary pressures on 20 June 2023 and 26 September 2023; a similar session was held for Southwater parents/carers on 19 September 2023. A link to the 2024 version of the Planning School Places Report will be sent after publication to each school to ensure headteachers and governing bodies are also aware of the information about their local area.
- 5.3 The School Organisation & Development Team will meet annually with all locality groups of headteachers to update on pupil projections and admissions arrangements where significant pressure is expected and these meetings will be noted for future reference.
- 5.4 Whilst the Planning Places Report serves a variety of uses from informing housing developers and district & borough councils of the County Council's expectations of education infrastructure requirements, it also provides useful short-term and long-term data and information for headteachers, governing bodies, elected Members and parents/carers. Feedback is always sought on the content and presentation to ensure it meets the broad requirements of a range of stakeholders, and all comments received are considered for future publications.

6 Finance

6.1 Revenue consequences

The revenue cost of school places is funded by the Department for Education through the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG).

Additional funding next year to pay for two additional teachers for the extra 70 places at Sir Robert Woodard Academy in September 2024 will be funded from the Growth Fund within the county's schools block allocation of the 2024/25 DSG. Ongoing pupil funding in 2025/26 will be included within the school's DSG allocation for that year based on their school census numbers in October 2024.

6.2 Capital consequences

To help the County Council fulfil its duty to make sure that there are enough school places for children in the county, the Department for Education also provides Basic Need funding under section 31 of the Local Government Act 2003. This funding is not ringfenced, which means that the County Council can use it to best meet its local priorities, but it can only be used for capital purposes. All funding allocations received by the County Council are included within the county's approved capital programme. Any future proposals for additional school places that require capital investment will require separate business cases that will be taken through the County Council's own governance process for capital investment.

6.3 The effect of the proposal:

(a) **How the cost represents good value**

N/A

(b) **Future savings/efficiencies being delivered**

N/A

(c) **Human Resources, IT and Assets Impact**

N/A

7 Risk implications and mitigations

Risk	Mitigating Action (in place or planned)
Insufficient school places in a locality area, e.g. Shoreham	Feasibility work is currently underway at both Shoreham Academy & Sir Robert Woodard Academy to determine what opportunities exist for potential expansion and this will report by Easter 2024. Separate discussions are expected with schools in the Horsham area about long-term options.
Creating too many additional places in an area	If too many additional places are created this can result in schools not filling to capacity and thereby experiencing financial and organisational challenges together with the need for capital

Risk	Mitigating Action (in place or planned)
	expenditure to be made without sufficient capital budget from DfE grant etc and therefore being a cost that falls to the County Council to finance. This is addressed by a regular review of provision to ensure that the removal (where appropriate) of surplus provision takes place, without compromising the need for school places in an area, as explained at 4.2.

8 Policy alignment and compliance

- 8.1 **Our Council Plan** – These proposals on school place planning and increased information to parents/carers relates to two of the priorities in the Council Plan, namely: Helping people and communities to fulfil their potential and Making the best use of resources.
- 8.2 **Legal implications** – As the production of a Planning School Places Report is not a statutory requirement it is noted that the report serves to meet the information needs of a wide spread of readers.
- 8.3 **Equality duty and human rights assessment** – Any implications for the County Council’s requirement under the Public Sector Equality Duty will be explored in any subsequent actions that may result from the Report. In terms of those with a protected characteristic, the service will ensure enablement and support across all relevant categories.
- 8.4 **Climate change** – Any requirements for capital projects as proposed in the Planning School Places Report will address the County Council’s commitment to mitigating Climate Change through individual business cases that refer to the County Council’s stated ambition to be Carbon Neutral by 2030.
- 8.5 **Crime and disorder** – The proposals in the Planning School Places Report will not affect the County Council’s responsibility to minimise crime and anti-social behaviour.
- 8.6 **Public health** – There are no proposals that should have any implications for the health and wellbeing of residents, service users or particular communities.
- 8.7 **Social value** – Any proposals in the Report will address how any improvements in economic, social and environmental wellbeing will be met as project specific business cases are developed.
- 8.8 **Human Rights Implications** - The County Council has an overriding duty to safeguard the Human Rights of children and young persons in its area. The County Council is mindful of Article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights – The Right to Respect for Family and Private Life - and has taken relevant factors into consideration in preparing this report. The processing of personal and special category data is subject to the County Council’s Data Protection Act policies and procedures in relation to discharging the County Council’s and its partners’ legal responsibilities. The County Council is also mindful of Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child - which states that all children have the right to be consulted and to have their opinions heard on any decision that affects them.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Draft Report on Planning School Places 2024

Background papers

None