

Children and Young People's Services Select Committee
4 December 2019
Woodlands Meed Special School
Report by Director of Property and Assets and Director of Education and Skills

Summary

The situation relating to the Woodlands Meed College site and the need to improve facilities has been discussed since 2016 where an agreement was originally made to replace 3 modular classrooms. The governors were steadfast in their view that there should be a full rebuild of the college site and, in March 2018, a proposal was made to extend the Woodlands Meed building at an approximate cost of £8.5 million.

Since the initial decision, several discussions have taken place with the governing body and Cabinet Member which led to a proposal of a new build of the Woodlands Meed College site which would accommodate an additional 30+ post 16 students. This was in response to the growth in the number of post 16 students with Special Educational Needs Disabilities (SEND) seeking continuing education, along with a lack of broader provision within the county that would meet these needs and therefore increase the potential reliance on external placements in the Independent Non Maintained Schools (INMS) sector.

Since that time, there have been some changes in the broader provision available for post 16 students with SEND within the county which has reduced the imperative to include additional places at the college site at this time. Also, since the original proposal, a more detailed analysis of the site and proposals for a new rebuild have been undertaken and the costs of completing such a project have increased significantly.

Whilst the original discussions on development of the college site were based upon a view that the college facilities in their current state may not meet the needs of students who access the site, there is conflicting information as to whether the current facilities can be developed, refurbished and enhanced to a level that would meet the needs of students now and into the future, or whether the building needs demolishing and a new building created. Money does need investing into the site but the significant costs in building a new college far exceed the monies originally identified.

Over time, discussions and communications with the school have raised expectations with the school community that the only solution to the building difficulties is to construct a new school. Viability options have raised the

challenges of constructing on the current site, particularly in relation to access during the construction and the impact this would have on the current college and adjacent primary school.

The focus for scrutiny

For members of the Committee to consider the proposal, as set out in Section 2, and whether they wish to recommend this as a way forward to the Cabinet Member for Education and Skills.

The Chairman will summarise the output of the debate for consideration by the Committee.

Proposal

1. Background and Context

- 1.1 The situation relating to Woodlands Meed College has been in discussion since 2016 where an agreement was originally made to replace 3 modular classrooms. The governors were clear in their view that there should be a full rebuild of the college site rather than any refurbishment, and in March 2018 a proposal was made to extend the Woodlands Meed building at an approximate cost of £8.5 million.
- 1.2 Since the initial decision, discussions have taken place with the governing body and the Cabinet Member for Education and Skills over a period of time which led to a proposal of a new build of the Woodlands Meed College site which would also accommodate an additional 30+ students post 16. This was in response to information known at the time of projected growth in the number of post 16 students with SEND seeking continuing education and a lack of broader provision within the county that would meet these needs. The view was that increasing numbers at Woodlands Meed would help reduce the demand for external placements in the independent sector and therefore reduce the pressure on the High Needs Funding Block. The provision of an additional 30+ places also helped justify a new build in meeting basic need criteria.
- 1.3 Viability option studies have taken place on a proposed full rebuild of the Woodlands Meed College Site and these costs have exceeded the original approximation of £8.5 million. Several options of new build on the current site have been explored which included a possible increase in enrolment by 30 pupils and these range in cost from £18-£25 million at the current time. Such costs could increase further depending on how the risks to pupils at the college and adjacent primary school are to be mitigated during the period of construction.

- 1.4 Since the original discussions took place and which were based on information held in 2016 relating to future SEND need, the local authority has undertaken a full review of SEND need both for now and in the future as part of its SEND and Inclusion Strategy 2019-24. This review has taken place in 2019 and has looked at future need across the county. It has included a review of existing provision in special and mainstream schools, the geography of future need, transport, and trends in the range of needs being identified. Proposals for expansion of specialist places in our mainstream schools through proposals to increase the number of Specialist Support Centres (SSCs) have already been made, scrutinised and supported, and plans for the expansion of up to 104 special school places are being drafted and discussed at the current time. These proposals do not include any significant expansion of places at Woodlands Meed College. The review has also looked at where places, particularly for post 16 students with SEND, can be commissioned to existing providers. This review has helped shape the future SEND and Inclusion Strategy and inform future decisions on provision. It has identified where there is growing need, where the local authority needs to provide additional specialist support provision in mainstream schools, and where the local authority needs to invest in additional specialist places.
- 1.5 Since 2016, the county has encouraged a broader range of post 16 providers offering provision for students with SEND and currently commissions over 550 places for pupils with SEND into Further Education (FE) sector providers within the county. Such provision enables young people with SEND to access a broad diversity of courses and programmes including a range of vocational programmes and Level 1 and Level 2 programmes. The further expansion of FE provision within the county provides an opportunity to meet any increasing demand for SEND places through existing and new provision through commissioning places in existing provision without the requirement of any significant capital investment. Commissioned partnership agreements between post 16 special school provision and local FE providers have been positive in supporting transition from specialist provision into the FE mainstream sector. Where such agreements have worked well, they have enabled young people who have been educated mainly in special schools through their secondary education, to make the transition into mainstream FE provision with access to the additional support available.
- 1.6 The aim of the SEND and Inclusion Strategy 2019-24 is to ensure that the county has the diversity of provision it requires to meet pupils' needs into the future but that it also encourages increasing independence and preparation for adult life. With regard to Woodlands Meed College, this does not suggest a reduction in places as such provision will always be needed as part of the broader diversity of provision within the county. However, it means that the county does not need to increase places at the college into the foreseeable future.

1.7 The county has ten special schools serving children with special needs. These include:

- Oak Grove College, Worthing (complex needs 11-18 yrs – 256 Numbers On Roll [NOR])
- Palatine Primary School, Worthing (generic needs primary – 153 NOR)
- Cornfield School, Littlehampton (SEMH 9-16 yrs – 56 NOR)
- St Anthony's School, Chichester (Generic 5-18 yrs 221 NOR)
- Fordwater School, Chichester (SLD/PMLD 2-19 yrs 135 NOR)
- Littlegreen School, Compton Up Marden (SEMH 7-16 yrs 75 NOR)
- Queen Elizabeth II School, Horsham (SLD/PMLD 3-19 yrs 105 NOR)
- Manor Green School and College, Crawley (Generic 3-19 yrs 432 NOR)
- Woodlands Meed School and College, Burgess Hill (Generic 2-19 yrs 266 NOR)
- Heron's Dale Primary School, Shoreham (Generic 4-11 yrs 126 NOR)

1.8 Woodlands Meed is the only maintained Special School serving the Mid Sussex District. It caters for 259 planned places for pupils across the 2-19 age range, across two sites. The two sites are Woodlands Meed School (located in Chanctonbury Road) for 2 to 14 year olds and Woodlands Meed College (located in Birchwood Grove Road) for 15 to 19 year olds. The college site currently caters for 100 Key Stage 4 and 5 pupils. Woodlands Meed is a generic Special School meeting the needs of a wide range of SEND.

1.9 Analysis of data suggests that pupils educated at the Woodlands Meed school site on Chanctonbury Road in the main transfer to the college site at the age of 14+. There is no significant evidence that pupils with Profound and Multiple Learning Difficulties (PMLD) or Physical Disabilities (PD) educated at the school site are locating to other schools at the point of transfer to the college.

2. The Building and Proposals

2.1 The college building is recognised as not currently providing the quality and facilities required to meet the needs of pupils. There have been conflicting views as to whether the current building can be developed, refurbished and brought in line to meet current requirements, or whether the only solution is to demolish and rebuild.

2.2 The governing body have been assiduously pursuing a rebuild and a new construction over the last two years. Feasibility surveys with up to four options for the site have been put forward which cover refurbishments and investment in the current buildings and facilities through to a full demolish and rebuild. These costs have exceeded the original approximation of £8.5

million. The options of new build on the current site range in cost from £18-£25 million.

2.3 As a result of the above a number of options have been considered which are outlined below. It must be stressed that these are preliminary costs and will be further developed and updated as the chosen option is further defined. As a result, at this stage they should be considered as an indication rather than a fixed cost.

2.4 It is recognised that any construction on the current site is not without its challenges. In undertaking viability studies of a new build project on the current site, a number of risks have been identified relating to the adjacent primary school during the period of construction. Birchwood Grove Primary School is adjacent to the college and any construction would require access to the site along the access road to the school, through the primary school grounds and play area. Parts of this access route are narrow, for example a 5 metre width from school classrooms to the boundary fence. The period of construction could create significant safeguarding and health and safety issues for parents, staff and pupils. Any decision to move forward with construction will need to include full and accurate costings for mitigating such risks. These costs have not been accounted for in the figures outlined below.

- **Option 1: £18,630,000**

This is a 100 pupil place new build college and incorporates a mix of single and two storey special needs school, fully constructed on the existing playing field. Pupils will be decanted to the new build and the existing college will be demolished and associated external works completed.

- **Option 2: £21,040,000**

This is a 136 pupil place new build college and incorporates a mix of single and two storey. Pupils will be decanted to the new build and the existing college site will be demolished and the Sports Hall and associated works will then be completed.

- **Option 3: £25,000,000**

This is 136 pupil place new build and incorporates a mix of single and two storey accommodation. This option includes for decanting the pupils into temporary accommodation on the school site, demolishing the existing college and building the new college on the existing site.

- **Option 4: £2,360,000**

This option includes for the replacement of the existing modular accommodation to provide similar teaching space.

- 2.5 All of the above options are deliverable, and their cost partly reflects the complexity of delivery. However, there are certain caveats that need to be considered.
- Sport England providing final planning approval. Sport England have provided outline approval but will not give their final approval until the completed project submission has been issued.
 - New Build site access for options 1&2. Should site access be refused via Birchwood Grove School due to H&S reasons then the only other option to gain access to the school playing field is via Folders Lane and across the Communal Recreation Area. This option will mean seeking temporary Rights of Way agreements from the local Borough Council and the Trust who own and manage the Communal Recreation Area, which may be difficult.
 - The funds being made available for the preferred option.

Proposal

- 2.6 Commission an independent specialist survey of the current college site to better understand whether it can be improved to a level that meets SEND regulations and requirements within the budget available and provides appropriate facilities for the number of pupils attending now and into the future. This will provide a baseline against which options can be measured
- 2.7 Review the findings of the independent survey and recommend action that best meets the identified needs within the council's capital resources and overall responsibilities.

3. Resources

- 3.1 The capital programme approved in February 2019 set aside £20.0m funded by £14.0m Corporate Borrowing and £6.0m potential government grant subject to a full business case being approved through the capital governance.
- 3.2 £0.033m of revenue funding has currently been committed for feasibility on the site.
- 3.3 Since February 2019, £0.5m has been approved for design works. As at the end of October, £0.062m from this allocation has been spent.
- 3.4 If the project was to be funded within the current allocation set aside of £14.0m, it would add revenue financing charges in the region of £0.653m per annum.

Project Cost	Revenue Financing Charge per annum
Option 1 - £18.63m	£0.870m
Option 2 – £21.04m	£0.982m
Option 3 - £25.00m	£1.167m
Option 4 - £2.36m	£0.110m
Current Allocation - £14.00m	£0.653m

- 3.5 If the option approved resulted in expenditure higher than £14.0m then the difference could only be funded from either increasing corporate borrowing resulting in increased revenue financing charges or through removing schemes funded by corporate borrowing within the current approved capital programme equal to the increase. Also, the Basic Need Grant could be used to fund the programme, however, this could limit the funds available for school expansion schemes required to meet the Council’s statutory duty to provide sufficient school places.
- 3.6 Options 1 and 4 do not create any additional capacity for pupils, however, options 3 and 4 create 36 additional pupil places which would increase capacity to 136. Cost per place is over the expected benchmark in options 1, 2 and 3.

Project Cost	Cost per place	*Average benchmarked cost per place
Option 1 - £18.63m	£183,500	£77,866
Option 2 – £21.04m	£154,706	£77,866
Option 3 - £25.00m	£183,824	£77,866
Option 4 - £2.36m	£23,600	£45,683
Current Allocation - £14.00m	£140,000	£77,866

*Benchmark data is an averaged benchmark from EBD OG which has been uplifted by 1.12 for WSCC Location factor.

Factors taken into account

4. Issues for consideration by the Select Committee

4.1 For the Select Committee to look at the Proposals in Section 2, including the background material in order to make a recommendation to the Cabinet Member for Education and Skills.

5. Consultation

5.1 Work has been ongoing with the school, and the Cabinet Member for Education and Skills in this matter. Members of the County Local Committee have also been informed.

6. Risk Implications and Mitigations

Risks of not approving the review of the current site	Mitigation
There is a risk that moving towards the demolition of the current building and implementing a new build on the site without an external review of the current facility could lead to the unnecessary use of the council's capital resources and reduce the ability to fund other essential capital projects.	Secure a full and independent analysis of essential need for the college and other essential capital projects.
If the need for a new school site is not established by either the need for increased numbers and/or the current condition of the buildings then there is a risk of not providing value for money to the taxpayer.	Secure a full and independent analysis of essential need for the college and other essential capital projects. Provide evidence of the projected need for young people with SEND needs in the 14-19 age group.
The construction of a major building project on the current site would create potential safeguarding and health and safety risks and inconvenience to pupils, staff and parents attending the adjacent primary school for the period of the construction project.	Explore and fully cost potential relocation of the primary school or additional temporary accommodation elsewhere on the site to reduce risk from construction traffic.

7. Other Options Considered

7.1 The option of not securing an independent review into the current building could result in a decision being made in the context of current information and lobbying which may not be in the interests of the council's efficient use of limited financial resources. The original timeframes for construction of a new building are recognised as already being unachievable for a new construction, although a refurbishment and development of the site may be possible within the timelines already discussed. As there is so much contradictory rhetoric surrounding the potential solutions, it would not be

inappropriate to secure an independent analysis prior to formally committing the funding being suggested.

8. Equality Duty

- 8.1 Work does need undertaking to the current site to ensure that provision is appropriate to meet the education and care needs of students and young people educated at the site. An independent SEND building review would identify gaps and the detail of issues that need addressing.

9. Social Value

- 9.1 The potential impact of not increasing places and expanding provision at our FE Colleges has been reviewed along with implications on travel.

10. Crime and Disorder Implications

- 10.1 None for the purpose of this report.

11. Human Rights Implications

- 11.1 None for the purpose of this report.

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Background Papers: None