

TITLE	Bohunt Wokingham School Sixth Form: Update and Budget
FOR CONSIDERATION BY	The Executive on Thursday, 27 July 2023
WARD	(All Wards);
LEAD OFFICER	Director, Children's Services - Helen Watson
LEAD MEMBER	Deputy Leader of the Council and Executive Member for Children's Services - Prue Bray

PURPOSE OF REPORT (INC STRATEGIC OUTCOMES)

The report is required because of changes to the project as a result of external factors. The outcome is that students in the rural south west (Finchampstead, Arborfield, Swallowfield and Barkham) will be able to take A level courses locally.

RECOMMENDATION

That the Executive

- 1) Notes the progress made on the Bohunt Wokingham School to date, and
- 2) Requests that the options to bring 6th form education to Bohunt and a further report on the timescales and costs be reported back to the Executive in Autumn.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

On 7th March 2022 the Council's Executive approved the proposal to part fund a scheme to create a new sixth form, create additional Year 7 places and enhance inclusion at the Bohunt Wokingham School. At the time, the project was intended to provide a 300 place sixth form, opening in the near future (2022 or 2023) with costs split between the council (£3.7m) and the Bohunt Education Trust (BET) (£2m).

This report will update members on progress with the scheme and set out the next stages.

The original financial budget for the accommodation is not sufficient to deliver a new build expansion to the school. This follows more detailed design work and costings of the initially proposed scheme taking into account significant inflation costs. As an alternative to a new build expansion, the Council is investigating the possibility of providing sixth form accommodation in an alternative building in proximity to the existing school. This building is not in the control of Wokingham Borough Council (WBC) nor BET and therefore it's deliverability is not guaranteed, but the Council is working with the owner to understand the feasibility of this, including timescales.

While the options are being explored, the school has informed the Department of Education (DFE) that it has not been possible to secure the commencement of a 6th form offer from September 2023 as originally proposed. The council are working to provide information assisting the students affected by this to find alternative sixth form places available in Wokingham area.

BACKGROUND

The Bohunt Sixth Form scheme was approved on 7th March 2022 by Wokingham's Executive. The report that led to this decision contains the background to the project. This report is solely concerned with progress since that date.

However, since March 2022 estimated building costs have increased significantly. This reflects the impact of high inflation rates, the necessity to ensure the building proposals fully reflect Department for Education premises standards and design, costing, supervisory and project management costs.

The design and development work has been undertaken at a time of unprecedented building cost inflation. The current expansion option, which provides up to an additional 150 places for 11 to 16 years olds as well as the 300 place sixth form, is estimated to cost £10.5m. This is an increase of £4.8m, above the current agreed project budget of £5.7m (£3.7m from WBC and £2m from the Bohunt Education Trust).

Following this review, and after consultation with the Bohunt Education Trust (BET) options now need to be considered to see what provision can be made within the available budget. Should this not be deliverable costed schemes will need to be assessed for their value for money accompanied alongside an assessment of affordability for both the Council and the Bohunt Trust.

As this report was being finalised for publication, the BET Board confirmed their willingness to contribute £5m to the project. This proposal and any requirements of the board will need to be carefully considered alongside the options appraisals.

The need to review options means that any new build premises could not be completed for September 2024. While Bohunt could provide sufficient accommodation for the first year of the 6th form in the current facilities, the DfE was notified by the school that they could not offer 6th form entry this year as there was no certainty there was sufficient accommodation for both the first and second years.

OPTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

There are a number of options available:

- To maintain WBC's current financial contribution (build a smaller building).
- To increase WBC's financial commitment recognising the decision of the Bohunt Trust to contribute £5m and subject to the affordability of the capital programme.
- To explore alternative existing accommodation to cover the period until the new accommodation is ready or to make it a permanent sixth form site.

Strengths and weaknesses of each proposal are set out below:

To maintain WBC's current financial contribution: A building of the size that could be built with the available budget would not provide the necessary accommodation for a 300 space sixth form and the 150 places for year 7-11 so it would not represent value for money on the investment made. There would be a high risk that the project could not proceed, as the Trust might be unable to justify a multi-million pound uplift in their planned contribution from their reserves.

Therefore, this option is not recommended.

To increase WBC funding alongside Bohunt Trust’s increased contribution: This was put forward as reflecting a better balance between the interests of both parties. While both the Trust and the council have a long-standing ambition to open a sixth form on the site, the Borough has no immediate need for sixth form places. The council must balance the need here, against other potential uses for the limited capital resources at its disposal and how affordable any additional accommodation might be.

To investigate opportunities for permanent provision of sixth form in alternative accommodation. As an alternative to a new build expansion, the Council is investigating the possibility of providing sixth form accommodation in an alternative building in proximity to the existing school. This building is not in the control of WBC nor BET, but the Council is working with the owner to understand the feasibility of this, including timescales. There is a risk with this option that a significant amount of time could be invested in the feasibility of this option for it to not prove deliverable, and then there would be further delay to delivering the expansion option. Equally the use of the building may impact on community space provision and engagement on a combined joint use of the building would need to be carefully considered. Partners, including the parish council would need to be engaged.

Recommendation: Whilst this option cannot be guaranteed as the building is not in the Council’s nor BET’s ownership, it is recommended that this feasibility work continues to a conclusion (either feasible and affordable, or not deliverable) in Autumn.

Overall recommendation

- 1) Continue to investigate the provision of sixth form in an alternative building
- 2) In parallel work up detailed costings for a new build extension recognising the additional contribution put forward by the Trust and confirming what additional contribution would be required by the Borough Council.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE RECOMMENDATION

The Council faces unprecedented financial pressures as a result of; the longer term impact of the COVID-19 crisis, Brexit, the war in Ukraine and the general economic climate of rising prices and the increasing cost of debt. It is therefore imperative that Council resources are optimised and are focused on the vulnerable and on its highest priorities.

	How much will it Cost/ (Save)	Is there sufficient funding – if not quantify the Shortfall	Revenue or Capital?
Current Financial Year (Year 1)	£0 - £5.25m depending on option chosen	No – The Council faces unprecedented financial pressures	Capital
Next Financial Year (Year 2)	£0	No	
Following Financial Year (Year 3)	£0	No	

Other Financial Information
As noted above BET have increased their contribution to £5m.

Legal Implications arising from the Recommendation(s)
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To be provided before submission

Stakeholder Considerations and Consultation
No consultation required

Public Sector Equality Duty
Equalities assessment to be appended

Climate Emergency – *This Council has declared a climate emergency and is committed to playing as full a role as possible – leading by example as well as by exhortation – in achieving a carbon neutral Wokingham Borough by 2030*
The school expansion project will comply with carbon neutrality requirements

Reasons for considering the report in Closed Session
Not applicable

List of Background Papers
Report to Executive on 22nd March 2022

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