

TITLE	Primary Strategy School Organisation Approvals
FOR CONSIDERATION BY	The Executive on 15 March 2017
WARD	Maiden Erlegh, South Lake, Bulmershe and Whitegates,
DIRECTOR	Judith Ramsden, Director of People Services
LEAD MEMBER	Charlotte Haitham Taylor, Executive Member for Children's Services

OUTCOME / BENEFITS TO THE COMMUNITY

The proposals in this report help to ensure that there are sufficient school places to meet the Council's statutory duty under the Education Act 1996.

RECOMMENDATION

That, to ensure are sufficient primary school places in Wokingham, Executive agrees:

- 1) to the permanent expansion of Loddon Primary School from September 2018 to offer 90 places per year and for the school to grow annually to offer 630 places, this agreement being conditional on the grant of planning consent for the scheme by 01/09/17;
- 2) to the permanent expansion of Beechwood Primary School from September 2018 to offer 60 places per year and for the school to grow annually to offer 420 places;
- 3) to the permanent expansion of Highwood Primary School from September 2018 to offer 60 places per year and for the school to grow annually to offer 420 places, this agreement being conditional on the grant of planning consent for the scheme by 01/09/17;
- 4) to not progress with the expansion of Aldryngton Primary School for 2017 as the number of applications for Reception places in Earley has not increased as projected, and agree that the proposal will be:
 - Subject to further consultation including the consideration of alternative options for growth;
 - Returned for further consideration by Executive in the event of an increase in demand for school places in the period 2018 to 2020.

SUMMARY OF REPORT

On 28 January 2016 Executive approved the Primary Strategy Implementation Plan Phase 1. This included the proposed expansion of Aldryngton, Loddon, Beechwood and Highwood primary schools. Under the School Organisation Regulations these expansions are prescribed alterations that must be formally determined by the Council or the Schools Adjudicator after a formal consultation process where they are promoted

by the Council.

This report sets out progress to date with the expansion schemes and the associated consultation and sets out the future timetable necessary to deliver school places in 2017.

One of the four schemes included in this report, relating to Aldryngton School, has elicited a significant volume of responses. The proposal is not recommended for progressing during 2017 due to the number of applications for reception places being lower than projected in Earley.

The other three schemes are recommended for progression. While there have been some concerns raised with regard to these proposals, relating to traffic and the impact on visual amenity, these are planning issues that will be dealt addressed via the planning process.

The decision on the number of places to be offered must be taken by mid-March to comply with the statutory school admissions offer timetable. The expansion proposals will ideally therefore be determined by this time to ensure places are available for the 2017/18 academic year admissions round and that officer decisions can be made taking account of the number and pattern of expressed preferences for school places.

This report takes account of the statutory guidance in “Statutory guidance for decision-makers deciding prescribed alteration and establishment and discontinuance proposals, April 2016”

Background

On 28 January 2016 Executive approved the Primary Strategy 2016 - 2019 and the Primary Strategy Implementation Plan Phase 1. This authorised the development of schemes for the expansion of Aldryngton, Loddon, Beechwood and Highwood primary schools and for the opening of a new school in Shinfield.

The Loddon and Beechwood expansions were agreed (subject to statutory process) for September 2016 and the Aldryngton and Highwood Primary School expansions from September 2017. In the case of Aldryngton Primary School the expansion was subject to a requirement “that further work should be carried out with the school to determine the feasibility of expansion with a target of September 2017”.

The timing of this report is intended to ensure that the decisions can be informed by the number and pattern of applications for Reception places for September 2017 entry.

Earley has been an area of high demand for school admissions. In 2015, 30 Earley children who formed part of the normal admissions round for Reception places had to be offered places outside the Earley area, despite the projection for that year indicating there would be sufficient capacity. In 2016, 30 additional places were provided at Loddon School and all places in Earley were fully allocated. Families moving into the area after the initial admissions round have found that no Reception places are available in Earley.

The Primary Strategy 2016-19 considered the pressure on places in Earley. It was apparent that pressures arose from children moving into the area, rather than a rising birth rate or migration due to local housebuilding. Evidence was presented from a number of sources that indicated there was a pressure in Wokingham resulting from older households moving out and being replaced by younger households (often with children) and that this was a particular issue in Earley. As these arrivals are less predictable than birth data, it was intended to ensure that the decision for the expansion of Aldryngton was made close to the point at which final allocations of Reception places must be made.

Forecasting future demand is unfortunately not a precise science. Evidence used in the preparation of the strategy and implementation plan included Wokingham’s school roll projection model (driven by birth numbers), Office of National Statistics migration data, council tax registrations, and planning records of planned new homes and home extensions. Although all of this information is relevant, it does not produce an unequivocal figure for the number of school places required to assist the council in planning to meet statutory requirements. However, the evidence indicated a clear need for 30 additional places per year in Earley and a likely need, for at least 3 years, of an additional 15 places per year. Beyond the three year period, the need for reception places will depend on the future number of births (which dipped towards the end of the projection period) and the impact of housing churn (which may potentially accelerate as older residents vacate family homes).

Loddon and Beechwood Primary Schools

It is proposed that Loddon Primary School is enlarged by 210 places to accommodate a roll of 630 statutory school age children (Reception to Year 6), retaining existing Early

Years provision from 01/09/2017.

It is proposed that Loddon is permanently expanded in two phases. Firstly, additional Key Stage One accommodation has been provided by conversion of the former Riverdale Neighbourhood Office back into school accommodation. This building already accommodated the school's Foundation Stage teaching areas. Secondly, new accommodation will be added to the existing main teaching block including a new larger hall and additional classroom areas. External works to play spaces will provide enhanced capacity.

It is proposed that Beechwood Primary School is enlarged by 105 places to accommodate a roll of 420 statutory school age children (Reception to Year 6), retaining existing Early Years provision from 01/09/2017.

It is proposed that Beechwood is enlarged by infilling spaces between existing classrooms. This will result in a building with a more regular form. All classrooms will have external windows, with two teaching areas (a library and an IT room) having top-light only. The existing hall space is deemed sufficient reflecting the school's history (i.e. it was previously a larger school).

Supporting Information

Additional children were admitted to both Loddon and Beechwood in September 2016 with the agreement of the schools, in advance of the permanent expansion decision. This was permissible as a single year increase in the number of children admitted to a school does not necessarily require permanent expansion of the school.

These schemes have been developed over the course of 2016 and were shared with the school and local community in December 2016. Responses were generally favourable for both schools.

Formal consultation for these two schemes occurred in February and March 2017. This entailed a public notice in a newspaper and full information published on the council's website with a formal representation period of 2/02/17 to 02/03/17, with letters to schools and other interested parties.

Meetings with parents and other interested parties were held at Loddon Primary School on 28th November 2016 and at Beechwood Primary School on 23rd November 2016.

There is a high degree of confidence in the need for the places at Loddon and Beechwood. The schools are in Woodley where close to 1,000 homes are in the process of being delivered across the area so the additional school places are required whatever short term fluctuation may occur.

In Earley, there was a clear need for at least 30 places in both 2015 and 2016 (in 2016 met by additional places offered at Loddon Primary School) so the case for the Loddon places is made on the basis of recent history as well as future projected need.

Appendix B sets out responses to date on the Beechwood and Loddon schemes.

The Loddon and Beechwood expansion schemes have led to very few adverse comments. Any concerns raised have related to planning issues such as additional

traffic, which will be addressed via the planning applications. If planning consent is not granted, the expansions cannot proceed.

Highwood Primary School

The proposal is that Highwood expands permanently by 210 places to accommodate 420 pupils from 1st September 2017.

The expansion entails a new build extension to the school and conversion of existing office accommodation currently occupied by a Childrens Services team.

Supporting Information

The Highwood scheme has been developed over the course of 2016 and initial consultation was completed in January 2017. Formal consultation for the schemes occurred in February and March 2017. This entailed a public notice in a newspaper and full information published on the council's website with a formal representation period of 2/02/17 to 02/03/17, with letters to schools and other interested parties. A public meeting took place on 22nd February 2017.

There is a high degree of confidence in the need for the places at Highwood. The school is in Woodley where close to 1,000 homes are in the process of being delivered across the area so the additional school places are required whatever short term fluctuation may occur.

The Highwood scheme has led to very few adverse comments. Any concerns raised have related to planning issues such as additional traffic, which will be addressed via the planning applications. If planning consent is not granted, the expansions cannot proceed.

Appendix B sets out responses to date on the Highwood proposal.

Aldryngton Primary School

The proposal being developed by officers, in line with the Executive decision of January 2016, was to expand Aldryngton by 105 places to accommodate a roll of 420 statutory school age children (Reception to Year 6) from 1st September 2017.

Expansion would entail the construction of a new two storey teaching block with classrooms, an IT rooms and a new school hall, constructed on the site of a small outdoor swimming pool. External playing space would be augmented through the provision of a new all-weather playing surface to complement existing hard surfaced play areas and grass sports pitches. The new two storey block would replace part of the existing permanent school structure and 3 mobile classrooms. The site of the 3 mobile classrooms would provide additional staff car parking.

This proposal is now not recommended for progression in 2017 based on the information included within the Supporting Information below.

Supporting Information

The Council's Primary Strategy identified Earley as a priority area for expansion because there were too few school places to meet needs locally and this shortfall was expected to continue if additional capacity was not provided.

As an illustration of this in 2015, 30 children were allocated Reception places in schools outside Earley because there was insufficient capacity in local schools.

In 2016, despite 30 additional places having been offered at Loddon Primary School, all Earley Reception places were allocated, leaving no capacity for incoming families. In the Aldryngton designated area, 13 children could not be offered a Reception place at the school, although the expansion of Loddon School meant that a local school was available. Families have continued to move to Earley and have been compelled to accept primary school places in neighbouring communities.

The availability of a local and accessible school, where children are able to walk from their homes, has been a common issue raised by parents to local members.

A brief account of the project's development stages is set out below.

In the second half of 2015, a "task and finish group" (comprised of officers, local members and interested parents and chaired by the then Deputy Executive member for Children's Services) was closely involved in the development of the primary strategy implementation plan proposals. Three sites were considered in Earley (Aldryngton, Loddon and Radstock Schools), based on location, popularity and viability.

To assist in the process, architects ERM Ltd was commissioned (reporting in September 2015) to undertake a spatial study. It is important to note that (a) the architects were focused on the single issue of evaluating site areas against DfE guidance and (b) that the requirement at the time was to locate a suitable site for a full form of entry (30 places per year). The architects recommended Loddon as the preferred site for a full form of entry with Radstock as a secondary preference, noting that all sites were deficient to some extent. The expansion of Loddon was progressed as the focus for the delivery of 30 additional places per year.

For the delivery of the remaining 15 places – part of the recommended 45 additional places required, adopted by the Executive in January 2016 - Radstock was not recommended for expansion primarily because this would have provided a further 30 additional places per year rather than the required number. A smaller expansion of the required 15 places per year (half a form of entry) would have led to the necessity to adopt mixed age teaching and (because the maximum average class size would be less than 30) this would lead to a financially less efficient form of classroom organisation. The larger expansion would have been more expensive than the alternative and would have risked being to the detriment of other local schools by taking children from their roll.

Aldryngton was selected for expansion after a range of issues had been considered including the specific number of places required and the particular nature of the sites, premises, local demand and highways issues.

Other Earley schools were considered as being "out of scope":

- Hillside, Whiteknights and Earley St Peters – no evidence of sufficient demand originating in Earley to make expansion successful.

- Hillside and Hawkedon - both schools had been subject to expansion in recent years, with Hawkedon already a large school and further expansion of Hillside considered too challenging given the site constraints.
- In addition, these schools would require expansions of 210 places (rather than 105) to maintain single age teaching and efficient class sizes.

On 28 January 2016, the Primary Strategy Phase 1 Implementation Plan was agreed by Wokingham's Executive. The challenges of developing the Aldryngton site were acknowledged and the expansion was conditional on further feasibility work.

During Spring 2016, four separate formal studies were carried out on the Aldryngton school project. Two studies were prepared as architectural and transport feasibility studies, intended to give confidence that a scheme (if acceptable on planning grounds) was achievable. These were carried out by architects ERM Ltd and WSP Transport consultants respectively. They confirmed there were no fundamental barriers to a satisfactory scheme, but were not in themselves fully developed proposals, suitable for submission as part of a planning application.

During Summer 2016, design and transport statements were commissioned with a view to submitting a planning application and letting contracts for expansion. These were let to two new practises, WS Atkins Ltd (architects) and Robert West Ltd (transport consultants). It is quite common place for architectural work to be commissioned in phases from separate consultants. Having a second transport consultant meant that Wokingham could have greater confidence that successful mitigation was possible. It also meant there was a second professional view on required mitigation in view of concerns that had been expressed over the park and stride locations that had been put forward as possible mitigation in the initial study.

The proposals for the development of the site have been through a number of iterations. The final proposal included the following key components:

- An existing 3 class mobile block to be removed from the site to enable the creation of additional car parking space to serve the additional staff required
- A two storey teaching block to be built on the site of the current school swimming pool which achieved a number of objectives including (a) integrating new accommodation into the current buildings (b) minimising the loss of play area by building upwards (c) protecting the existing grass team game area
- An new all-weather play surface which has advantages on the basis that such surfaces (a) double up as sports pitches and areas for informal (lunch/break-time) play and (b) are considered to be worth double the area of a grass pitch due to their greater resilience.

On 16 January 2017, officers held a meeting with parents and the local community as part of the non-statutory consultation. This was followed by publication of proposals in a local newspaper and on the Council's website. The initial consultation exercise is a recommended component (by the DfE) of the consultation process, but is not a statutory requirement. The statutory requirement is for a notice published in a local newspaper and on the Council's website.

The statutory School Organisation consultation was from 2nd February 2016 to 2nd March 2017, conducted through a notice in the Reading Chronicle, publication on the Council's website and through letters to schools and other partners.

The Aldryngton proposal has led to a significant volume of correspondence, almost all of which has been sent by people opposed to the expansion including the school itself.

During the consultation, the case for the Aldryngton expansion has been less demonstrable, based on the expectation of continued demographic change led by the replacement of older households with younger families. It was acknowledged throughout the consultation and in correspondence with parents that the final decision would be taken in light of actual admissions data for 2017/18 and that the proposal would not progress in 2017 unless supported by increased demand.

The admissions data for 2017 shows that:

- There are 16 fewer first preference applications for *Earley* resident children for Reception places at the school in 2017 compared to 2016 (78 for 2017, compared to 94 for 2016)
- There are 43 first preference applications for Aldryngton Primary school from within the school's Designated Area (compared to 59 in 2016 and 54 in 2015).
- The overall level of demand for Reception places in Earley for *Wokingham* resident children is comparable to that seen in 2016 with 411 Wokingham resident first preference applications for the 7 Earley Primary Schools (compared to 416 in 2016 and 433 in 2015).

This indicates that:

- Aldryngton Primary School continues to be oversubscribed with a level of demand closely comparable to that of 2016.
- The number of applicants within the Designated Area is a very close match to the school's capacity (43 for 45 places). It is likely therefore that there is a much reduced risk of being unable to place all Aldryngton DA children in either Aldryngton or another local school. Most, if not all, Earley children (for whom an on-time application for a Reception place was made) are likely to receive an offer of a place in Earley without additional capacity at Aldryngton Primary Schools.
- Offers made to schools outside of Earley are likely to simply reflect the pattern of preferences expressed (for example, by not expressing a preference for the designated area school, or not using all four preferences).
- However, it is likely that there will be no surplus places or insufficient surplus places to meet the needs of children in this age group arriving in Earley in future.

The council will continue to seek planning consent (if this has not been granted by the 15th March 2017) so that the scheme can be brought forward to Executive for approval in the next three years if demand does rise.

Appendix A sets out the issues raised in more detail and Appendix C (a letter sent to parents) sets out issues raised and the officer response before the informal consultation meeting took place in January 2017.

Where consultees have commented on the proposals the response has generally been negative. The Aldryngton school governing body have formally objected to the proposal and their letter is appended as Appendix D.

Exploration of alternative options in Earley

In view of the concerns that have been raised with the expansion proposal the

examination of alternative opportunities for increasing capacity locally has commenced, including alternative sites as well as other schools.

Executive Decision

The Executive is asked to consider the strength of the case for the expansions, the views of stakeholders and the impact on the Council's resources (and in particular the authority's ability to fund the scheme).

The decision can be a conditional one – subject to a number of prescribed events as set out in paragraph 8 of Schedule 3 to the Prescribed Alterations Regulations. These include the granting of planning consent. .

The *“Statutory Guidance for decision makers deciding prescribed alterations and establishment and discontinuance proposals April 2016”* has a number of specific requirements. These are summarised below, with an account of how the recommendation complies with the requirements.

“That the appropriate fair and open local consultation and/or representation period has been carried out and that the proposer has given full consideration to all the responses received.”

Consultation events with parents and other interested parties have been held for all schemes. Public notices have been published in a local paper and on the Council's website as required. Key partners have been informed. A full account of all representations and comments received has been reported in the body of the report and in relevant appendices.

“Decision-makers should consider the quality and diversity of schools in the relevant area and whether the proposal will meet or affect the needs of parents; raise local standards and narrow attainment gaps.”

The schools proposed for expansion are Good or Outstanding schools serving a local community. They are therefore expected to meet the needs of parents and contribute to raising local standards and narrowing attainment gaps.

“A school-led system with every school an academy”

The proposals do not impact on the individual schools ability to become Academies so this has no adverse impacts on the intentions of “Education Excellence Everywhere”, a government 2016 White Paper.

“Conditional Approval”

Where proposals are conditional, the dates by which the conditions must be fulfilled is stated.

“Proposed admission arrangements”

No change to current admissions arrangements is proposed as part of these proposals. The current arrangements are compliant with the statutory School Admissions Code.

“Community cohesion”

The schools are all community schools serving a local population. They are expected to have a neutral or small positive impact on community cohesion by providing schools in which all members of the local community can mix.

“Travel and accessibility”

The schools are all well served by roads with pavements and footpaths. They are of a size and in locations where the additional children are, disability aside, expected to be able to walk to school.

“Funding”

Funding for the schemes will come from the Council’s capital programme.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE RECOMMENDATION

The Council faces severe financial challenges over the coming years as a result of the austerity measures implemented by the Government and subsequent reductions to public sector funding. It is estimated that Wokingham Borough Council will be required to make budget reductions in excess of £20m over the next three years and all Executive decisions should be made in this context.

	How much will it Cost/ (Save)	Is there sufficient funding – if not quantify the Shortfall	Revenue or Capital?
Current Financial Year (Year 1)	Nil	Yes	N/A
Next Financial Year (Year 2)	£11,995K	Yes	Capital
Following Financial Year (Year 3)	£6,397K	Yes	Capital

Other financial information relevant to the Recommendation/Decision

All revenue costs will be met from Dedicated Schools Grant.
Initial capital costs (including spend in 2016/17) has been met through funds allocated in the 2016/17 Capital Programme. The above figures relate to the proposed Capital Programme for the 2017/20 period.
There will be a positive impact on the general fund through reduced home to school transport spend.
Capital costs would be met from the Capital Programme and are subject to agreement to the proposed 2017/20 Capital Programme by Council.

Cross-Council Implications

N/A

List of Background Papers

N/A

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Appendices

Appendix A - Aldryngton Consultation responses

Appendix B – Other schools

Appendix C – Letter to parents at Aldryngton School

Appendix D – Objection from the Aldryngton School Governing Body