

TITLE	Wokingham Borough Post 16 Education Options
FOR CONSIDERATION BY	The Executive on Tuesday, 22 March 2022
WARD	None specific
LEAD OFFICER	Director, Children's Services - Helen Watson
LEAD MEMBER	Executive Member for Children's Services - Graham Howe

PURPOSE OF REPORT (INC STRATEGIC OUTCOMES)

Members are invited to consider a range of options related to Post 16 education.

RECOMMENDATION

That the Executive delegates authority to the Director of Children's Services in consultation with the Director of Resources and Assets and the Lead Member for Children's Services to negotiate and enter into an agreement with the Bohunt Education Trust for a joint project to create a new sixth form at the Bohunt School Wokingham.

That the delegated authority and agreement are subject to the following conditions:

- I. the expansion and change of age range is approved by the Secretary of State;
- II. in the period of the 5 years after the approval of this option the school delivers a flexible package of additional school places to include: an additional 30 Y7 places in September 2022; up to an additional 30 Y7 places if needed when acceptance offers are known (including to independent schools); additional Y8 & Y9 places to meet increasing demand through in-year applications, especially for girls;
- III. that SEND provision is strengthened over time to ensure appropriate 11-18 education pathways for Bohunt pupils with SEND;
- IV. that the final agreement includes key parts of the business case presented to the council in February 2022, including undertakings related to the management of admissions to the sixth form;
- V. agreed conditions in a funding agreement that shall include matters such as cost sharing, funding profiles, timetable, risk, overspends, procurement strategy;
- VI. that Bohunt Educational Trust contributes at least £2million to the scheme;
- VII. that £1.5m is vired from the Basic Needs Capital Programme in 22/23 which will be vired back from the Post 16 Capital Programme in future years and
- VIII. any other conditions that the Director of Resources or Director of Children's Service deems necessary as set down in a funding contract between Bohunt and the Council.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report is written to help inform the Council's decision in relation to a proposal from the Bohunt School & Education Trust to establish a new sixth form, to be delivered through a cost sharing partnership, in the context of adopted policy, post 16 need and alternative courses of action.

The Bohunt School & Education Trust has submitted a proposal for additional sixth form places with related proposals for additional Year 7 places (which can help enable girls with out of borough allocations for September 2022 secure Wokingham school offers). The related proposal is directly aligned to Wokingham education policy priorities, provided it can be realised in partnership with the borough.

Delivering the sixth form would demonstrate that the Council was continuing to deliver essential infrastructure for the new Strategic Development Location communities in the south of the borough in line with commitments in the adopted 2010 Core Strategy. This helps maintain confidence in the development strategy and delivery and in doing so acts as a defence against the alternative of large-scale uncoordinated development with inadequate infrastructure provision. It is also consistent with the Council's intention for an 11 to 18 school when the new school project was initiated through an Executive decision in 2014.

The proposed 6th Form provision at the Bohunt School is strongly supported by the local community. Creating new sixth form provision here would enable students to travel to their education by sustainable means (walking or cycling), rather than by car, coach or bus.

Given the size of the school and the school's Good Ofsted rating, it is likely that a new sixth form would be successful, enabling more young people to be educated in the Borough.

The number of students requiring post-16 places is projected to increase throughout the next decade. Levels of international migration including British National (Overseas) (Hong Kong) and potentially Ukrainian refugees are unpredictable, but it is prudent to plan for significant numbers of arrivals, in addition to current projected need. Current projections indicate that provided students who prefer out of borough provision continue to be admitted to these schools and colleges, current capacity should be sufficient until the late 2020s. Should the ability of Wokingham students to attend out of borough provision be adversely affected by rising demand closer to these schools and colleges, then there is likely to be a need for additional provision locally. Whilst there is a strong likelihood that Further Education College provision can be increased, local sixth form colleges may not be able to grow to match both population growth in the areas they were set up to support, and to continue to allow Wokingham students access. Mitigating this risk through the provision of additional sixth form capacity minimises the risk of urgent and possibly less effective action being required at a later date. Moreover, the capital programme is constrained. Higher priorities have been identified including the need for additional Year 7 places and new SEND provision.

The identified alternatives, "do nothing" and "invest in established sixth forms", enable limited resources to be refocused on high priority issues and create greater resilience in current provision respectively. All three options have merits and risk, so the judgement is balanced, but in favour of the new sixth form.

Executive is therefore recommended to approve the sixth form proposal, with conditions.

Background

This report is written to help inform the Council's decision in relation to a proposal from the Bohunt School & Education Trust to build a new sixth form centre, to be delivered through a cost sharing partnership and operational 2023-24. It sets out what the proposal can bring to the borough, in the context of changing need. It also sets out alternative courses of action that could be taken. Further contextual information is provided in Appendix A "Post 16 background data" and the key aspects of the Bohunt proposal are set out in Appendix B "Bohunt Wokingham Proposals".

The Bohunt School & Education Trust has submitted a proposal for additional sixth form places with related proposals for additional Year 7 places. These related proposals are directly aligned to Wokingham education policy priorities, provided they can be realised in partnership with the borough.

Wokingham policy commitments

The Council's intention from inception has been that what is now the Bohunt Wokingham School would be an 11 to 18 school. This was set out in the council's Core Strategy (the council's plan for development until 2026) adopted in 2010 (in paragraph 2.27), where the need for a secondary school in Arborfield was established. In July 2014 the council's Executive agreed to the school delivery project as an 11 to 18 1,200 place school, with an option to grow to offer 1,500 places. On opening in 2016 the school opened as a 1,200 place 11 to 16 school. The current proposal enables the school roll to reach (and exceed) 1,500 places and offer sixth form provision. This is particularly important in the south as all other areas are served by 11 to 18 schools, while both secondary schools in the south are 11 to 16.

This proposal therefore fulfils a core commitment made by the council when it determined its development strategy in 2010. The delivery of these commitments gives all partners further confidence that the full range of commitments made as part of the Core Strategy and subsequent statutory planning documents will be met. This is important because the adopted strategy focuses development into four large scale developments (SDLs), two to the north and south of Wokingham town, and two in the south (in Shinfield and around the former garrison site). These areas, particularly the two in the south did not benefit from existing infrastructure (roads, leisure facilities, schools etc) to meet the needs of the new community and so significant investment was planned into the development strategy. Therefore, the delivery of these facilities is essential for both the future sustainability of these communities and public confidence in the strategy itself. Should the strategy be perceived to have failed, housing delivery in the southern SDLs may slow and the risk of uncoordinated development outside designated development areas is increased, with risks of increased traffic congestion, and inadequate local education and leisure provision.

Community support

It is known that the sixth form project is supported by communities around the south. The Bohunt School has conducted a consultation exercise that clearly demonstrated that local communities (including residents in long established and new communities) would value a sixth form. The council's own consultation in 2021 on the 11 to 16 education strategy also recorded significant support for both schools with sixth forms and a new sixth form in the south (despite the latter being outside of scope).

Traffic congestion and net carbon zero strategy

A new sixth form that would be accessible for most students by walking or cycling (sustainable modes of travel) would support the council's net carbon zero strategy (and reduce traffic congestion) by reducing the need for trips by car, bus and coach to alternative provision.

Viability and sustainability

The sixth form is expected to be popular, successful and sustainable, with a focus on Level 3 (e.g., A and T level) provision. The school is oversubscribed in the 11 to 16 age groups, so the future Year 11 (the year before sixth form) cohorts are expected to be sustained at a minimum roll of 240 for the foreseeable future. This would point to a sixth form of up to 300 pupils (based on 60% transfer to the on-site sixth form). Some Wokingham town schools see a loss to sixth form colleges and if this was replicated here, the sixth form might be slightly smaller. Either way, the sixth form roll is expected to exceed the DfE's minimum planned size for new sixth forms of 200 places.

Impact on other Wokingham Sixth forms

A reasonable concern is that the new sixth form might undermine achievement at existing Wokingham sixth forms. There are two issues here, the potential role of former Bohunt students in creating sustainable, successful sixth forms at other schools and the potential for the new sixth form to take students who would otherwise attend local sixth forms. The former refers to a potential future benefit, as recent history is that very few (less than 15 last year) students who formerly studied at one of the south's two 11 to 16 schools have gone onto Wokingham sixth forms. The immediate impact is therefore minimal. The second issue is covered by two factors. The proposal includes a commitment by the Bohunt School to limit external admissions to 15 students for the first three years. In the longer term, the physical limits on capacity are likely to limit future external student recruitment.

Future need

While the borough has a statutory duty to ensure there are sufficient post 16 places, there is significant surplus capacity in the borough's sixth forms, so there is no current need for a sixth form at the Bohunt School. However, the 17- and 18-year-old population is projected to increase in Wokingham and surrounding boroughs. This means that the current surplus will decrease, and (if current trends are maintained) there will be little surplus capacity by the late 2020s. However, if the rising population in neighbouring boroughs is not matched by increased provision there is a risk that south Wokingham residents will be unable to secure places at some preferred out of borough schools and colleges. In this event they may need places at Wokingham school sixth forms. This has the potential to create a shortfall in provision in the mid to late 2020s. This may not arise – out of borough schools and colleges may increase the number of places available – but a new sixth form at the Bohunt School would mitigate this risk. Mitigating this risk through the provision of additional sixth form capacity therefore minimises the risk of urgent, and possibly less effective, action being required at a later date. International migration (noting that significant numbers of British Nationals (Overseas) (Hong Kong) are currently arriving and Ukrainian refugees may arrive soon) is unpredictable, but it would be prudent to plan for additional need from this cause.

Year 7 support

The current major pressure on school places is at Year 7. The Bohunt School proposal would give a potential Year 7 to Year 11 roll of 150 pupils. Although the school's preference would be for a single class per year expansion, the Council's need is for flexible provision, to ensure that sufficient places are available to deal with periods of peak demand.

Places would be allocated from the school's waiting list, releasing places in other Wokingham schools that would be available for allocation to girls currently allocated places in out of borough schools (and would help mitigate the risk of this situation arising in future).

SEND

The additional capacity will help enable children with SEND (particularly those without an Education Health and Care Plan (EHCP)) secure a place at a borough school. Schools are required in law to admit children with an EHCP (a statutory plan) designating that school.

Cost sharing and partnership arrangements

A material consideration is the offer by the school and Trust to share costs, with the Trust contributing £2m to project costs. Given that delivery of the sixth form is a council commitment, the Bohunt Education Trust's offer means that part of the cost, which would be incurred at some point in the next decade, is defrayed, enabling released funds to be committed to other projects.

The formal partnership agreements will be negotiated with the Trust, with support from the council's legal services team. This will ensure that appropriate safeguards for Wokingham's investment will be in place, to ensure in particular that Year 7 provision matches WBC requirements.

Financial issues

There is no national capital funding stream available to the council to fund sixth form expansions. The council can draw on capital funding from developers in the form of S106 payments (if post 16 is within the scope of an agreement) and Community Infrastructure Levy (subject to prior commitments to the many other competing priorities for this funding stream), capital grants made for other purposes, proceeds of asset sales and prudential borrowing. A one off DfE post 16 capacity fund to fund additional places was established for 2021/22, but the Council would not have been eligible to apply for this.

The Council has arrangements to support revenue costs associated with additional Year 7 to 11 places through the Dedicated Schools Grant Growth Fund. Management of this budget is in partnership with the schools forum and final arrangements are intended to be agreed within available resources.

Post 16 revenue start-up costs would be a matter for the Bohunt School to address (the Growth Fund is for statutory school age growth).

Other Post 16 needs

A quarter of Wokingham's Year 11 pupils go on to become students at a Further Education college (nearly all to one of the three colleges in adjoining boroughs), mainly to study vocational and Level 2 (sub-A level) courses. Accelerate Learning (who run two of the three colleges) report that they have both capacity to offer additional places and capacity to expand provision, subject to demand. On this basis there are no proposals for additional Level 2 / vocational course capacity.

Alternatives

The two identified alternatives are:

- To do nothing
- To invest in other Wokingham Sixth Forms

“Do nothing” reflects the fact that there is no immediate education provision case for additional post 16 capacity. It would mean that the additional benefits (Year 7) would need to be made up on other sites. It would free up the £5.4M in the MTFP for other high priority needs.

“Investment in other Wokingham Sixth forms” would enable the council to make existing provision more resilient by addressing some long-standing provision deficits and making them a more attractive proposition for students, reducing the number of students travelling outside the borough. Some are very small and must be considered borderline viable. It is possible that some provision will be lost (which could create a future shortfall in provision) because they are not currently viable.

These options are set out in more detail below:

Options for action

Option 1: Do nothing

Advantages

- Retains budget allocated to post-16 in the MTFP for higher priority needs.
- Ensures investment in post 16 capacity is made at a point where there is a clear statutory need.
- National funding for post-16 may become available in the future as post 16 numbers start to rise.

Disadvantages

- Does not meet priorities identified by south Wokingham communities.
- Does not contribute a flexible solution to meet Y7 demand.
- Does not offer opportunity to increase post-16 SEND provision to meet identified need.
- Does not reduce traffic congestion / school run traffic.

Option 2: Refocus on expansion of existing sixth forms, when necessary, with SEND focus.

Advantages

- Could lead to larger more effective sixth forms in the borough (with a potential target of making all sixth forms able to offer at least 300 places).
- Reduces the risk of sixth form failure as schools focus resources on 11 to 16 provision.
- Would ensure that all sixth form spend also targets the council's key priority groups amongst children with high levels of Special Education Need or Disabilities (SEND).

Disadvantages

- Does not meet priorities identified by south Wokingham communities.
- Does not offer a flexible solution to meet Y7 demand
- Does not reduce traffic congestion / school run traffic.

Option 3: Enter into an agreement with the Bohunt Education Trust for a joint project to create a new sixth form at the Bohunt School Wokingham.

Advantages

- Meets long standing development strategy objectives.
- Meets South Wokingham residents' priority of a local school sixth form option for their area.
- Provides a jointly agreed flexible package of Y7 expansion to meet increasing demand for Wokingham school places (condition of partnership funding agreement)
- Would help reduce the volume of traffic movement associated with journeys to post 16 education.
- Strong likelihood of this being a successful sixth form significantly above the DfE's minimum size threshold.
- Mitigates a risk of access to out of borough provision being lost as local populations rise.
- Makes use of a financial contribution that will not be available in future.

Disadvantages

- There is a risk (after the initial 3-year protection period) of the new sixth form causing other school sixth forms to diminish in size – potentially to a point at which they can no longer provide an efficient or even viable sixth form within budget constraints.
- There is no immediate statutory need for these places and there are competing needs (Year 7 and SEND provision in particular) that need to be funded at a time when council capital budgets are tightly constrained. This is mitigated, however, by the condition to provide a flexible package of Y7 expansion to meet increased demand for 3 years.

- There is no dedicated funding source for this expansion. As post 16 rolls begin to rise generally, it is likely that DfE funding programmes will be identified. It is possible that future iterations of the DfE's Post 16 Capacity Funding programme could be accessed directly by the school, without WBC support.
- Risks associated with population growth in adjoining and nearby areas may be mitigated by expansion of existing colleges, so the long-term risks may be managed in other ways.

Recommendation

There are competing arguments here.

The benefits include fulfilling long standing policy objectives, mitigating future risks (particularly to other schools), meeting community aspirations and the likelihood that the new provision will be successful. The financial contribution is a material issue too.

Against which, the case for a new sixth form has limited strength on place sufficiency grounds (noting that an important risk is that out of borough provision will cease to be available to Wokingham resident students). Furthermore, the Council has other pressing statutory priorities, including new SEND provision, that also require access to limited financial resources.

There is an improved case if the council's support for the new facility is conditioned on the provision of flexible Year 7 capacity in accordance with council identified priorities. In time this Year 7 capacity will become a 30 place per annum expansion of the school, but the immediate need is for places that can be used flexibly (i.e.in multiples of 30) to meet Borough needs.

In view of the wide range of potential benefits, limited adverse impact on other schools, mitigation of future place supply risks and financial contribution to the project, option 3 is recommended for approval.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE RECOMMENDATION

The Council faces severe funding pressures, particularly in the face of the COVID-19 crisis. It is therefore imperative that Council resources 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)	Nil	Yes	Capital
Next Financial Year (Year 2)	£1.5M	Yes	Capital
Following Financial Year (Year 3)	£2.2M	Yes	Capital

Other Financial Information

Bohunt Wokingham have established that they can contribute £2m towards a project cost of £5.7M, leaving Wokingham to fund £3.7M.

The current agreed sixth form expansion capital budget is £5.4M. This is not committed elsewhere.

Note that current costs are estimates, and it is likely that final out turn figures will require further spend from within the agreed budget £5.4 M budget for post 16 investment.

The annual split in spend is estimated.

Stakeholder Considerations and Consultation

Statutory consultation on the sixth form proposal is the responsibility of the Bohunt Education Trust.

Public Sector Equality Duty

An Equality Impact Assessment is attached

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*

If Option 3 is chosen there will be a positive impact through reduced travel to post 16 education options.

List of Background Papers

None

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