

TITLE	Growth Fund Update
FOR CONSIDERATION BY	Schools Forum on 12 July 2023
WARD	None Specific;
LEAD OFFICER	Director, Children's Services - Helen Watson

OUTCOME / BENEFITS TO THE COMMUNITY

That all Wokingham resident children of statutory school age, entitled to and requesting a school place, will be offered one.

RECOMMENDATION

That Schools Forum notes the planned programme of expenditure for 2023/24 and the implications of the projected spend for 2023/24 for the 2024/25 Growth Fund.

SUMMARY OF REPORT

The projected spend from the 2023/24 Growth Fund of £1.9m. This is funded by £1.7m new in year allocation for 2023/24 and £384k carry forward from the 2022/23 year. This will leave £168k to carry forward into the 2024/25 year.

The projected 2024/25 spend is £1.6m.

While plans for 2023/24 have been confirmed, plans for 2024/25 are advanced, but (at the point of drafting) not, in all cases, formally confirmed.

The need for additional capacity is very much driven by international migration into the borough. While mid-phase growth was particularly strong in both 2021/22 and 2022/23 there is limited information available for 2023/24, yet. Analysis of roll growth between September 2022 and January 2023 indicated that rolls were strong growing in that period. Shortly May 2023 data will be available and it will be possible to determine the current rate of roll growth.

Forest School's proposal to go co-ed from September 2024, will, if approved, lessen some of the burden on other schools.

Background

The Growth Fund enables the council to make payments to schools to enable them to employ staff and purchase resources when they agree to admit additional students.

Wokingham Borough secondary school rolls are now growing. This reflects the impact of the primary school bulge, a prolonged period of rising demand for primary school places driven by rising birth numbers until 2012/13. Birth numbers began to decline from 2013 onwards and consequently primary school rolls (particularly in Key Stage 1) fell after children born in 2013 and later years, began to enter primary school. The council's initial response to the rising demand for secondary places was to open the Bohunt Wokingham School in 2016. Even with that school admitting 240 students per year (above the council's original planning assumptions) the borough requires additional secondary school places. In March 2022 the council's executive agreed a programme to increase the number of secondary school Year 7 places from 2022 to 2027.

However, since 2021 net migration into Wokingham has risen sharply. Comparing 2021 to 2022 and 2022 to 2023 year group growth with earlier years shows that mid-phase migration into the borough has more than doubled compared to earlier years. Where Year 7 rolls were projected to decrease after 2022/23, migration into the area will (if this is sustained) lead to a later peak year and a much greater number of places required.

It is not known when the rate of increase will reduce, but the termly school census' are now checked to monitor growth between the annual school roll projections. At the point of drafting the May census data is not available, though.

Analysis of Issues

The council is developing long term secondary school place plans. However, it faces a number of challenges that must be taken into account:

Resources: the council's capital programme is out of balance with available resources. Although the council can borrow in advance of receiving government grant or developer payments (S106, CIL) high interest rates means this would have an adverse impact on services. The council has set up a "Gold" process, led by the Chief Executive to reframe existing programmes within available resources.

Immigration into the borough: the number of international migrants moving into the borough has been high in the past two years, and as far as can be known, still continues to be high. At some point it is likely to drop back, but it is far from clear when this will occur. When (and if) it does Year rolls are expected to start to reduce (although they will be above the 2022 baseline level for a number of years).

The impact of new housing: the borough has seen a consistently high number of homes built each year for over 5 years now. Before 2030, unless at least one large new large development is approved, the rate of building will fall, and if this occurs, the demand for primary school places may diminish too.

Cross border movement: At secondary school age, the council is a net exporter of pupils. Should this balance change, it would affect the number of additional places required.

Year 8 to 11 places: historically growth in secondary age cohorts has been low, but in the last two years, significant growth has occurred. Currently the Fair Access Protocol manages these admissions, but this is not a sustainable long term approach, so agreements with individual schools to create new mid phase classes may be required.

The table of planned (or anticipated) Growth Fund spend is attached as Appendix one.

It is currently projected that £168k will be unspent at the end of 2023/24, and that this will transfer to the 2024/25 year.

Based on current planning assumptions, £1.455m is required as in year growth fund in 2024/25. Modelling will continue to evolve through the summer and will be shared with the Schools Block task & finish group as part of budget setting.

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)	£1.88m	Yes	Revenue
Next Financial Year (Year 2)	£1.62m	to be progressed through 2024/25 budget setting	Revenue
Following Financial Year (Year 3)	Unknown	Revenue	Revenue

Other financial information relevant to the Recommendation/Decision

Cross-Council Implications (how does this decision impact on other Council services, including properties and priorities?)

Public Sector Equality Duty
 While due regard has been paid to the Public Sector Equality Duty an Equalities assessment has not undertaken as this spend is non-discretionary and tied to a public duty

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
 This decision will be neutral to the council’s climate emergency plans.

Reasons for considering the report in Part 2

None

List of Background Papers

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