

# SCHOOL PLACE PLANNING REPORT 2:

## Delivery of Special Education Provision

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## 1. Background

The Oxfordshire SEND Sufficiency Delivery Strategy 2022/23-2026/27 sets out Oxfordshire County Council's planning framework for the delivery of additional school-based capacity to meet the needs of children and young people with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND). It complements the Oxfordshire Local Area SEND Strategy and is aligned with the DfE Delivering Better Value (DBV) Programme. The Strategy is published on the council's website at: <https://www.oxfordshire.gov.uk/sites/default/files/file/special-educational-needs/SENDSufficiencyStrategy.pdf>

The Strategy sets out how the number of children subject to an Education, Health & Care Plan (EHCP) is rising much more rapidly than can be explained by population growth alone, and the subsequent increase in demand for special school provision has been greater than the increase in the supply of maintained special school places. The growing deficit has been met through increased dependence on higher-cost Independent and Non-Maintained Special Schools (INMSS), resulting in unsustainable pressure on funding for SEND provision. A shortage of places also means it takes longer to place a child in suitable provision, and may mean that children have further to travel to school.

The detailed analysis in this Strategy of the growth in the numbers of children with EHCPs, existing specialist provision of all types, and forecasts for future demand for places, complements the Oxfordshire Local Area SEND Strategy, and is aligned with the DfE Delivering Better Value (DBV) Programme. It is informed by widespread consultation held during 2022 into the Local Area SEND Strategy 2022-27 and System Reform for Special Educational Needs and Disabilities, as well as through the DBV Programme.

The Strategy sets out a spatial framework to achieve a better distribution of special school provision, and to provide a structure for the phased expansion of the network of Resource Base provision. Under the Strategy, capital investment to provide additional SEND provision in Oxfordshire will focus on the following four priorities:

- Priority 1: Local access to appropriate high-quality provision
- Priority 2: Reducing overall cost pressures
- Priority 3: Meeting emerging needs
- Priority 4: Efficient use of resources to maximise reach and scope of support

This report sets out recent, current and planned work to increase educational provision for children with SEND.

## **2. Delivery of additional SEND provision since 2023**

### **a. Resource Bases**

*In the two academic years since July 2023 (the date of the SEND Ofsted) the number of SEND Resource Base places has increased by 3%, compared to an increase in total Oxfordshire pupil numbers of 1%.*

This increase in places was delivered through a new Resource Base at:

- Cherry Fields Primary School, Banbury (2023/24) - Communication & Interaction needs.

This followed on from the three Resource Bases opened in the previous two years, which were still working up to full operational capacity by 2023:

- Whitelands (secondary) School, Bicester (2021/22) - Social, Emotional & Mental Health needs
- Southwold Primary School, Bicester (2021/22) - Communication & Interaction Needs, and Social, Emotional & Mental Health needs
- Gagle Brook Primary School, Bicester (2022/23) - Communication & Interaction Needs, and Social, Emotional & Mental Health needs

Taking all four new Bases into account, the number of Resource Base places in Oxfordshire schools has increased by 10% between 2021/22 and 2024/25, compared to an increase in overall pupil numbers in Oxfordshire of 3%.

### **b. Special schools**

*In the two academic years since July 2023 (the date of the SEND Ofsted) the number of state-maintained sector special school places in Oxfordshire has increased by 8%, compared to an increase in total Oxfordshire pupil numbers of 1%.*

This increase in places has been delivered through:

- John Watson Special School, Wheatley – 8 additional places added over that period
- Bardwell Special School, Bicester – 15 additional places added over that period
- Bloxham Grove Academy – new school, supplying 70 places by 2024/25, growing to 120 places when fully operational.

Bloxham Grove Special School opened in January 2024, providing 118 additional special school places for pupils aged 7 – 18 with Social, Emotional & Mental Health needs and/or Autism Spectrum Disorder.

### **3. Forward plan of additional capacity**

#### **a. Resource bases**

*Taking into account the recently opened and currently confirmed new Resource Bases, the number of Resource Base places in Oxfordshire schools is planned to increase by 45% compared to the July 2023 Ofsted date – over 80 additional places.*

Accommodation for new Resource Bases has already been incorporated in three new mainstream schools recently opened, and the Bases will start admitting pupils in due course:

- Barton Park Primary School, Oxford - Social, Emotional & Mental Health needs
- St John's CE Academy, Grove (primary and secondary) – Social, Emotional & Mental Health needs and Autism Spectrum Disorder
- Windrush CE Primary School, Witney – Communication & Interaction Needs, and Autism Spectrum Disorder

In order to provide more local specialist provision for children with SEND, work is underway to expand the coverage of Resource Bases and open Bases more quickly than can be delivered through new schools, through working with existing schools which have accommodation which can be repurposed as a Base.

The next of these due to open is at St Frideswide CE Primary School in Oxford, which will open a 16-place Base in 2025/26 for pupils with Communication & Interaction Needs, and Social, Emotional & Mental Health needs.

In addition, there has been considerable interest from other primary schools in opening Resource Bases, and proposals are being considered against the principles set out in section 3d below.

#### **b. Special schools**

*Taking into account the recently opened and currently confirmed new and expanded special schools, the number of state-maintained special school places in Oxfordshire is planned to increase by 47% compared to the July 2023 Ofsted date – over 600 additional places.*

The current expansion projects planned for existing special schools are:

- Mabel Prichard School: accommodation due to complete for the 2025/26 school year, to increase capacity from 110 to 136 places.
- Springfield School: working with schools and Trusts to identify how special school could expand into accommodation now surplus to requirements at mainstream school (co-located)
- Bishopswood School: working with schools and Trusts to identify how special school could expand into accommodation now surplus to requirements at mainstream schools (co-located)

Further opportunities to expand existing schools are also at an earlier stage of exploration.

Three further new special schools are at different stages of the planning process.

**New SEMH special school in Faringdon (Key Stage 2 – Key Stage 5)** at a site previously used by an Infant School, which has now relocated into new accommodation. Funding for this school is primarily via the DfE Free School programme. This school is planned to provide up to 118 additional places, and expected to open in 2026/27.

**New SEMH special school in Didcot (Key Stage 2 – Key Stage 5).** Subject to DfE approval, this will be built on land currently used by Aureus (secondary) School which is surplus to that school's requirements. This school is planned to provide 120 additional places, with a current opening date of 2027/28.

**New community special school in Didcot (Nursery – Key Stage 5).** A site for this school has been secured through a Section 106 agreement with the housing development to the west of Didcot, known as Valley Park. This school is planned to provide 120 additional places. The opening date of this school is dependent on the progress of the host development, but is currently estimated as 2028.

### **c. Capital Budget for planned schemes**

Schemes planned for delivery from 2025 onwards are funded from a combination of High Needs Capital Grant (provided annually from DfE), Section 106 funds from housing developers where contributions have been sought to support specialist provision, and corporate funds approved to support the expansion of Resource Bases. A total of £37m funding has so far been committed against planned schemes. Costs to deliver the current programme are expected to be £47m.

There is an expectation that we will continue to receive High Needs Capital, which over 2021/22-2024/25 has averaged in the region of £7m per annum. Funding has so far been announced up to the 2024/25 budget year; an announcement is expected by the end of March about funding for the 2025/26 budget year. The government has previously stated that the spend guidance will be updated to reflect the government's priority to improve mainstream inclusion.

"Section 106" funding is sought from housing developers for expansion of special education provision proportionate to the need arising from the development.

Although Basic Need Funding is primarily for creation of new places in mainstream schools, it can also be used to support specialist schemes.

All capital funding streams are kept under regular review to ensure they are allocated to projects that best match priorities.

#### **4. Principles for assessing proposals for capital spend on SEND provision**

The council continues to invite interest from both mainstream and special schools in further projects to expand SEND provision. The consideration of any proposals will be informed by the following principles:

##### Inclusion

Building on the principles in the Oxfordshire Local Area SEND strategy 2022-2027, inclusion will be at the heart of any prioritisation. The three priority groups are:

- Children with SEND
- Children we care for (CWCF) and Children we previously cared for (CWPCF)
- Children in receipt of pupil premium funding (PP/disadvantaged)

##### Quality First Teaching

Removing barriers to learning, adapting the environment to the child to enable children to fully participate in school life. Investment should be focused on schools where:

- There is strong leadership of SEND, and capacity to manage the proposed investment and new provision
- Good existing quality of education for SEND, which will be further strengthened through the proposed investment, or
- Existing quality of education for SEND is compromised by the available accommodation, which could be resolved through the proposed investment.

##### Right Support Right Time in Inclusive Settings

Oxfordshire's SEND Sufficiency Delivery Strategy 2022/23-2026/27 sets out the following overarching priorities for delivery of SEND provision:

- Local access to appropriate, high-quality provision - addressing existing gaps in spatial planning frameworks (set out in the Strategy).
- Reducing overall cost pressures, through reduced use of higher cost INMSS provision, and/or reducing travel distances/costs. Projects which enable children to remain within mainstream schools.
- Meeting emerging needs - focused on growing types of SEND and/or geographic areas of population growth and housing development.
- Efficient use of resources to maximise reach and scope of support, e.g adapting or expanding existing accommodation to better meet need, or where the capital investment required otherwise represents good value for money.

These principles translate into assessment criteria as shown in Figure 1 below.

<b>Inclusion</b>	
The proposal would increase the number of:	Children with SEND who will attend their local school
	Children we care for (CWCF) and Children we previously cared for (CWPCF) who will attend their local school
	Children in receipt of pupil premium funding (PP/disadvantaged) who will attend their local school
<b>Quality First Teaching</b>	
The school demonstrates:	Strong leadership of SEND, and capacity to manage the proposed investment and new provision, for example as assessed by Ofsted
	High quality of education for SEND, for example as assessed by Ofsted
	How quality of education for SEND will be strengthened through the proposed investment
	High aspirations for learners
	Inclusive school ethos - low rate of permanent exclusions, suspensions, etc.
	Clear plan to measure impact
<b>Right Support Right Time in Inclusive Settings</b>	
Proposal would:	Meet the needs of children with complex needs
	Fill a local current or emerging geographic gap in provision
	Target the type of SEND for which there is a local shortage of provision
	Be affordable and sustainable within the relevant revenue funding mechanisms
	Deliver added value in supporting SEND provision beyond the school, e.g. through a local partnership approach
<b>Property expectations and governance</b>	
Proposal would:	Represent good value for money
	Make more effective use of OCC's education estate and assets
	Comply with standard OCC governance processes and priorities, including sustainability and DfE guidance as outlined in BB104 Area guidelines for SEND as appropriate

*Figure 1: assessment criteria for new SEND provision proposals.*

## 5. Sufficiency Challenges

It is recognised that delivery of sufficient additional SEND capacity has previously not kept pace with the rapid rise in the need for specialist provision, resulting in increased use of Independent and Non-Maintained Special Schools, and delays in identifying suitable provision for children with SEND.

The main challenges, and responses, have been:

### The pace of growth and change in EHCPs

- Not only has the number of EHCPs risen much faster than previously forecast, but the type and complexity of need is constantly changing. Over the last five years, the number of EHCPs issued per year in Oxfordshire has trebled, from 232 (2019) to 706 (2024) (+204%).
- This rapidly escalating need and demand on specialist services and requests for specialist placements highlights the need to further develop the mainstream offer and this forms part of the Council's SEND Sufficiency Strategy, as well as the SEND Transformation Programme (Theme 1: Right Support, Right Time) and Oxfordshire's commitment to supporting early intervention.
- Schools and the local authority will continue to need to be increasingly innovative in meeting the needs of children and young people with SEND. This includes the council's Enhanced Pathways initiative, developed within schools, which provides a teacher-led space to support some of the most vulnerable SEND students across local schools, offering a bespoke and specialised curriculum that meet their social, emotional, communication, sensory and academic needs whilst remaining within their local mainstream school community.

### Site availability

- Existing special school sites are fully utilised – for further expansion, additional site area is required, and is being sought through a combination of reprioritising the mainstream educational estate and acquiring new sites. In some cases, expansion of special schools would require their relocation, or for them to operate across split sites.
- New school sites within housing developments are dependent on progress of the development to delivery the site with the necessary services and infrastructure. This has been a cause of delay in delivering a new special school in Didcot.
- In some cases, accommodation previously used for mainstream education has become surplus to requirements, but adapting this accommodation to be suitable for special education is not always straightforward.
- Land agents have been employed to search for potential new sites, but there is limited availability of affordable and available sites within Oxfordshire which are suitable for a special school.

### Trust and school operational requirements

- Surplus accommodation within mainstream schools will only become available gradually, as pupil numbers fall and classrooms become available for repurposing. Close partnership working with schools and academy trusts is necessary to plan how



accommodation can be repurposed without compromise to their operational requirements.

- Special Schools also need to adjust their operational practices to adapt to the scale and nature of additional accommodation which is available, for example operating across split sites.
- Revenue funding models are also needing to be revised to recognise the greater flexibility of SEND provision and deliver equitable funding across different types of provision.

### Statutory approval processes

- There are statutory processes to be followed to establish new schools or make significant changes – including expansion or adding a SEND Resource Base – to existing schools and academies. These inevitably add to the timescale of creating additional provision.
- Under current legislation, most new schools are established as academies, and the local authority is responsible for running a competitive process to identify a suitable academy sponsor to recommend to the DfE Regional Director. Once the academy sponsor has been approved in principle, it will then be for the successful trust to work towards establishing the new school, with support from the local authority and the DfE. The Secretary of State will then consider signing a funding agreement with the successful trust once content that the school is ready to open successfully. The process of establishing a new school, putting aside any construction timescale, typically takes at least two years.
- For significant changes to schools, current legislation requires full consultation to take place, particularly with parents, staff and governors. For non-academy schools, a statutory consultation and decision-making process must be followed, with the decision taken by the local authority. Academies need to submit an application to the Department for Education, for approval by the DfE Regional Director.

### Planning permission and construction

- Significant changes to accommodation, in particular new schools, will require planning permission, which can always be a potential constraint on construction, and cause of delay.
- Construction processes can be accelerated through the use of modular / off-site construction techniques, where these are suitable.