

**EDUCATION & YOUNG PEOPLE
OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
28 March 2025**

Update on New Children's Homes

Report by Lisa Lyons

RECOMMENDATION

1. Committee is RECOMMENDED to

Read, consider and note this update, which is provided for information only, no decisions are required.

Executive Summary

2. This report has been drafted to provide Overview and Scrutiny Committee with an update on the progress of development of five new Oxfordshire County Council children's residential homes so far, describe the work that is in progress and highlight any delays and the causes of these.

Background

3. Oxfordshire County Council has always owned and operated Residential Children's Homes, offering both short term assessment placements and long-term residential care. Three homes (Glebelands, The Moors and The Oaks) have provided up to 16 placements for children. Plans to expand the provision were made in response to the cost and sufficiency issues associated with Residential Children's Homes nationally.
4. On 22 December 2022, Cabinet approved a Business Case to develop the Children's Service residential Care Home capacity, by the purchase and adaptation of 4 children's homes costing a total of £10.450m; 50% of this total was matched by the Department for Education (DfE). Oxfordshire County Council has made a capital commitment of £5.225m.

Updates on the progress for each new Residential Home

Aspen House (West Oxfordshire)

5. Aspen House was the first of the new children's homes to open. It provides residential care for up to 4 children aged 12-17. The home offers both medium and long-term placements, including emergency admissions, and supports children with mobility challenges. It has now been open for 6 months and has been full since it opened. Aspen House was inspected in October 2024 and received a good judgement by Ofsted.

Peak House – South Oxfordshire

6. Once open Peak House will be a 1-2-bedroom short term children's home, providing care for children with a range of complex needs or who require same day admission. Children who will live at Peak House will benefit from a quieter and more bespoke care setting and are likely to have had a range of adverse childhood experiences.
7. Peak House is ready to open, pending OFSTED registration, all building work is completed, and the home has furniture ready for children to move in. Registration paperwork is with OFSTED and the team at Peak House are working with social workers and managers to match children currently living out of Oxfordshire with a view to them returning into the county. OFSTED could visit the home any day for the pre-registration inspection and as soon as the registration is received children can start moving in.

Willow Bank – Vale of the White Horse

8. Once open Willow Bank will be the second 1-2-bedroom short to mid-term children's home, providing care for children with a range of complex needs or who require same day admission. Children who will live at Willow Bank will benefit from a quieter and more bespoke care setting and are likely to have had a range of adverse childhood experiences.
9. Building work at the Willow Bank site has not finished but is on track to be completed by the end of this month so that the care team will receive the keys, after this the building will need furnishing, decorating and OFSTED registration. There have been no delays with the completion of the building work at Willow Bank, and it is hoped that the home will be operating in Autumn 2025. (pending Ofsted registration).

Great Mead – South Oxfordshire

10. Once open, Great Mead will be a 4-bedroom mid to long term children's home, providing care for children with a range of complex needs.
11. Building work at the Great Mead site has been slow to progress, due to planning issues and wildlife concerns (there have been bats living in the roof and possibly great crested newts in a pond). It is unlikely that the building work will be completed until late summer 2025, following this the care team will need to furnish and prepare the building before registering with OFSTED. It is unlikely that Great Mead will open until Winter 2025.
12. Children We Care For living outside of Oxfordshire and who would benefit from returning will be prioritised to live at Great Mead. Transitions will begin at intervals as soon as the Ofsted registration is received.

Oathill Lodge – West Oxfordshire

13. Oathill Lodge will provide the same service as Great Mead, just in a different location. It has not progressed as quickly with the planning and building process, however it is likely that the home will also be open in Winter 2025.

Again, Children We Care For living outside of Oxfordshire will be prioritised to live at Oathill Lodge.

Corporate Policies and Priorities

14. The new Children's Homes project is firmly rooted in the Children's Social care Sufficiency Strategy, which details plans to create more local homes for Oxfordshire children, so that they can benefit from living alongside residents and the excellent support infrastructure in the county.

15. Building local Residential Care Homes also speaks to Oxfordshire's Strategic Plan, specifically the following priorities:

Put action to address the climate emergency at the heart of our work.

All new children's homes have been built to the highest building specifications that ensure projects are taking the environmental impact of any work and the completed building into consideration. All five new homes have electric charge points on location and electricity/gas supplies have been introduced with the least possible disruption to the environment

Support carers and the social care system.

All new children's homes support carers because local jobs have been created for people who would like a job in social care, and for birth families of the children living in the residential homes, because they will be moving nearer which will improve family time opportunities. The Social Care system is also supported by this project because providing local homes means that children live closer to their social care support team, which in turn means that teams are physically closer to the children they are working with.

Create opportunities for children and young people to reach their full potential.

This project means that a number of children placed outside of Oxfordshire can move back into the county, if this is safe and in their best interests. This provides Children we Care For with improved opportunities to reach their full potential, because they can access local resources, including our excellent schools and therapeutic services (ATTACH for example).

Financial Implications

16. The table below provides a summary of the budget for each of the units, together with the forecast spend. 50% of any underspend must be paid to the DFE, this is part of the agreement made with them.

	Home				Total
	Peak House	Willowbank	Great Mead	Oathill	

OCC Capital Investment	£1,026,000	£1,026,000	£1,586,500	£1,586,500	
DfE Funding	£1,026,000	£1,026,000	£1,586,500	£1,586,500	
Total	£2,052,000	£2,052,000	£3,173,000	£3,173,000	
Forecast Capital Spend	£1,858,833	£2,204,179	£3,090,270	£2,605,923	
Variance	Small home balance	£-40,989	£-82,730	£-567,077	£-690,796
DfE reimbursement (50% of underspend)		£20,494	£41,365	£283,539	£345,398

17. In total this project has a projected underspend of £690,796, as stated £345,398 of this will be paid back to the DfE. As this is a projected underspend it is possible that this figure may change, however the team are confident that as this figure has remained the same for several months, it is unlikely that there will be any significant variations in the forecast.

18. While Aspen House is a new Children's Residential Home, it was not part of the above business case, this is because the council agreed to fund this project, prior to DfE funding becoming available. The budget for the Aspen House project was £3,000,000 and the total spend at completion was £2,930,000 leaving an underspend of £70,000.

19. This is a review of progress on capital projects, and as such does not cover revenue financial implications in this report.

Comments checked by:

Jane Billington, Strategic Finance Business Partner – Children's Services
Date: 20/03/2025

Legal Implications

20. There are no potential legal implications.

Comments checked by: Craig Cochrane, Head of Law and Legal Business Partner, Child Care Team (Legal Services)

Date: 18 March 2025

Staff Implications

21. Staff have been appointed and are subject to the onboarding process to ensure they are in post by the time that the children's homes open.

Comments checked by:

Nazia Turley, HR Business Partner, Children's Social Care, 17 March 2025

Equality & Inclusion Implications

22. Planning for the growth in Oxfordshire County Council's Residential Care home established has centred around principles of equality and inclusion, with the driving force for expansion being the need for Children We Care For to be living in Oxfordshire and enjoying the same level of support and opportunities as resident children. The increase in the number of beds in Residential Children's homes means that more children can return.

23. Children's homes have been built taking equality and inclusion into consideration, with adaptations having been made for physically disabled children and sensory assessments being undertaken during construction to make sure home environments are calm and peaceful and do not cause any undue stress or anxiety to the children living in the home.

LISA LYONS
Director of Children's Services

Annex: Nil

Background papers: Nil

Other Documents: Nil

Contact Officer: Charlotte Davey
Assistant Director – County Services

March 2025