

Division(s): DIDCOT WEST, WALLINGFORD

DEPUTY LEADER OF THE COUNCIL
21 September 2021

NEW PRIMARY SCHOOL IN NORTH EAST DIDCOT
Report on consultation and approval for school specification

Report by Director for Children's Services

RECOMMENDATION

1. **The Cabinet Member is RECOMMENDED to approve the specification for the new primary school for north east Didcot.**

Executive Summary

2. The South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse adopted Local Plans include large-scale housing growth across Didcot. The Oxfordshire Pupil Place Plan details recent and planned new schools to meet the needs of the growing population, including a new primary school located in north east Didcot, which is the subject of this report.
3. Oxfordshire County Council will not run the new school. The 2011 Education Act requires that all new schools are expected to be academies/free schools. This law means that they are not run by the county council except in exceptional circumstances. Instead, academies are run by independent academy trusts.
4. This report forms part of the approved process in Oxfordshire to identify a sponsor for a new school, as detailed below. It seeks approval both for the final education specification, and for the council to embark on a process to identify an academy sponsor to operate the new school.
5. The physical design and construction of the school will be subject to the usual planning permission and capital governance processes, and is not covered in this report.

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Background

6. The host site for this planned new primary school is the 1,880-home development in the north east of Didcot, permitted as application P15/S2902/O. In the longer term, this development is planned to also include a second primary school and a new secondary school. The planned schools will also serve other nearby housing developments, including the South Oxfordshire Local Plan allocated site at Ladygrove East.
7. Oxfordshire County Council's role is to plan for and secure sufficient school places, and find a potential sponsor for the new schools. The Department for Education (DfE) has set out guidance on the Free School Presumption process for establishing new schools, and based on this guidance, Oxfordshire's School Organisation Stakeholder Group has approved the following process:
 - i. The county council undertakes a public consultation to decide the academy model to be implemented and finalise the education specification for the new academy, based on the DfE's model specification template, which is then to be approved by the Cabinet Member responsible for Education. The DfE is notified that applications will be sought.
 - ii. The county council invites initial expressions of interest (EoI) in running the school through the county council website, as well as through direct notification of known interested parties and through such mechanisms as facilitated by the DfE.
 - iii. The county council assesses expressions of interest against the specification and the criteria in current DfE guidance, as well as any data provided by the DfE, and invites detailed bids from three or fewer providers.
 - iv. Assessment panel to include a presentation from each shortlisted bidder, and agreement of assessment against criteria.
 - v. The county council submits a recommendation and assessments, including scoring of the proposals, to the Regional Schools Commissioner (RSC), as representative of the Secretary of State, who then decides on the successful trust.
8. The first stage of this process is to write an educational specification for the new schools to invite bids from potential academy trusts wanting to run it. The public consultation on the draft specification for the primary school at north east Didcot has now taken place, and details of this consultation are provided below. From this, the specification for the school has been finalised. The purpose of this report is to provide information on the consultation outcome, and seek Cabinet Member approval to move onto the next stage of the process: inviting interested parties to submit outline expressions of interest to run the school, based on the proposed specification at Annex 1.

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Proposed specification for the new school at north east Didcot

9. The school will be:
 - A 2-form entry primary school.
 - Age range: 2-11.
 - Admission number: 60
 - Total places provided for Reception to Year 6: 420 places.
 - Inclusive of a nursery for 2- and 3- year olds: 90 full-time equivalent places.
 - Co-educational.
10. The school's catchment is expected to be primarily the north east Didcot strategic development area but may draw from a wider area to meet population pressures across Didcot.
11. The detailed specification is provided in Annex 1.

Next steps

12. The Cabinet Member is requested to approve the draft specification attached as Annex 1 as the basis for stage (ii) of the academy provider process outlined in paragraph 7 above, the invitation of expressions of interest from potential providers. Such expressions of interest would be sought from early October 2021, and short-listed by officers, with short-listed applicants invited to submit a detailed proposal by January 2022. The detailed proposals would then be assessed, and the Cabinet Member asked to approve a preferred provider for recommendation to the Regional Schools Commissioner for approval in spring 2022.
13. Running in parallel to this process, contractors have been appointed to develop the design for the new primary school, with a planning application expected late 2021; the current expectation is that the school will open in September 2023, but this will be kept under review informed by the speed of housing delivery at the development.

Corporate Policies and Priorities

14. The planned new school is necessary to ensure the county council can meet its statutory duty to secure sufficient school places for the growing population of Didcot. It will support the council's vision to provide services that enhance the quality of life and to give every child a good start in life. It is included in the council's 2021/22 – 2025/26 Corporate Plan, incorporating the Capital and Investment Strategy and the ten-year Capital Programme to 2030/31, as approved by Council in February 2021.

Financial Implications

15. The direct financial implication of this report is the cost of the process of seeking expressions of interest, which is planned for and met within the normal CEF budget provision. There are no significant financial implications or risks at this stage.
16. The capital cost of the school is included in the current OCC approved Capital Programme, and is expected to be fully funded from Section 106 developer funding contributions secured for this purpose.
17. In respect of Basic Need places local authorities are required to make provision to support new schools prior to opening, to cover set-up costs, as well as during the period until the school attains its agreed number of year cohorts, as during this period they are not able to benefit from economies of scale. The current mechanism for doing so was approved by Oxfordshire Schools Forum in November 2020. Growth funding is allocated by the government to local authorities through the national funding formula and included in the dedicated schools grant. The Growth Fund will be drawn upon to provide a pre-opening grant to the successful trust of £97,500 and a post-opening grant of £283,000.

Comments checked by:

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Legal Implications

18. There are no direct legal implications resulting from this report. The report sets out the process to be followed which is contained within DfE guidance on the Free School Presumption Process for establishing new schools, including the requirement to undertake public consultation. The Local Authority has a statutory duty to ensure the sufficient supply of school places; good quality places in the right place at the right time under the Education Act 1996.

Comments checked by:

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Staff Implications

19. There are no additional staff implications resulting from this report.

Equality & Inclusion Implications

20. Section 149 of the Equalities Act 2010 imposes a duty on the Council to give due regard to three needs in exercising its functions:

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- Eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation and other conduct prohibited by the Equality Act.
- Advance equality of opportunity between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not.
- Foster good relations between people who share a protected characteristic, and those who do not.

21. There are no equality and inclusion implications arising from this report.

Sustainability Implications

22. There are no sustainability implications resulting from this report.

Risk Management

23. There is a degree of uncertainty about the precise timescale of the school's growth as it will be influenced by factors outside the county council's control, including the housing market. To mitigate against this risk, providers will be sought who are able to be flexible in how quickly the new school will grow. Providers will be specifically asked in the application process how they will manage these uncertainties. Until a funding agreement is signed with the provider, the county council will be able to renegotiate details of timing should conditions change.
24. If the specification proves unattractive to potential sponsors, we may not be able to identify sufficient providers interested in running the school. This has not so far been a concern in Oxfordshire. In cases where an academy provider cannot be identified, the Department for Education expects to be able to assist.

Consultations

25. The public consultation to inform the development of the education specification for the new primary school was conducted by the School Organisation & Planning team between 16 June 2020 – 14 July 2020. The purpose of the consultation was:
- To invite comment on the draft education specification to be used as the basis of identifying an academy sponsor for the new school;
 - To act as pre-notification to potential sponsors of the future bidding process.
26. The consultation was publicised through the county council consultations website and invitations to join the consultation were targeted at local councillors, schools, and other stakeholders.
27. There was one response to the consultation, from a local academy trust. Their comment was: *"Looks sound and has built in learning from previous new builds."*

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Would it be sensible to fill the local primary schools in Didcot first before opening this one or would that provide too much travelling to the 'wrong' area?"

28. In response to this comment, the nearest existing primary schools are All Saints CoE (VA) Primary School and Ladygrove Park Primary School, neither of which has significant spare capacity. The first phases of the north east Didcot development, which include the location of the school site, were granted Reserved Matters approval in 2018 and 2019, and are underway. By the planned opening date of the school, 400-500 houses are projected to be completed within the development. This would be expected to at least fill the available local spare places. There are three other existing primary schools within the two-mile statutory maximum walking distance for infant pupils: Willowcroft Primary School, Manor Primary School and Northbourne CE Primary School. Of these schools, only Manor Primary School has significant spare capacity, and this school is better located to attract pupils from the west of Didcot, where there is very rapid pupil population growth resulting from the Great Western Park development, rather than from north east Didcot. It is therefore considered that an opening date of 2023 is compatible with meeting the needs of the new development without destabilising the local education market, but that it is necessary to keep this date under review, and defer the opening should the housing development make slower progress than currently projected. Following the consultation, the wording of the specification has been amended to make clear the possibility of a deferred opening.

Kevin Gordon
Director for Children's Services

Annex: Draft specification for new primary school at north east Didcot

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