

CABINET MEMBER FOR CHILDREN, EDUCATION & FAMILIES - 10 FEBRUARY 2014

NEW SCHOOLS FOR BICESTER: REPORT ON CONSULTATION AND APPROVAL FOR SPECIFICATION OF FIRST NEW PRIMARY SCHOOL

Report by Director for Children's Services

Introduction

1. Cherwell District Council is developing a new Local Plan to guide development of the district up to 2031, and significant housing growth is planned for Bicester. This plan includes proposals for:
 - North West Bicester (Eco-Town) – at least 5000 homes in total, 1793 of these by 2031, with new primary schools and a secondary school
 - Graven Hill – 1900 homes, with a new primary school
 - South West Bicester (Kingsmere) – 1631 homes already planned in Phase 1, with another 650 proposed for Phase 2, with new primary schools and a secondary school
 - South East Bicester – approximately 400 homesThere will also be other developments, including in surrounding villages.
2. The timescales of housing development on this scale are always subject to change, so it is important that the strategy for providing sufficient school places is flexible, and able to respond to emerging needs.
3. The first new school required is the first primary school on the North West Bicester (Eco-Town) exemplar site. It is expected that this school will open in 2016.
4. This report summarises the consultation, and seeks approval for the specification for the first Eco-Town primary school. The full strategy for providing sufficient school places in Bicester is not yet finalised, as it needs to be informed by the expected Department for Education decision on a Studio School application; depending on this decision, there may need to be some further consultation into the nature of secondary school provision. There will therefore be a further report in due course.

Background

5. Oxfordshire County Council will not run the new schools. The 2011 Education Act says that all new schools are expected to be academies. This law means that they are not run by the county council except in exceptional circumstances. Instead, academies are run by independent academy trusts. These trusts can be set up by lots of different organisations, including educational specialists, employers, existing local schools, charities, religious groups and community groups.

6. Oxfordshire County Council's role is to plan for and secure sufficient school places and to find a potential sponsor for the new schools. The government has set out a bidding and selection process by which new school providers are chosen. The first part of the process is to write an educational specification for the new schools in order to invite bids from potential academy trusts wanting to run it. The county council has completed a public consultation and has used responses received to it to inform the writing of the first new school's specification, which is the first primary school on the North West Bicester (Eco-Town) exemplar site.
7. The Cabinet meeting of 4 September 2012 approved a new process for the identification of sponsors for new academies to meet the needs of population growth such as this:
 - i. Undertake a public consultation to identify the academy model to be implemented.
 - ii. Invite initial expressions of interest in running the school through DfE website set up for this purpose.
 - iii. Assess expressions of interest and then invite detailed bids from three or fewer providers to show clear plans of how they will contribute to the raising of education standards, add diversity of choice and which best fits the local requirements and meets the needs of those within groups offered specific protection under s149 Equality Act 2010.
 - iv. Assess bids against criteria and rank in order of preference. Agree a preferred option to be approved by Lead Member for Education or Cabinet as appropriate.
 - v. Submit report to Secretary of State for decision.
 - vi. Proposal developed with provider approved by Secretary of State through sharing vision of community, county and sponsor.
8. The public consultation to inform the development of a specification for the first new school at North West Bicester (Eco-Town), and to hear views on school capacity strategy for the area generally, has now taken place. On the basis of this a draft specification for the first new school has been developed. Each new school will have a separate specification, which will be submitted for approval. The purpose of this Report is to provide information on the outcomes of the consultation, and seek Cabinet Member approval to move onto the next stage of the academy process, inviting interested parties to submit outline expressions of interest to run the first primary school for the Eco-Town, based on the proposed specification at Annex 1.
9. The expected pupil generation of new housing in North West Bicester (Eco-Town) has been modeled using the council's PopCal tool, based on current knowledge about the timing of house building and the types and sizes of housing. The timing of houses could vary depending on housing market conditions.

Consultation

10. The public consultation to inform the development of a specification for the first new school was conducted by the School Organisation & Planning team 18 November 2013 – 17 January 2014:
 - To gather local community views to help shape the specification of the school and choice of sponsor.

- To gather local views to help the future shape of a Bicester-wide educational strategy.
 - To act as pre-notification to potential sponsors of the future bidding rounds.
11. The consultation was publicised through the county council website and local media as well as through posters and leaflets distributed by schools, libraries and local networks such as Bicester Vision. Two “drop-in” sessions were held in Bicester to allow interested parties to talk to officers about the proposals. Briefing sessions were also held for local Members and for the Bicester schools’ partnership.
 12. 23 individuals and organisations responded to the consultation, including a detailed response from Cherwell District Council. Officers and members of Cherwell District Council were further consulted through two meetings to discuss the school needs of Bicester.
 13. The consultation will inform a strategy for ensuring sufficient school capacity across Bicester as the local population grows. This strategy will be influenced by the expected forthcoming Department for Education decision regarding a studio school application, and depending on what this decision is, there may need to be some further consultation on the nature of secondary school provision. There will, therefore, be a further report in due course on the full school capacity strategy.
 14. In order to secure an academy provider in good time to allow the first Eco-Town primary school to open in September 2015, approval is now sought for the educational specification for this school, which has been informed by this consultation.

Proposed specification for the new school at North West Bicester (Eco-Town)

15. On the basis of the data available and the consultation responses, the draft specification seeks a provider for the new primary school at North West Bicester (Eco-Town).
16. It is proposed that the school have a particular focus on sustainability and environmental education, both for its own pupils and also shared with the wider community.
17. It is not proposed that the specification imposes restrictions on the nature of provider – e.g. faith organisations, or existing providers – given that the local consultation was inconclusive on these issues.
18. The specification includes 8 places reserved for specialist resourced SEN provision, primarily for children with communication and interaction needs, physical or sensory needs.
19. The school will be located on the site previously identified within the North West Bicester (Eco-Town) exemplar site.

Next steps

20. 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 3 above, the invitation of expressions of interest from potential providers. Such expressions of interest would be sought during spring 2014, and short-listed by officers, with short-listed applicants invited to submit a detailed proposal by the summer.
21. A further report would be submitted to Cabinet in July 2014 to seek a decision on which provider(s) the county council wishes to recommend to the DfE for approval.

Equality and Inclusion Implications

22. Section 149 of the Equalities Act 2010 imposes a duty on the Council to give due regard to three needs in exercising its functions:
 - 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.
23. The draft specification seeks to increase equality of access to education for children with disabilities by including the provision of additional SEN provision.

Risks and mitigation

24. 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 each provider, the county council will be able to renegotiate details of timing should conditions change.
25. If the specification proves unattractive to potential sponsors, we may not be able to identify sufficient providers interested in running the school. In cases where an academy provider cannot be identified, the DfE expects to be able to assist.

Financial and Staff Implications

26. 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 CE&F budget provision. There are no significant financial implications or risks at this stage.

27. Additional revenue funding for specialist SEN resourced provision is referred to under "Supporting vulnerable learners and those with special educational needs". This funding will come from the Dedicated Schools Grant High Needs Block, and will be factored into allocation decisions for this budget.
28. Local authorities are required to make provision in their growth funds to support new schools prior to opening, to cover set-up costs, as well as during the period until the school reaches full capacity, as during this period they are not able to benefit from economies of scale. These costs will need to come from the Schools Block of the Dedicated Schools Grant, and Schools Forum will be asked to approve the allocation mechanism for such funding during 2014-15.

RECOMMENDATION

29. **The Cabinet is asked to note the outcomes of the consultation on a school capacity strategy for Bicester and into a new school for North West Bicester (Eco-Town) and RECOMMENDED to approve the specification as the basis for seeking academy providers for the school.**

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Annex 1 Draft specification for new school for North West Bicester (Eco-Town)

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