

## ***Delegated Decisions by Cabinet Member for Children and Young People***

***Tuesday, 17 March 2026 at 3.00 pm or on the rise of Cabinet whichever is later***

***Room 1 - County Hall, New Road, Oxford OX1 1ND***

If you wish to view proceedings, please click on this [Live Stream Link](#).  
However, that will not allow you to participate in the meeting.

### ***Items for Decision***

The items for decision under individual Cabinet Members' delegated powers are listed overleaf, with indicative timings, and the related reports are attached. Key Decisions taken will become effective at the end of the working day on 20<sup>th</sup> March 2026 unless called in by that date for review by the appropriate Scrutiny Committee.

Copies of the reports are circulated (by e-mail) to all members of the County Council.

**These proceedings are open to the public**



Martin Reeves  
Chief Executive

March 2026

**Committee Officer:**                      **Email:**  
**committeesdemocraticservices@oxfordshire.gov.uk**

*Note: Date of next meeting: 21 April 2026*

**If you have any special requirements (such as a large print version of these papers or special access facilities) please contact the officer named on the front page, but please give as much notice as possible before the meeting.**

## Items for Decision

### 1. Declarations of Interest

See guidance below.

### 2. Minutes of the Previous Meeting (Pages 7 - 10)

To confirm the minutes of the meeting held on **24 February 2026** to be signed by the Chair as a correct record.

### 3. Questions from County Councillors

Any county councillor may, by giving notice to the Proper Officer by 9 am three working days before the meeting, ask a question on an item on the agenda.

The number of questions which may be asked by any councillor at any one meeting is limited to two (or one question with notice and a supplementary question at the meeting) and the time for questions will be limited to 30 minutes in total. As with questions at Council, any questions which remain unanswered at the end of this item will receive a written response.

Questions submitted prior to the agenda being despatched are shown below and will be the subject of a response from the appropriate Cabinet Member or such other councillor or officer as is determined by the Cabinet Member, and shall not be the subject of further debate at this meeting. Questions received after the despatch of the agenda, but before the deadline, will be shown on the Schedule of Addenda circulated at the meeting, together with any written response which is available at that time.

### 4. Petitions and Public Address

Members of the public who wish to speak on an item on the agenda at this meeting, or present a petition, can attend the meeting in person or 'virtually' through an online connection.

Requests to present a petition must be submitted no later than 9am ten working days before the meeting.

Requests to speak must be submitted no later than 9am three working days before the meeting.

Requests should be submitted to [committeesdemocraticservices@oxfordshire.gov.uk](mailto:committeesdemocraticservices@oxfordshire.gov.uk)

If you are speaking 'virtually', you may submit a written statement of your presentation to ensure that if the technology fails, then your views can still be taken into account. A written copy of your statement can be provided no later than 9am on the day of the meeting. Written submissions should be no longer than 1 A4 sheet.

**5. Proposed closure of Ace Nursery** (Pages 11 - 28)

Report by Director of Children's Services (CMDCEYP5)

The Cabinet Member is RECOMMENDED to:

- a. Approve the proposed closure of The Ace Centre Maintained Nursery School.

**6. Didcot Valley Park Special School - Education specification and approval to start LA presumption process** (Pages 29 - 56)

Report by Director of Children's Services (CMDCEYP6)

The Cabinet Member is RECOMMENDED to:

- a. Approve the specification for the new special school serving the Didcot area, and for a competitive process to be launched to identify an academy sponsor to run the school.

## **Councillors declaring interests**

### **General duty**

You must declare any disclosable pecuniary interests when the meeting reaches the item on the agenda headed 'Declarations of Interest' or as soon as it becomes apparent to you.

### **What is a disclosable pecuniary interest?**

Disclosable pecuniary interests relate to your employment; sponsorship (i.e. payment for expenses incurred by you in carrying out your duties as a councillor or towards your election expenses); contracts; land in the Council's area; licenses for land in the Council's area; corporate tenancies; and securities. These declarations must be recorded in each councillor's Register of Interests which is publicly available on the Council's website.

Disclosable pecuniary interests that must be declared are not only those of the member her or himself but also those member's spouse, civil partner or person they are living with as husband or wife or as if they were civil partners.

### **Declaring an interest**

Where any matter disclosed in your Register of Interests is being considered at a meeting, you must declare that you have an interest. You should also disclose the nature as well as the existence of the interest. If you have a disclosable pecuniary interest, after having declared it at the meeting you must not participate in discussion or voting on the item and must withdraw from the meeting whilst the matter is discussed.

### **Members' Code of Conduct and public perception**

Even if you do not have a disclosable pecuniary interest in a matter, the Members' Code of Conduct says that a member 'must serve only the public interest and must never improperly confer an advantage or disadvantage on any person including yourself' and that 'you must not place yourself in situations where your honesty and integrity may be questioned'.

### **Members Code – Other registrable interests**

Where a matter arises at a meeting which directly relates to the financial interest or wellbeing of one of your other registerable interests then you must declare an interest. You must not participate in discussion or voting on the item and you must withdraw from the meeting whilst the matter is discussed.

Wellbeing can be described as a condition of contentedness, healthiness and happiness; anything that could be said to affect a person's quality of life, either positively or negatively, is likely to affect their wellbeing.

Other registrable interests include:

- a) Any unpaid directorships

- b) Any body of which you are a member or are in a position of general control or management and to which you are nominated or appointed by your authority.
- c) Any body (i) exercising functions of a public nature (ii) directed to charitable purposes or (iii) one of whose principal purposes includes the influence of public opinion or policy (including any political party or trade union) of which you are a member or in a position of general control or management.

### **Members Code – Non-registrable interests**

Where a matter arises at a meeting which directly relates to your financial interest or wellbeing (and does not fall under disclosable pecuniary interests), or the financial interest or wellbeing of a relative or close associate, you must declare the interest.

Where a matter arises at a meeting which affects your own financial interest or wellbeing, a financial interest or wellbeing of a relative or close associate or a financial interest or wellbeing of a body included under other registrable interests, then you must declare the interest.

In order to determine whether you can remain in the meeting after disclosing your interest the following test should be applied:

Where a matter affects the financial interest or well-being:

- a) to a greater extent than it affects the financial interests of the majority of inhabitants of the ward affected by the decision and;
- b) a reasonable member of the public knowing all the facts would believe that it would affect your view of the wider public interest.

You may speak on the matter only if members of the public are also allowed to speak at the meeting. Otherwise you must not take part in any discussion or vote on the matter and must not remain in the room unless you have been granted a dispensation.

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# Agenda Item 2

## DELEGATED DECISIONS BY CABINET MEMBER FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

**MINUTES** of the meeting held on Tuesday, 24 February 2026 commencing at 3.00 pm and finishing at 3.30 pm

**Present:**

**Voting Members:** Councillor Sean Gaul– in the Chair

**Officers:** Jack Ahier (Senior Democratic Services Manager), Lisa Lyons (Director of Childrens Services), Jane Billington(Strategic Finance Business Partner),Carly Williams(Service Manager Education Directorate)

*The Cabinet Member considered the matters, reports and recommendations contained or referred to in the agenda for the meeting and agreed as set out below. Copies of the agenda and reports are attached to the signed Minutes.*

### **20 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

(Agenda No. 1)

There were none

### **21 QUESTIONS FROM COUNTY COUNCILLORS**

(Agenda No. 2)

There were none received

### **22 PETITIONS AND PUBLIC ADDRESS**

(Agenda No. 3)

There were no requests

### **23 MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING**

(Agenda No. 4)

The Cabinet Member approved the minutes of the meeting held on 03 February 2026, as an accurate record of proceedings.

### **24 ENHANCED PATHWAYS BUSINESS CASE**

(Agenda No. 5)

The Cabinet Member considered the report which indicated that the latest Area SEND monitoring inspection from Ofsted and the CQC highlighted that as a result of Enhanced Pathways, many children's and young people's needs were being more effectively met in mainstream settings. The business case was also seeking to once again expand the project further to ensure more children and young people could

have their needs met successfully. The Cabinet Member highlighted that the Enhanced Pathways started with only 9, then grew to 40. It was further said that the plan was to grow it to 60.

Furthermore, in the academic year 2024 - 25 £1,194,718 had been spent on 20 Enhanced Pathways. This benefitted 292 children and young people, which could be compared to the same value potentially benefiting only 17 children placed at Independent Non-maintained Special School (INMSS) at an average cost of £70,000 or 96 pupils accessing alternative education provision packages at an average cost of £12,354.55.

Resolved to:

- a) Approve the Council to fund a further 20 Enhanced Pathways to triple the reach of the project to enable the Council to offer a more equitable offer across the county to meet the increasing numbers and complexities of children and young people with Special Educational Needs in mainstream schools and to realise probable savings through this spend to save model.
- b) Approve the Council's budgetary commitment for a period of 3 years for each Enhanced Pathway (barring significant changes to central government funding of SEND during that period).
- c) Commit to consider and review opportunities to upscale the Enhanced Pathways programme over the coming years in line with the impact evidence provided.

## **25 FORMAL APPROVAL OF EARLY YEARS FUNDING FORMULA 2026/27** (Agenda No. 6)

The Cabinet Member considered the report which indicated that Early Years Providers and Schools Forum were consulted on the Early Years Funding Formula, and the overwhelming response was to pass on the increase in hourly rate in full to providers.

Resolved to:

- a) Pass the funding increase received by Oxfordshire onto providers (after allowing for centrally retained funding per Department of Education (DfE) criteria) and approve the 2026-27 Early Years funding formula for 3- and 4-year-old provision with an underlying hourly rate of £6.04 (excluding the supplements, SEN Inclusion Fund and Contingency).
- b) Pass the funding increase received by Oxfordshire onto providers (after allowing for centrally retained funding per Department of Education (DfE) criteria) and approve the 2026-27 Early Years funding Formula for 2-year-old working parent provision at an hourly rate of £8.29.
- c) Pass the funding increase received by Oxfordshire onto providers

(after allowing for centrally retained funding per Department of Education (DfE) criteria) and approve the 2026-27 Early Years funding formula for 2-year-olds of families receiving additional support at an hourly rate of £8.29.

- d) Pass the funding increase received by Oxfordshire onto providers (after allowing for centrally retained funding per Department of Education (DfE) criteria) and approve the 2026-27 Early Years funding formula for 9 Months to 2-year-old provision at an hourly rate of £11.33.

**26 DETERMINATION OF 2027-28 ADMISSION ARRANGEMENTS FOR OCC COMMUNITY AND VC SCHOOLS**  
(Agenda No. 7)

The Cabinet Member considered a report that outlined the proposed school admissions arrangements for Oxfordshire for the 2027–28 academic year following public consultation. North Kidlington Primary School and Ducklington Church of England Primary School had requested a reduction to its Published Admission Number (PAN) for 2027/28.

Resolved to:

- a) Approve Scheme of Co-ordination for Normal Points of Transfer
- b) Approve Admission Arrangements and Oversubscription Criteria for Community and Voluntary Controlled Schools
- c) Approve Published Admission Numbers (PANs)
- d) Approve In-Year Admissions Scheme

..... in the Chair

Date of signing ..... 2026

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**Divisions Affected: Chipping Norton**

## **DELEGATED DECISIONS BY CABINET MEMBER FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PERSONS**

**17<sup>th</sup> March 2026**

### **THE PROPOSED CLOSURE OF THE ACE CENTRE MAINTAINED NURSERY SCHOOL**

**Report by Director of Childrens Services**

#### **RECOMMENDATION**

1. **The Cabinet Member is RECOMMENDED to:**
  - a. **Approve the proposed closure of The Ace Centre Maintained Nursery School.**

#### **Executive Summary**

2. Under Section 15 of the Education and Inspections Act 2006, a local authority can propose the closure of all categories of maintained school. It is proposed to close the Ace Centre Maintained Nursery School.
3. The decision must be made in accordance with the *Education and Inspections Act 2006* (as amended), *The School Organisation (Establishment and Discontinuance) (England) Regulations 2013* and decision makers must have regard to the statutory guidance *Opening and closing maintained schools October 2024* (the Guidance). Further details of the relevant legislation are set out in the report.
4. The Guidance states that there is a presumption against closing maintained nursery schools, meaning that the case for closure should be strong and a proposal must be clearly in the interests of educational provision in the area. The county council confirms that it has considered all relevant points in relation to the proposal.
5. Following a pre-publication consultation, a statutory notice was published and the required representation period ended on Monday 9<sup>th</sup> February 2026.

6. The county council is the decision maker for closure proposals and must decide within a period of two months following the end of the representation period, or otherwise the decision is referred to the Schools' Adjudicator.
7. The Cabinet Member is now required to decide on the proposal.

## **Background**

8. The Ace Centre Nursery School is located on the Burford Road in the centre of Chipping Norton and is one of 7 maintained nursery schools across Oxfordshire. It is a freestanding 39 full-time equivalent place nursery providing school hours term time only provision for 3–5-year-olds and admits 2 years-olds under s27 Governor powers.

## **Reasons for closure**

9. There have been significant changes in leadership over the past four years with a new Headteacher and Governing body. The Headteacher resigned during the Autumn term of 2025 and left on 31<sup>st</sup> December 2025.
10. Currently the school is judged to be outstanding. In October 2023, the school had a Section 8 inspection and although the grade of outstanding remained the same, evidence suggested 'that the overall grade may not be as high as this if it had been a Section 5 inspection'. This resulted in the school becoming a focused Strategy school. Quality improvement support and challenge were provided by the council to ensure the school made rapid improvements.
11. Numbers on roll indicate that demand has been decreasing over the last three academic years, partly because of demographic changes and due to extended childcare entitlements for working parents with children 9 months to 4 years. Consequently, the council has observed wider changes in the childcare market, with take-up patterns and parental choice shifting according to parental needs and market response.
12. Low pupil numbers in any school term mean that the funding the Nursery School receives is correspondingly reduced. This in turn means that it is difficult for the school to maintain the building and cover running costs, both elements of which are relatively high in older buildings.
13. A maintained nursery school must have a headteacher, and nursery sessions must be run by at least one qualified teacher. Funding of places is determined in compliance with the Government's School and Early Years Finance (England) Regulations 2025.
14. This proposal follows significant challenges faced by the nursery including a sustained and substantial reduction in pupil numbers, which has affected its financial and educational viability. The Council is committed to ensuring that alternative early years' provision remains available locally to minimise any impact on families and the wider community.

## **Pupil Numbers and Admissions**

15. There are more nursery places than needed in the Chipping Norton area (surplus 41 places for 2-year-olds and surplus 116 places for 3-year-olds). The birth rate is gradually trending downwards, and the number of young children is expected to decrease in the short to medium term. Demand is predicted to fall as set out below:

Funded places forecast demand in local area (part time equivalent places)

	<b>2025</b>	<b>2028</b>
2-year-olds	101	92
3-year-olds	110	96

At the time of the pre-publication consultation in November 2025 there were only 23 children on roll. All but 5 children left the Nursery by the end of December 2025.

16. The Governing body has decided that remaining open for such a small number would not be viable and not offer the best provision for these children. The Nursery School has consequently temporarily closed to children from January 2026. Families have been successful in accessing alternative places and support has been offered for those remaining on roll, with the expectation that places will be offered with no break in provision.

### **Proposed closure date**

17. It is proposed to formally close The ACE Centre Nursery School at the end of the 2025/2026 school year on 31st August 2026.

### **Decision-Making Process (pre-publication)**

18. The county council ran a pre-publication consultation with respect to the proposed closure. 25 responses were received; 24 were against the closure.
19. During the consultation, parents of existing children were offered the opportunity to either respond online to the proposal and/or attend a consultation event. Three in-person consultation times were offered along with one online session.
- One person attended a face-to-face discussion opportunity
  - There were no attendees at the online opportunity
20. The county council, school leadership team and governing body considered the issues raised in the consultation in developing the statutory proposal. The issues raised and the council's response to these are summarised in the attached Consultation Report (Annex 1).

### **Decision-making process (formal proposal)**

21. Following the pre-publication consultation, a formal proposal was developed to close Ace Centre Nursery School. The Guidance states that the reasons for closing a maintained nursery school can include the following:
- *It is to be amalgamated with another school* (this is not applicable)
  - *There are surplus places elsewhere in the local area which can accommodate displaced pupils* (this is applicable)
  - *It is no longer considered viable* (this is applicable)
22. The Council confirms that it followed all requirements for the decision-making process. The statutory notice (Annex 2) was published on the county council website on 12<sup>th</sup> January 2026. It was sent to the Secretary of State on the same day and relevant consultees were notified within 7 days as required under the relevant legislation and Guidance. The notice was published in a local newspaper. The Representation ran until the 9<sup>th</sup> February which is the statutory 4-week period required. The statutory notice was accompanied by a Full Proposal document (Annex 3) which was available to read online on the county council public website or by request.
23. As required, the full proposal included a statement setting out:
- How copies of the proposal may be obtained
  - That anyone can object to, or comment on, the proposal
  - The date that the representation period ends
  - The address to which objections or comments should be addressed.

### **Representations**

24. Four responses were received to the statutory consultation. All respondents indicated a strong objection to the closure of the nursery provision at Ace Centre citing the impact on families and the community, concerns about a shortage of childcare and the communication and process followed.
25. The statutory proposal directly addressed the childcare shortage objection by providing data on surplus places and asserting that alternative provision was available and sufficient. Opportunities for communication had been provided and the required consultations followed.

### **Presumption against closure of maintained nursery school**

26. There is a presumption against closure of maintained nursery schools. The Guidance sets out several factors which must be considered when proposing to close such schools. These factors are set out below, together with an explanation of how these have been considered:
- Plans to develop alternative early years provision clearly demonstrating that it will be a least equal in quantity to the provision provided by the nursery school with no loss of expertise and specialism; and

- How replacement provision is more accessible and more convenient for local parents
27. The alternative early years provision includes school-based nursery settings offer both term-time places and wraparound care. Additionally, parents have the option of full-time care from several settings. This provides a wide range of choice in settings as best meetings their needs with good standards as evidenced by Ofsted.
28. Vacancy data indicates immediate availability of places in Chipping Norton. Several providers have potential to expand, subject to demand, and this will create more viable provision for any future demographic growth.

## **Corporate Policies and Priorities**

29. This proposal supports the County Council's Corporate objective to ensure that children get the best start in life (objective 7). Viable, sustainable and flexible childcare enables families to take up childcare that best works for them and provides the best platform for children achieving good levels of development.

## **Financial Implications**

30. Ace Centre Nursery School has been operating in a deficit position for some time. The revised 3-year budget indicates that the school will have a deficit of balance of approximately £222K by the end of this financial year. If the closure decision is taken, it is likely that this deficit balance will increase up to the date of closure. The County Council will be responsible for the school's deficit at the time of closure.
31. Responsibility for the area of the nursery building currently occupied by Ace Centre nursery will revert to the council.

Comments checked by: Emma Wren, Finance Business Partner,  
emma.wren@oxfordshire.gov.uk

## **Legal Implications**

32. Closure of schools is covered by The School Organisation (Establishment and Discontinuance) (England) Regulations 2013 which should be read in conjunction with Part 2 and Schedule 2 of the Education and Inspections Act 2006 (as amend by the Education Act (EA) 2011).

The content of these regulations is summarised in the DFE's Statutory guidance 'Opening and Closing Maintained Schools' (October 2024).

Officers need to have followed the steps set out in this guidance, which include:

- Having a period of consultation
- Publishing details of the proposal on a website and local newspaper and advising various statutory consultees (including the Secretary of State)

- Having a representation period of at least 4 weeks and considering all representations made over that period and
- Notifying all relevant parties once a decision has been made

Comments checked by: Richard Hodby, Solicitor:  
[richard.hodby@oxfordshire.gov.uk](mailto:richard.hodby@oxfordshire.gov.uk)

### **Staff Implications**

33. At the time of drafting the report, some staff remain in employment at the nursery. Should the decision for closure be taken, there will be a consultation involving appropriate parties (including unions representatives) for those individuals. The county council will be responsible for redundancy and pension payments.

### **Equality & Inclusion Implications**

34. Decision makers should be satisfied that proposed changes will not adversely impact any particular group, including those with protected characteristics or who are disadvantaged

### **Sustainability Implications**

35. There are no climate action sustainability implications.

### **Risk Management**

36. Careful analysis of the risks surrounding the proposal have been undertaken throughout its development.
37. As outlined above, considerable time has been given to reviewing and analysing quality childcare places available in the Chipping Norton area to ensure that families have a good range of flexible options. This work was required to ensure that the operational risk around closing the nursery would not result in a family being in a position of not having childcare provision. During the period of temporary closure of the setting, all families have been supported and found appropriate placements.
38. We have shared information when available at appropriate points with staff and parents, and gathered feedback through meetings, drop-ins, and consultations with the intention of keeping all parties updated and included.
39. There are financial impacts of taking a closure decision around redundancy costs (and pension payments) for remaining staff, however, this must be balanced with the ongoing deficit risk of the Nursery, which, despite much effort to reduce, has not improved.

### **Consultations**



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## Annex 1

### The ACE Centre Nursery Proposed Closure

#### Consultation Responses

The County Council ran an informal 'pre-publication' consultation to consider views on the proposed closure of the nursery.

25 responses were received as part of this consultation. The county council, nursery school leadership and governing body considered the issues raised in that consultation in developing the proposal.

The issues raised during the pre-publication consultation and the county council's response to these are summarised below:

Of the 25 responses received, 24 strongly opposed the closure proposal, citing concerns about the loss of the quality of provision and staff expertise, the unique outdoor learning offer, the school's value to the community, capacity and access to alternative provision, and the communication and process followed.

One response was partially supportive, requesting assurance regarding replacement provision and clarity on the future use of the site.

The table below shows how the objections received in the pre-publication consultation have been addressed in the Full Statutory Proposal:

<b>Objection Theme</b>	<b>How Addressed in Statutory Proposal</b>
Concerns about practical access, transport, and convenience of alternative settings.	The proposal states that "replacement provision will be... more accessible and more convenient for local parents," and that a range of settings (including those with wraparound care and full-time options) are available, offering parental choice and convenience.
Concerns about whether other local settings can absorb displaced children and maintain quality.	The proposal provides detailed data on local capacity, stating there are "surplus 41 places for 2-year-olds and surplus 116 places for 3-year-olds" in the area, and that "vacancy data indicates immediate availability of places in Chipping Norton." It also notes that several providers can expand if needed, ensuring sufficient capacity for all children.
ACE is seen as a vital community	The proposal discusses the impact on the

<p>hub, supporting families beyond education.</p>	<p>community, stating that “impact on the community is expected to be minimal as most families have already identified suitable alternative provision.” It also notes that early years settings are skilled at supporting new children and families, and that the council has considered statutory guidance on minimising community impact.</p>
<p>Concerns about loss of high-quality education, staff expertise, and unique learning environment.</p>	<p>The proposal explicitly states that “replacement provision will be at least equal in quantity and quality, with no loss of expertise or specialism” and that alternative settings offer “good standards as evidenced by Ofsted inspection.” The council commits to ensuring that displaced children can access provision of comparable quality, and that staff expertise is not lost to the community.</p>
<p>Loss of unique outdoor/forest-school opportunities.</p>	<p>While the proposal does not specifically reference outdoor space, it reiterates the requirement for “replacement provision [to] be at least equal in quantity and quality.” This implies that distinctive features, such as outdoor learning environments, must be considered when assessing the adequacy of alternatives.</p>
<p>Perceived lack of transparency and predetermined outcome.</p>	<p>The statutory proposal outlines a clear, staged process for decision-making, including opportunities for formal representation and objection. It provides multiple channels for submitting views and objections, and details the timeline for decision-making, which will be made in a public meeting. This is intended to ensure transparency and genuine stakeholder input.</p>

### Full Statutory Consultation

The Full Statutory Consultation was held for a period of four weeks from 12<sup>th</sup> January – 9<sup>th</sup> February 2026.

Four responses were received to the consultation. All respondents indicated a strong objection to the closure of the nursery. Reasons cited were the impact on families and the community, concerns about a shortage of childcare and the communication and process followed.

The statutory proposal directly addresses the childcare shortage objection by providing data on surplus places and asserting that alternative provision is available and sufficient, providing demographics and financial data and clearly outlines the statutory process followed.

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**OXFORDSHIRE  
COUNTY COUNCIL**

## **PUBLIC NOTICE**

### **Proposed Closure of The ACE Nursery School, Chipping Norton**

Notice is given in accordance with The School Organisation (Prescribed Alterations to Maintained Schools) (England) Regulations 2013 that Oxfordshire County Council intends to Close The ACE Nursery School effective from 31<sup>st</sup> August 2026.

The Local Authority, working with the Governing Body of the school, is proposing to close The ACE Nursery School, Chipping Norton. The proposal follows significant challenges faced by the nursery, including a sustained and substantial reduction in pupil numbers, which has affected its financial and educational viability. Oxfordshire County Council is committed to ensuring that alternative early years provision remains available locally to minimise any impact on families and the wider community.

This Notice is an extract from the full proposal, which can be viewed under the Current Consultations listings on the Oxfordshire County Council public website at <https://letstalk.oxfordshire.gov.uk/ace-nursery-closure>. Copies can also be requested by contacting:

**School Organisation & Planning, Oxfordshire County Council, Schools and Settings, Sufficiency**

**Email:** [school.planning@oxfordshire.gov.uk](mailto:school.planning@oxfordshire.gov.uk)

Within four weeks from the date of publication of this Notice, any person may object to or make comments on the proposal by sending them to the Local Authority using the online feedback form located on the Oxfordshire County Council website as detailed above, or by email to the above address.

**Signed: Lisa Lyons, Director of Children's Services**

**Publication Date: 12<sup>th</sup> January 2026**

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**OXFORDSHIRE  
COUNTY COUNCIL**

## **FULL STATUTORY PROPOSAL**

The School Organisation (Prescribed Alterations to Maintained Schools)  
(England) Regulations 2013

### **Closure of The Ace Centre Nursery School**

#### **1. School and LA details**

**This proposal published by:**

**Local Authority:** Oxfordshire County Council

**Address:** County Hall, New Road, Oxford OX1 1ND

**School:** The ACE Centre Nursery School

**Address:** Burford Road, Chipping Norton, OX7 5DZ

#### **2. Outline of proposal**

Oxfordshire County Council, working with the Governing Body of The ACE Centre Nursery School, proposes to formally close the nursery school.

The Ace Centre Nursery School is located on the Burford Road in the centre of Chipping Norton and is one of 7 maintained nursery schools across Oxfordshire.

It is a freestanding 39 full-time equivalent place nursery providing school hours term time only provision for 3–5-year-olds and admits 2 years-olds under s27 Governor powers.

This proposal follows significant challenges faced by the nursery including a sustained and substantial reduction in pupil numbers, which has affected its financial and educational viability. Oxfordshire County Council is committed to ensuring that alternative early years' provision remains available locally to minimise any impact on families and the wider community.

#### **3. Implementation**

It is proposed to formally close The ACE Centre Nursery School at the end of the 2025/2026 school year on 31<sup>st</sup> August 2026.

#### **4. Reasons for closure**

There have been significant changes in leadership over the past four years with a new Headteacher and Governing body. The Headteacher resigned during the Autumn term of 2025 and left on 31<sup>st</sup> December.

Currently the school is judged to be outstanding. In October 2023, the school had a Section 8 inspection and although the grade of outstanding remained the same, evidence suggested 'that the overall grade may not be as high as this if it had been a Section 5 inspection'. This resulted in the school becoming a focused Strategy school. Quality improvement support and challenge was provided by the Local Authority to ensure the school made rapid improvements.

Numbers on roll indicate that demand has been decreasing over the last three academic years, partly because of demographic changes and due to extended childcare entitlements for working parents with children 9 months to 4 years. Consequently, we have observed wider changes in the childcare market, with take-up patterns and parental choice shifting according to parental needs and market response.

Low pupil numbers in any school term mean that the funding the Nursery School receives is correspondingly reduced. This in turn means that it is difficult for the school to maintain the building and cover running costs, both elements of which are relatively high in older buildings.

A maintained nursery school must have a headteacher, and nursery sessions must be run by at least one qualified teacher. Funding of places is determined in compliance with the Government's School and Early Years Finance (England) Regulations 2025.

Government guidance is that a maintained nursery school can be closed if:

- There are surplus places elsewhere in the local area which can accommodate displaced pupils, and there is no predicted demand for the school in the medium or long term.
  - There are more nursery places than needed in the Chipping Norton area. The birth rate is steady, and the number of young children isn't expected to increase in the short to medium term, so if The ACE Centre Nursery School closes, there will be sufficient nursery places available locally.
- It is no longer considered viable.
  - The school's pupil numbers are too low to generate sufficient funding to cover the costs of leadership, staffing and maintaining the building. The school has a significant budget deficit.

## **5. Pupil Numbers and Admissions**

There are more nursery places than needed in the Chipping Norton area (surplus 41 places for 2-year-olds and surplus 116 places for 3-year-olds). The birth rate is gradually trending downwards, and the number of young children is expected to decrease in the short to medium term. Demand is predicted to fall as set out below:

Funded places forecast demand in local area (part time equivalent places)

	2025	2028
2-year-olds	101	92
3-year-olds	110	96

At the time of the initial informal consultation in November 2025 there were only 23 children on roll. All but 5 children left the Nursery by the end of December 2025.

The Governing body has decided that remaining open for such a small number would not be viable and not offer the best provision for these children.

The Nursery School has consequently temporarily closed to children from January 2026. Families have been successful in accessing alternative places and support has been offered for those remaining on roll, with the expectation that places will be offered with no break in provision.

## **6. Displaced Pupils and impact on the community**

In making this proposal, the local authority has considered the statutory guidance for proposers and decision-makers relating to opening and closing maintained schools; specifically:

Plans for alternative early years provision clearly demonstrating that replacement provision will be at least equal in quantity and quality, with no loss of expertise or specialism and how the new provision will be more accessible and more convenient for local parents.

- The alternative early years provision includes school-based nursery settings offer both term-time places and wraparound care. Additionally, parents have the option of full-time care from several settings. This provides a wide range of parental choice in settings as best meet their needs with good standards as evidenced by Ofsted inspection.
- Vacancy data indicates immediate availability of places in Chipping Norton. Several providers have potential to expand, subject to demand, and this will create more viable provision for any future demographic growth.

Therefore, impact on the community is expected to be minimal as most families have already identified suitable alternative provision. While any requirement to change provider may be unwelcome, early years settings are used to and skilled at supporting new children.

## **7. How to submit your views**

If you wish your view to be considered when the county council decides on this proposal, it is important that you submit a response through this statutory representation process, even if you have already responded to the informal consultation held in November/December 2025

Comments or objections, or statements of support, must be received by the local authority by **midnight 9<sup>th</sup> February 2026**.

Respond by:

- Using the online questionnaire at [www.oxfordshire.gov.uk/ace-nursery-closure](http://www.oxfordshire.gov.uk/ace-nursery-closure)
- Emailing [school.planning@oxfordshire.gov.uk](mailto:school.planning@oxfordshire.gov.uk) (*please quote 'Ace Nursery Closure' in the header*)
- Handing in a written response at the reception office of The Ace Centre Nursery School, Burford Road, Chipping Norton
- Posting a written response to **School Organisation & Planning, Oxfordshire County Council, 4<sup>th</sup> Floor County Hall, Oxford OX1 1ND**, marking your envelope ACE Nursery Closure

Comments or objections must be received by **midnight 9<sup>th</sup> February 2026**

### **8. Decision-making**

The decision-maker for this proposed closure is Oxfordshire County Council. The decision will be made by the Cabinet Member responsible for Education at a meeting which is open to the public and publicised on the county council's website.

The decision must be made within a period of two months of the end of this representation period and is currently expected on 17<sup>th</sup> March 2026.

## **DELEGATED DECISION BY CABINET MEMBER FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE**

**17 March 2026**

### **Didcot Valley Park Special School - Education Specification and Approval to Start LA Presumption Process**

**Report by Lisa Lyon Director for Childrens Services**

#### **RECOMMENDATION**

The Cabinet Member is **RECOMMENDED** to:

- a. **Approve the specification for the new special school serving the Didcot area, and for a competitive process to be launched to identify an academy sponsor to run the school.**

#### **Executive Summary**

1. Oxfordshire's Special Educational Needs & Disabilities (SEND) Sufficiency Delivery Strategy identifies the need for two new special schools in the south-east of Oxfordshire, one for children with Social, Emotional & Mental Health and/or Autism Spectrum Disorder (SEMH/ASD) needs, and one for children with Profound & Multiple Learning Difficulties (PMLD) or Severe Learning Difficulties (SLD), and other associated needs.
2. One site for a new special school has been identified since 2014 (and secured through a Section 106 legal agreement relating to the large-scale Valley Park housing development) to the west of Didcot, but the development made slow progress through planning. This school will specialise in PMLD and SLD needs.
3. A search for a second site identified the potential for partnership working with GLF Schools, the academy trust responsible for Aureus (secondary) School to the west of Didcot, to reduce the planned capacity of Aureus School, to enable subdividing the site for the purposes of building a new special school. This site would be used for the school specialising in SEMH/ASD needs.

4. Oxfordshire County Council will not run either of the new schools. 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.

5. This report forms part of the approved process in Oxfordshire to identify a sponsor for a new PMLD/SLD special 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.

6. 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.

### **Exempt Information**

Annex 2 is a map that shows the home locations of pupils in Oxfordshire who currently attend a community special school (1 dot = 1 child). While it illustrates the point of this report – that there is an evident gap in provision in Didcot - this is not an appropriate map to share external to the County Council. Should a map be required for public consumption, a less granular map can be produced for the purpose.

### **Background**

7. Didcot currently has no special schools. The nearest maintained community special schools (primarily educating children with PMLD/SLD needs) are in Abingdon and Wantage. The nearest maintained special schools focused on SEMH/ASD needs are in Oxford, with a new school planned for Faringdon. This means children and young people with SEND face long journeys to access suitable education provision. These travel distances are detrimental to the wellbeing of children living in the Didcot area, and result in increased transport costs for Oxfordshire County Council (OCC) and a greater reliance on high-cost INMSS placements.

8. Didcot is one of the fastest growing towns in Oxfordshire, and a major focus for housing development, split across the district council border between South Oxfordshire District Council and Vale of White Horse, with growth of over 10,000 homes planned/permitted between 2011 and 2035. It also lies at the centre of further major strategic housing growth areas in South Oxfordshire (around Culham, Berinsfield, etc) and Vale of White Horse (at Wantage and Grove). The need for special education provision is therefore expected to grow in this area.

9. As of January 2025, there were 85 children attending Community Special School provision who lived in the Didcot and Wallingford SEND planning area (PA). This places pressure on Community Special School provision elsewhere in the county – particularly at Bishopswood (Henley, Sonning Common & Woodcote PA), Fitzwaryn (Faringdon & Wantage PA) and Kingfisher (Abingdon & Cumnor PA). See Annex 2

for a map to illustrate this pattern. A new Community Special School in Didcot would free up significant amounts of capacity at these schools.

10. 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 applications from academy trusts interested 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 applications against the specification and the criteria in current DfE guidance. This assessment includes a presentation from each bidder to the assessment panel.
- iv. The county council submits a recommendation and assessments, including scoring of the proposals, to the DfE Regional Director (RD), as representative of the Secretary of State, who then decides on the successful trust.

11. 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 community special school in 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 applications to run the school, based on the proposed specification at Annex 1.

### **Proposed specification for the new school**

12. The school will be:

- A 120-place special school, specialising in PMLD and SLD needs
- Age range: 2-19

13. The detailed specification is provided in Annex 1.

### **Next Steps**

14. ELT 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 9 above,

the invitation of applications from potential providers. Once the applications are assessed, the Cabinet Member will be asked to approve a preferred provider for recommendation to the DfE Regional Director for approval by late summer 2026.

15. Running in parallel to this process, feasibility work is underway to inform the design for the new school; the current expectation is that the school will open in 2028.

### **Corporate Policies and Priorities**

16. 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 supports the Oxfordshire Local Area Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) Strategy 2022-2027 and the SEND Sufficiency Delivery Strategy 2022/23-2026/27.

### **Financial Implications**

17. 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. This Schools is part of the SEND Sufficiency plan and is a planned mitigation within the High Needs Deficit Management Plan. There are no significant financial implications or risks at this stage.

18. The capital cost of the school is included in the current OCC approved Capital Programme and is expected to be fully funded from High Needs Capital grants, and Section 106 developer funding contributions secured for this purpose.

Comments checked by:

Jane Billington, Strategic Finance Business Partner – Children's Services

Jane.billington@oxfordshire.gov.uk

### **Legal Implications**

19. Local authorities must plan for and secure sufficient school places for their area in line with their duties under section 14 of the Education Act 1996.

20. The process followed by the council to establish a new school is in line with the non-statutory guidance published by the government which sets out the department's advice and guidance about how the free school presumption process should operate in practice. This guidance applies to all new schools established following the process in section 6A of the Education and Inspections Act 20061, which is known as the 'free school presumption' route. Section 6A requires that, where a local authority identifies a need for a new school in its area, it must seek proposals to establish an academy (free school). The legislation that relates to this guidance includes:

- the Education Act 2011 (EA 2011)
- the Education and Inspections Act 2006 (EIA 2006)
- the Academies Act 2010.

Comments checked by:

Jay Akbar, Head of Legal and Deputy Monitoring Officer, Law & Governance (Legal Services)

Jay.Akbar@oxfordshire.gov.uk

### **Staff Implications**

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

### **Equality & 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. Increasing SEND provision through the building of a new special school to serve Didcot and the surrounding area will have positive equalities impacts for children and young people with special educational needs & disabilities, and their families and carers. Children with SEND are disproportionately male, eligible for free school meals, looked after by a local authority, and from the ethnicity groups Traveller of Irish heritage, Black Caribbean or Other Black backgrounds, and these groups will particularly benefit from this service change.

### **Sustainability Implications**

24. The school will be constructed to Net Carbon Zero standards. Locating a special school in Didcot will reduce travel distances for children and young people.

### **Risk Management**

25. There are no foreseen risks with respect to the transfer of the site; the Valley Park development is building out well. The site is scheduled for transfer as of the 350th housing occupation.

26. 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 Department for Education expects to be able to assist.

## Consultations

27. 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 23 June – 20 July 2025. 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.

28. 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.

29. There were 14 responses, of which 11 expressed clear support for the proposal; the remaining 3 expressed views that the school should not be made too big, that it should serve ASD/SEMH needs, and that the school should provide after-school clubs and offer more nursery places.

30. The location and type of school was identified based on data analysis showing where there is the greatest need for additional special school provision, and the specific site selected facilitates the swiftest delivery of a new special school. The age range, and indicative number of places per year group, can be kept under review once the school is operational, and adjustments made if necessary. The proposed school is only one element of the county council's ongoing work to increase SEND provision across the county, and work is already underway to progress the ASD/SEMH school on the Aureus secondary school site.

31. Other comments included:

- “Great news when we have such a high number of SEN/SEMH needs in the area.”
- “Please expedite as soon as possible. This is long overdue.”
- “I think that the area absolutely needs two new special schools, and I hope they can be built quickly and provide the school places needed for our children with SEN. A school that can support children with ASD and ADHD is needed.”
- “As a council with such high numbers of SEND across the board of ages and school groups, with a desperate need for foster care placements and adoptions of low SEND numbers, I think you should take serious consideration into this setting as a whole, but also the plausibility of providing residential facilities. There are non *[sic]* in this area that provide residential facilities for complex needs children and young people suitable to their needs, resulting in higher transports costs to out of county, and greater EHCP funding strains for direct payments and personal budgets with carers at home to provide 24/7 care which can be inadequate, generic and unbeneficial to the

child or family. On this, it is incredibly difficult to find carers who can or have experience in special needs young people and many families then lose this money that they fought for because it hasn't been "spent" as they couldn't actually employ someone. This is also namely said due to low hours in most individuals' budgets which equate to 10 hours per week etc. "

- "The special schools will be greatly received and will help alleviate pressures on mainstream settings, but the bigger holistic picture must be considered and thought about as a whole group of services and therapies etc to be a council who strive for the needs of every and all child in all of the best ways."

32. Oxfordshire County Council receives very few requests for residential education places, with this provision usually being a joint endeavour between Children's Social Care or Health.

**Lisa Lyons**  
**Director for Childrens Services**

**Contact Officer:** Louise Heavey, Pupil Place Planning Manager,  
louise.heavey@oxfordshire.gov.uk

Annex:

1. Didcot Community Special Specification Draft for Consultation
2. Children at Community Special Schools

Background papers: N/A

February 2026

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# **Oxfordshire County Council New Special School**

**Seeking proposals to establish a  
new Special School to serve  
south-east Oxfordshire**

**May 2025**



**OXFORDSHIRE  
COUNTY COUNCIL**

## SECTION A: INTRODUCTION AND PROCESS

Oxfordshire's Special Educational Needs & Disabilities (SEND) Sufficiency Delivery Strategy identifies the need for two new special schools in the south-east of Oxfordshire, one for children with Social, Emotional & Mental Health and/or Autism Spectrum Disorder (SEMH/ASD) needs, and one for children with Profound & Multiple Learning Difficulties (PMLD) or Severe Learning Difficulties (SLD), and other associated needs.

The new schools are required to:

- reduce travel distances and time for children in the Didcot and south-east Oxfordshire area who currently have no nearby special school suitable for their needs;
- as a result, improve education and welfare outcomes for local children;
- meet local population growth both in the immediate areas and surrounding communities, by releasing capacity at existing special schools; and
- better manage the county's expenditure on Independent and Non-Maintained Special School (INMSS) provision and special school transport.

This specification covers the new PMLD/SLD special school, which is planned to open in 2028, subject to progress with construction. The specification for the SEMH/ASD school was approved summer 2024, and it is intended that the academy sponsor selection processes for the two schools will run in parallel.

**The authority is seeking proposals from appropriate providers to sponsor this new school. Interested academy trusts are invited to submit applications for one or both new special schools, based on their expertise and experience.**

To inform the selection of a sponsor, Oxfordshire County Council conducted a public consultation on this educational specification for the new school in June/July 2025. The consultation resulted in 14 responses. The consultation has informed this specification, which was approved by the Oxfordshire County Council Cabinet Member responsible for Education in 2025.

This specification guides applicants in the information that should be included in proposals from interested academy sponsors and should be read in conjunction with the relevant application form and DfE guidance.

**Key Dates (subject to change):**

<b>Date</b>	<b>Action</b>
<b>Summer 2025</b>	Consultation on school specification.
<b>Autumn 2025</b>	Launch of competition for a Trust to run the proposed school.
<b>Winter 2025</b>	Proposer groups will submit their applications.
<b>Spring 2026</b>	Assessment of applications received, with reference to how well they meet the specification for the school. Interviews and presentations by shortlisted bidders.  Local authority will make recommendations to DfE, who will make a final decision on which application to approve.
<b>Summer 2026</b>	Indicative date by when DfE decision on academy sponsor may be announced.
<b>2027-2028</b>	Sponsor, LA and DfE work together on pre-opening planning, resulting in a signed Supplementary Funding Agreement.
<b>2028</b>	Target date for opening of school – exact date tbc

Please note, these dates will be updated and published on the OCC website; they are subject to change and may be updated as the process progresses.

The Regional Director (RD) for South East, on behalf of the Secretary of State, will consider the local authority assessments and recommendations before deciding which proposer is in the best position to take forward the new school. The Regional Director will inform the local authority and the successful proposer of its decision, and the local authority will inform any unsuccessful proposers.

It is essential that by the time of presentation, proposers have achieved DfE approved sponsor status. Without this, their application cannot be considered. Information about this process is available from [www.gov.uk/government/collections/academy-sponsorship](http://www.gov.uk/government/collections/academy-sponsorship) .

The New School Proposal Form and this Specification Document are available to download from <https://www2.oxfordshire.gov.uk/cms/content/new-schools-oxfordshire> [not available until bidding opens]

**Contact details and further information**

Further information is available from, and applications should be sent to: [school.planning@oxfordshire.gov.uk](mailto:school.planning@oxfordshire.gov.uk)

## SECTION B: OXFORDSHIRE'S CONTEXT

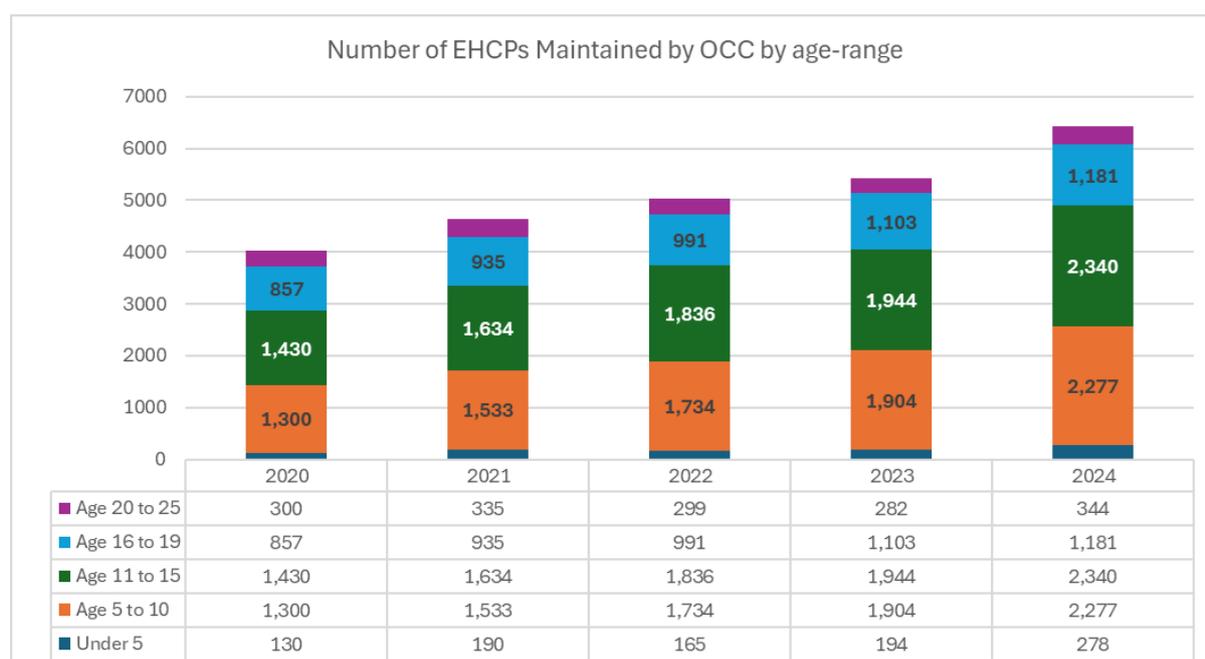
### B1: Special Educational Needs in Oxfordshire

Oxfordshire's ambition is for all children and young people with SEND to have the right support and opportunities at the right time, so that they go on to live rich and fulfilling lives at the heart of their communities. In 2022, an updated Oxfordshire Local Area SEND Strategy for Children and Young People aged 0 to 25 with SEND was published at [www.oxfordshire.gov.uk/sendstrategy](http://www.oxfordshire.gov.uk/sendstrategy). The strategy was co-produced by the SEND Strategy Development Group, with representatives from Oxfordshire County Council (education and social care), NHS Oxfordshire Clinical Commissioning Group, education settings and Oxfordshire Parent Carers Forum and provides the following strategic objectives:

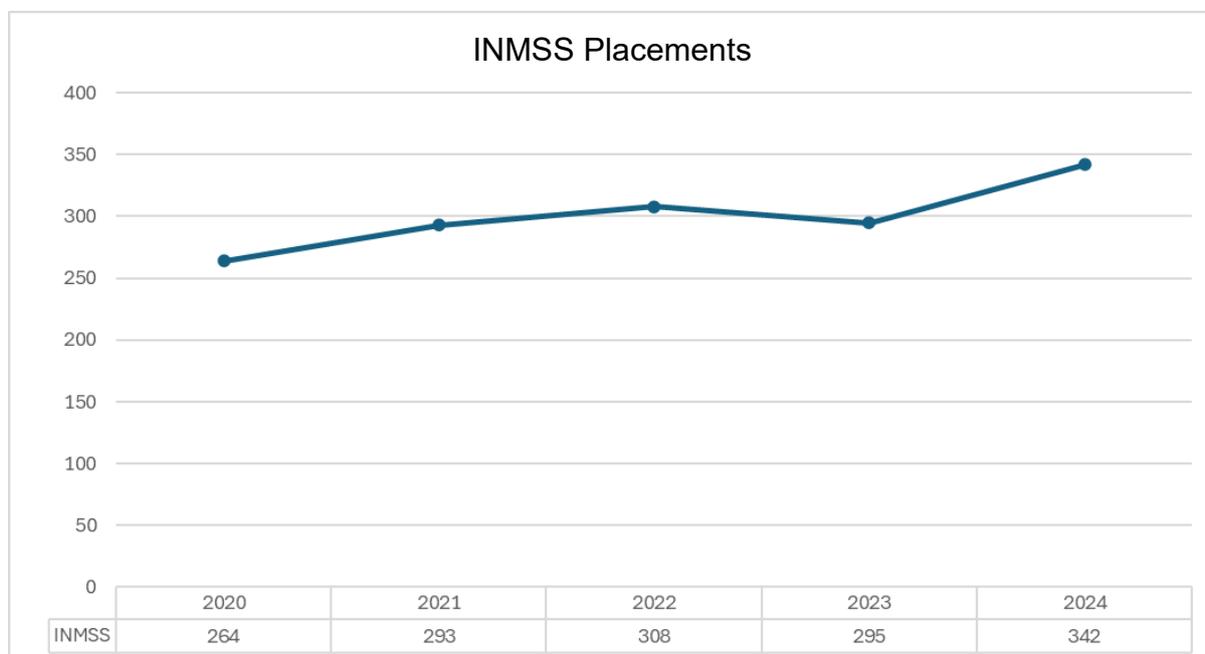
1. Improving outcomes for children with SEND
2. Developing a continuum of local provision to meet the requirements of children and young people with SEND
3. Good physical and mental health and wellbeing
4. Improving post-16 education, learning, employment and training
5. Positive move into adulthood for young people with SEND

The associated sufficiency strategy, published at [www.oxfordshire.gov.uk/sendsufficiency](http://www.oxfordshire.gov.uk/sendsufficiency) particularly seeks to deliver the second objective of good, local provision. This planned new school is a major element in delivering the necessary provision.

The number of Oxfordshire EHCPs has increased by 60% over the last five years, accelerating to an 18% increase between 2023 and 2024 alone.



Because the need for special school places has grown faster than the Oxfordshire has been able to expand the capacity of maintained special schools, the use of independent and non-maintained special schools (INMSS) has increased by 30% over the last five years. As these places have higher fees than maintained special schools, this is placing an unsustainable pressure on funding for children with SEND.



## **B2: Current SEND Provision in Oxfordshire**

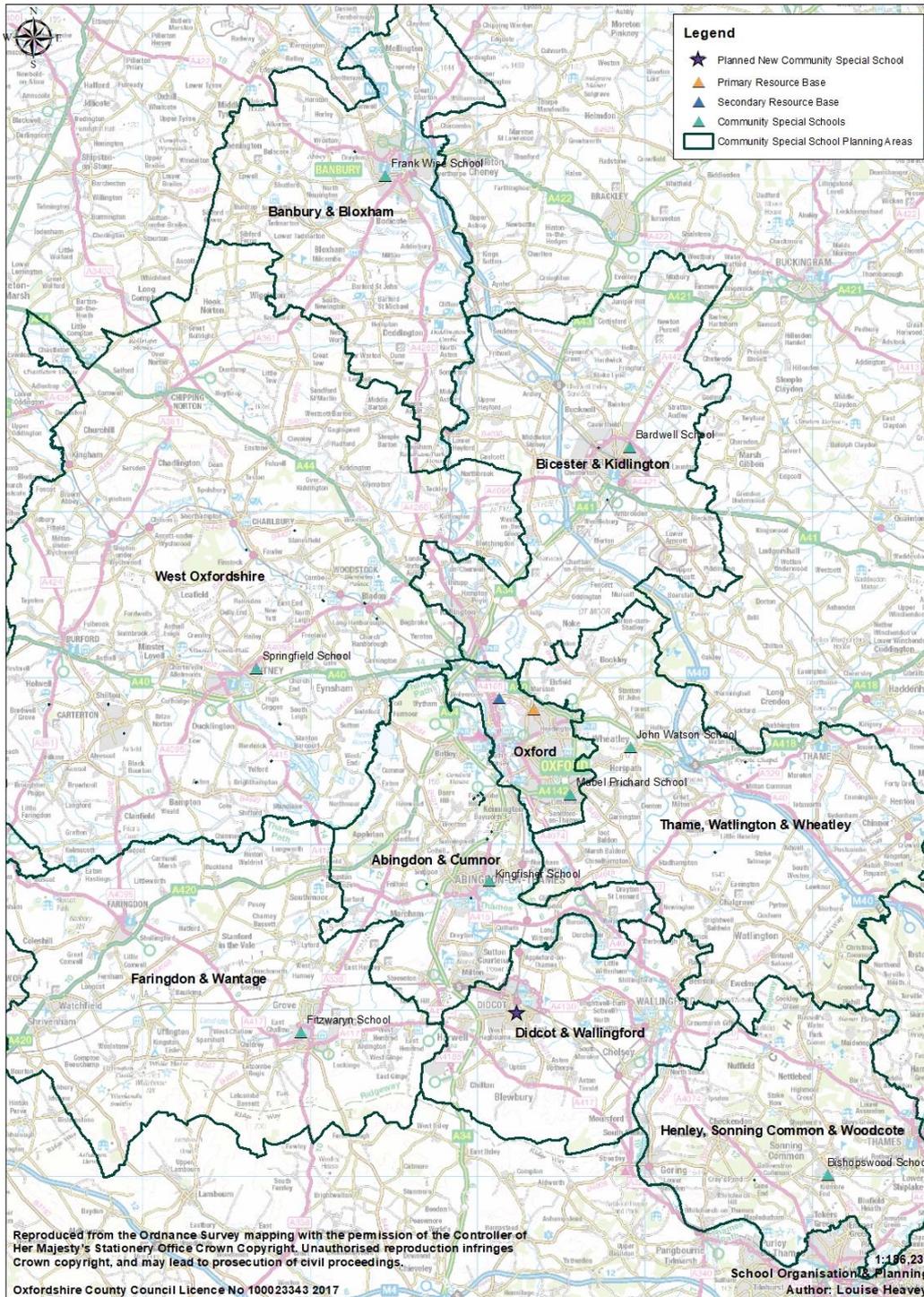
Oxfordshire currently has 14 maintained special schools, 10 of which are academies. Six of these are primarily for pupils with SEMH / ASD needs, and eight are primarily for children with SLD/PMLD and associated needs. There is also one Hospital School, and an Alternative Provision school. The most recent Ofsted reports for these schools (in some cases prior to academy conversion) assess five as Outstanding and seven as Good. One school has a rating of “Requires Improvement” and two were judged Inadequate prior to academy conversion and have not yet been inspected as academies. One new school for pupils with SEMH / ASD needs opened in January 2024 and has not yet been inspected. Another school (in Faringdon) for pupils with SEMH / ASD needs is working through the planning permission process and is due to open for 2026/27.

This specification is for a new special school serving the south-east Oxfordshire area, meeting the needs of children and young people in the 2-19 age range, primarily with PMLD and SLD needs.

Oxfordshire’s current SEND provisions are located as shown on the maps below.

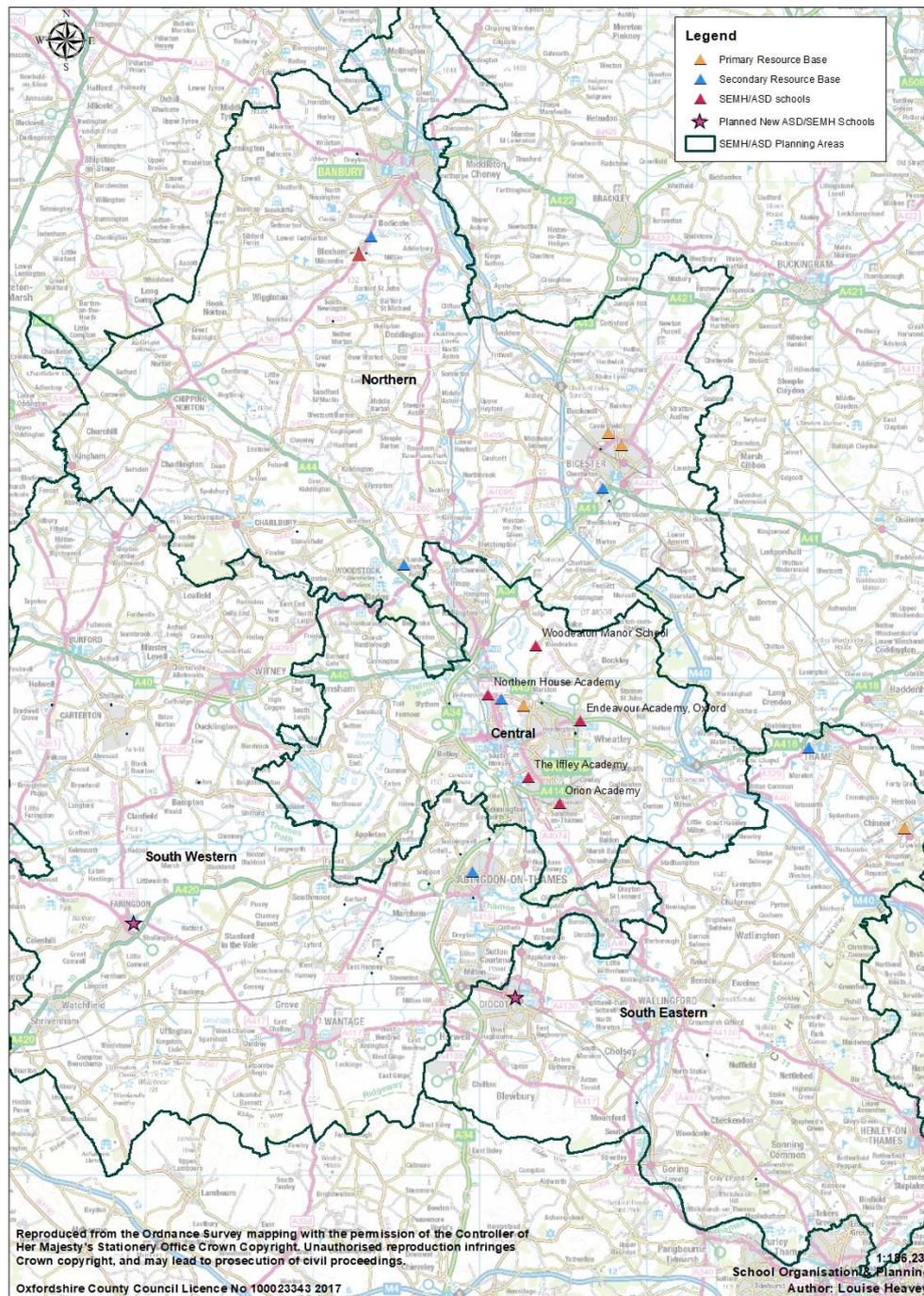
Map 1: current maintained specialist provision for needs other than SEMH / ASD

The map below divides the county into nine areas for the purpose of strategic planning of specialist provision primarily for needs other than SEMH / ASD. These areas are envelopes of the smaller planning areas used for planning mainstream school capacity and broadly reflect the areas from which each of the county's existing maintained community special schools draws its pupils. The exception is the Didcot/Wallingford area, which currently has no community special school.



**Map 2: current and planned maintained specialist provision for SEMH / ASD**

The map below divides the county into four areas for the purpose of strategic planning of specialist provision for SEMH / ASD. These areas are also envelopes of the smaller planning areas used for planning mainstream school capacity and reflect the much larger areas served by SEMH/ASD special schools. Oxfordshire's SEND Sufficiency Delivery Strategy 2022/23-2026/27 sets an aspiration for a specialist ASD/SEMH special school in each of the areas. This will be achieved once the planned new schools at Faringdon and Didcot open. Given the growth in need, further new schools/expansion may become necessary.



OCC, working in partnership with academy trusts and the DfE, is delivering significant additional special education provision. Since 2022/23, the current programme of additional capacity, including the school covered by this specification, is expected to increase state-maintained special school capacity in Oxfordshire by over 600 places, an increase of nearly 50%, by 2032. This includes the new school which opened in Bloxham in 2024, the one due to open in Faringdon in 2026/27, and the two new schools planned for Didcot, as well as planned expansions of existing schools.

This proposed new school in Didcot will significantly improve access to special education provision for the growing population in south-east Oxfordshire. This will speed up the process of placing children with SEND in a suitable special school and reduce travel times and distances. There will also be an indirect benefit of releasing pressure on existing schools and freeing up capacity to meet other areas of population growth.

In addition to the school covered by this specification, Oxfordshire intends to open another special school in Didcot, for children and young people primarily with SEMH/ASD needs. It is currently hoped that this will open in 2027/28.

## SECTION C: THE SCHOOL

This specification is to establish a school in the south-east of the county. This would improve the geographic coverage of special schools to ensure provision within a reasonable distance of all communities. The tables below list key details of the school proposed. Proposer group applications must be for a school that has these key characteristics.

<b>Type of school</b>	Special			
<b>Area of SEN</b>	PMLD / SLD			
<b>Per-pupil revenue funding the local authority would expect to pay</b>	Funding will be as determined by the special schools funding formula, agreed annually by Schools' Forum. For 2025/26 the formula is set out below:			
	<b>Formula Factor</b>	<b>Rate</b>	<b>Allocation</b>	<b>Rate Set By and Notes</b>
	Place Funding	£10,000.00	Per place	DfE
	Teachers Pay & Pension	£660.00	Per place	DfE
	Additional Funding	Varies	Per place	DfE – 2023/24 rates
	Supplementary Funding	Varies	Fixed	LA – set at 2022/23 values
	Core Top Up	£12,985.13	Per OCC Pupil	LA - +2.88% inflationary increase
	Other Top Up Factors	Varies	Per OCC Pupil	LA - +2.88% inflationary increase
	MFG	Varies	Protection	Set at 0.0% protection
	During the 2025/26 financial year Oxfordshire County Council intends to review the top-up methodology and formulas used across all SEND services to understand the options available to allocate the resource to deliver the outcomes desired, which may result in a new special school formula.			
<b>Age range</b>	Age 2-19			
<b>Gender</b>	Co-educational			
<b>Capacity</b>	The eventual full capacity of the school is expected to be 120 pupils, including sixth form. It is recognised that class sizes may vary from year to year depending on the needs of each cohort.			
<b>Type of placements</b>	Full time			
<b>Number of nursery places</b>	4			
<b>Number of 16-19 places</b>	20 - subject to review once the school is established and operating in all year groups.			
<b>Any planned outreach, training and/or reintegration support</b>	The new school would be expected to take an active part in relevant initiatives, including to work collaboratively with other schools and trusts delivering SEND provision, and support mainstream schools.			

## **C1: Location and site**

Proposed location: Valley Park development, Didcot, OX11 6DU (approx)

A 1.7ha site has been secured through a Section 106 agreement with the Valley Park development.

The school will be accommodated in a new, purpose-built building, the design of which will be based on DfE Building Bulletin 104 Guidelines. It will include 2 Early Years rooms, 11 Key Stage 1-4 classrooms, and 2 sixth form classrooms. Further details will be available as the design work progresses.

## **C2: Indicative opening schedule**

In order to minimise travel distances, pupils living in the area who are already at special school will be offered the opportunity to transfer to the new school, where this is compatible with the effective operation of the school.

Because of the shortage of appropriate special school provision in this area, many children are placed in high-cost Independent and Non-Maintained Special Schools, which places unsustainable pressure on SEND funding in Oxfordshire. The council will work with parents to manage moves to the new school at appropriate transition points, where this is in the best interests of the pupils.

In addition, some children with severe needs are remaining in their mainstream school awaiting a more suitable special school place becoming available. This would be a further immediate intake into the new school.

To reflect these circumstances, the council will work with the successful sponsor to plan the most appropriate schedule of growth for the new school, based on data held once a provisional opening date for the school is confirmed, and agree an annual number of commissioned places.

The table below details an indicative number of places that the local authority proposes for each year group at the point of opening until the school is full, subject to review in the pre-opening period. The numbers per year group will need to be flexible based on the needs of each cohort and will be kept under annual review.

	Year of opening 2028 tbc	+1	+2	+3	+4	+5	+6
Nursery	2	3	4	4	4	4	4
Reception	2	3	4	4	4	4	4
Key stage 1 (Y1-2)	8	9	10	13	14	14	16
Key stage 2 (Y3-6)	16	20	24	27	31	32	32
Key stage 3 (Y7-9)	10	21	24	25	26	27	28
Key stage 4 (Y10-11)	0	0	8	17	18	18	18
Key Stage 5 (age 16-19)	0	0	0	0	8	17	18
<b>Totals</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>56</b>	<b>74</b>	<b>90</b>	<b>105</b>	<b>116</b>	<b>120</b>

## **SECTION D: REQUIRED OUTCOMES OF THE NEW SCHOOL**

*Applicants will be required to fully explain and evidence in Section D of the proposal form how the school will achieve its educational vision under the following headings. Applicants should take account of the relevant criteria in Annex C of the free school presumption guidance, available at [www.gov.uk/government/publications/establishing-a-new-school-free-school-presumption](http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/establishing-a-new-school-free-school-presumption), which provides more detail on the evidence which should be provided.*

### **D1 – Curriculum & Education**

*Applicants will need to demonstrate an ambitious and deliverable curriculum plan which is consistent with the vision and pupil intake.*

The school should:

- Provide sustainably good or outstanding education with an exciting and inspiring, broad and balanced curriculum across the age range which is flexible enough to meet the individual needs of all pupils, and deliverable with the resources which will be available.
- Have a clear rationale for the proposed curriculum, demonstrating understanding of the needs of the expected intake, and an ambitious approach to meeting those needs.
- Have strategies in place to support pupils to be successful when they enter and leave the school, with a strong focus on preparation for adulthood, including life and social skills.
- Work collaboratively with FE providers and health and social care agencies to ensure appropriate onward destinations post school at either 16+ or 19+.
- Form partnerships with other educators, employment services, businesses, housing agencies, disability organisations and arts and sports groups.
- Seek out and share best practice within and beyond the school, promoting innovation and creativity in learning and teaching.
- Work effectively with mainstream schools to maximise appropriate integration and development opportunities, sharing skills and expertise.

### **D2 – Measuring Performance**

*Applicants will need to demonstrate their approach to measuring school and pupil performance effectively and setting challenging targets.*

The school should:

- Set and meet ambitious but realistic aspirations for all pupils, determined through timely and comprehensive assessment.

- Instil rigorous processes of school self-evaluation and continual improvement, including recognising the importance of pupil and parent input in these processes.
- Identify baseline measures of pupils' attainment and put in place an assessment and data tracking system that will allow pupil progress to be monitored and continuously improved.
- Review success measures and targets regularly to improve the school's performance. This could include benchmarking assessment data with other relevant schools.
- Use appropriate data to inform teaching and drive progression and attainment for all pupils.
- Implement strategies to ensure that attendance of children matches the attendance rates of the highest performing authorities.
- Engage parents/carers in supporting and encouraging their children's learning, including through regular reporting.

### **D3 – Staffing & Management**

*Applicants will need to set out a staffing structure that will deliver the planned curriculum within the expected income levels with a focus on outstanding teaching (including strategies for effective performance management).*

The school should:

- Have an appropriate balance of roles, experience and expertise.
- Maintain outstanding and dynamic leadership, management and governance.
- Attract, retain and develop the highest quality teachers and support staff to ensure good or better teaching and learning, and effective and motivated workforces.
  - Plan the growth of staffing within the funding available, until the school is at full capacity in line with planned pupil numbers and have credible contingency plans to adapt the staffing structure and still deliver a sufficient curriculum if income were less than expected.

### **D4 – Ensuring inclusivity, safeguarding and strong communities**

*Applicants will need to set out clear and robust policies and procedures for inclusion, safeguarding and community links.*

The school should:

- Work in partnership with pupils and parents to support the development of every child.

- Develop a strong moral and caring ethos, ensuring care and support for the whole child.
- Ensure safeguarding and well-being responsibilities are met.
- Be welcoming to pupils of all faiths/world views and none. Encourage pupils from different communities, faiths and backgrounds to work together, learn about each other's customs, beliefs and ideas and respect each other's views.
- Prepare children for life in modern Britain including through the teaching of spiritual, moral, social and cultural (SMSC) education. Consideration must be given to relevant issues, for example how the school will teach PHSE, adhere to the Prevent Duty
- Promote fundamental British values of democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty, and mutual respect and tolerance of those with different faiths and beliefs.
- Meet the needs of its pupils and local community through enrichment and extended services, for example, breakfast clubs, sports clubs, homework clubs and music/art clubs.
- Explore the range of opportunities the community offers to keep well, keep learning and stay involved.
- Work in close partnership with the existing network of special schools in Oxfordshire and Oxfordshire's SEND team.
- Work in partnership with the county council and other educational providers to contribute towards meeting the collective responsibility to secure the best for all Oxfordshire's learners, including participating in school-to-school support, and supporting the strategic responsibilities of the county council to ensure sufficiency of high quality school places and improved educational outcomes through agreed sharing of data and information.
- Work in partnership with wider services such as social care services, health and police to keep children safe, support families and build stronger communities.
- Be outward facing, playing a key role within its immediate community and the wider local economy, for example through opening up facilities to the community, and participating in community activities.
- Develop strategic alliances, partnerships and networks to better meet the needs of children and families.

## **SECTION E: CAPACITY AND CAPABILITY**

*Applicants will be required to demonstrate that they have the capacity and capability to set up and run the new school, and that they have access to appropriate educational, financial and other expertise.*

As a minimum, this must include the following:

- The resources they would draw on and/or deploy to support the development of the new school by the opening date.
  - Clear evidence that they have the range of skills and abilities necessary to set up and then run a school effectively, including managing school finances; leadership; project management; marketing; human resources; safeguarding; and health and safety.
- How the school would be organised and what the governance arrangements would look like, including a diagram of the proposed structures.

### **E1 – Experience and credentials**

*Applicants will need to demonstrate:*

- Appropriate roles, responsibilities and relevant experience to support the pre-opening and post-opening phases of the school's opening.
- A clear understanding of missing skills and experience (if any) of the team and a strategy to fill these gaps.
- Strong, relevant special education expertise, for example strong special school improvement experience, or substantial experience of delivering high quality special education relevant to this specification.

### **E2 – Governance**

*Applicants will need to demonstrate:*

- A governance structure, and roles and responsibilities, that will ensure accountability and effective decision-making, and drive improvement in the new school.
- An understanding of what changes, if any, they would need to make to the existing governance structure.
- An assessment of any conflicts of interest and how they will be managed, including any financial transactions that are likely to take place between any member/trustee and the academy.
- A strategy for securing independent challenge to members and trustees.
- A plan to recruit and train high quality individuals to fill any gaps.

## SECTION F: FUNDING AND COSTS

Funding for the new school has been identified in Oxfordshire County Council's capital programme, with an indicative budget of £23.3m. Funding sources include DfE capital grants (High Needs Provision Capital Allocation) and "Section 106" funding secured by the council that supports SEND provision.

The local authority is required by the Department for Education to provide revenue funding towards pre-opening and post-opening costs of new schools.

In addition to the pupil-led revenue funding, the new school will qualify for the following financial support from the local authority:

- A pre-opening grant of £97,500.
- A loose furniture and equipment budget of £250 per primary pupil and £540 per secondary pupil.
- A post-opening grant of £170,000

The Department for Education will also provide a one-off grant payment of £25,000 to the successful sponsor to cover the legal costs incurred in establishing the new free school.

*Applicants will be required to submit a robust financial plan for the school, covering the period until the school is operating at full capacity. They should detail their contingency planning should pupil intakes grow slower than expected. Applicants are recommended to use the DfE's School Financial Template, or similar tool.*

## SECTION G: IMPACT AND EQUALITIES ASSESSMENT

As prescribed by section 9 of the Academies Act 2010 and section 149 of the Equality Act 2010, the local authority must assess the potential impact of any new school on existing educational provision in the area. The local authority must also consider whether the new school would impact on any groups with protected characteristics.

A new special school in this location would have positive equality and inclusion implications, by improving access to a suitable school place for children with SEND. Sufficiency of SEND provision has important equalities impacts. National data shows that pupils with EHCPs are more likely to be:

- Male – 73% of EHCPs nationally are for boys.
- Eligible for free school meals – 40% of pupils with EHCPs are eligible compared to 23% of all pupils in schools.
- Speakers of English as their first language – 84% of pupils with EHCPs compared to 80% of all pupils in schools
- Looked after by a local authority – 29% have an EHCP.

Special Educational Needs are most prevalent in the Traveller of Irish heritage ethnic group. Other significantly higher than average rates of EHCPs are seen for pupils of Black Caribbean and Other Black backgrounds.

Other important equality and inclusion impacts include:

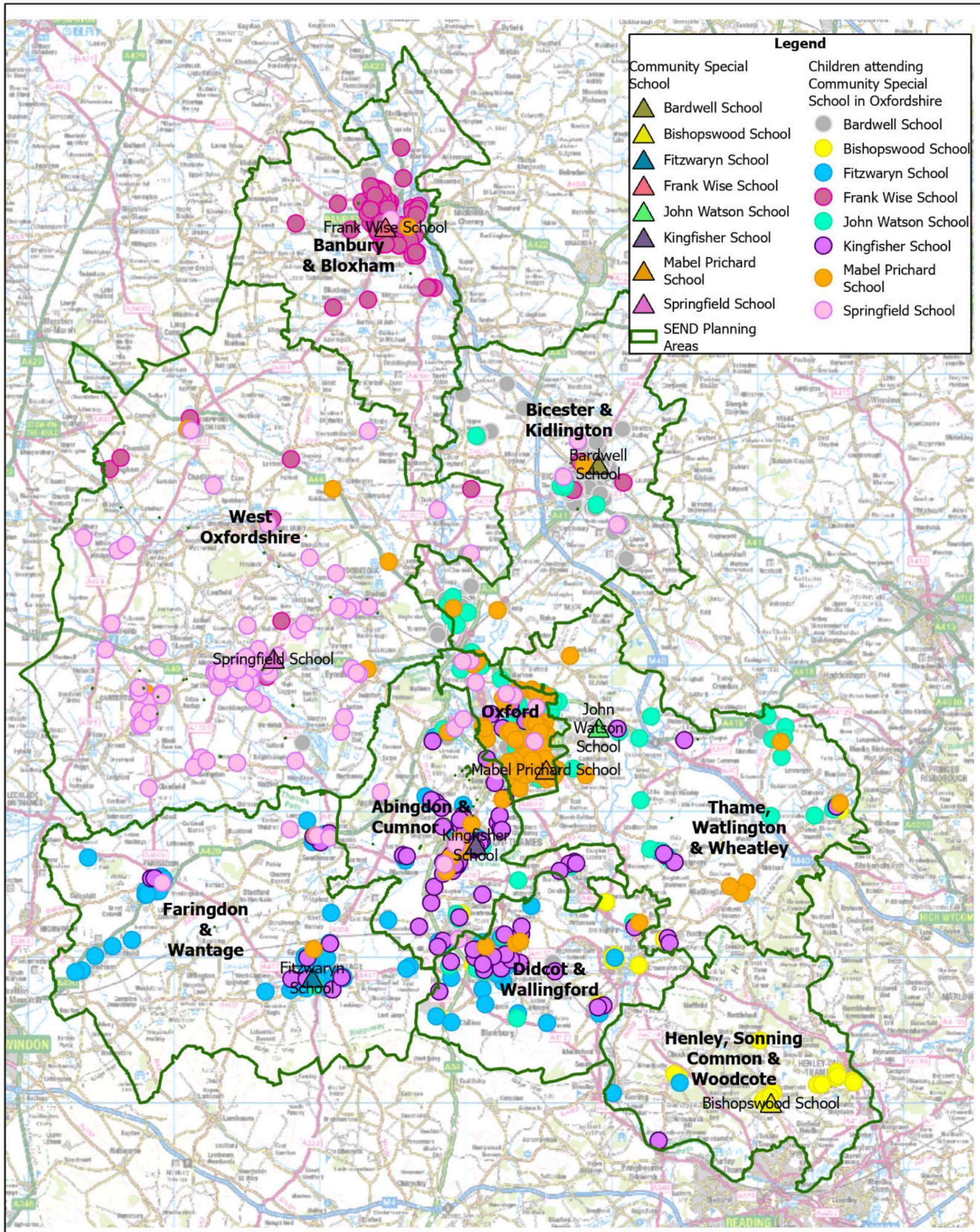
- more local places allow vulnerable children to be educated in their local community;
- more local places reduce travel distance and time for children and enables them arriving at school more willing and able to learn;
- shorter journeys reduce unit costs (cost per pupil) measures in the Home to School Transport budget;
- this new school will fill a gap in the special school map for Oxfordshire and create potential to reduce the use of expensive Independent and Non-Maintained Special Schools placements, releasing financial resources.

The school is not expected to have a negative impact on other maintained schools, due to the existing shortage of special education provision within Oxfordshire.

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Children and Young People Attending Community Special School Provision in Oxfordshire (January 2026)



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