

# **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

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