

Wiltshire Council

Cabinet

12 September 2023

Subject: School Places Strategy 2023 - 2027

Cabinet Member: Cllr Laura Mayes – Cabinet Member for Children’s Services, Education and Skills

Key Decision: Key

Executive Summary

Wiltshire's current School Places Strategy 2017 - 2022 needs to be replaced with a new version for 2023 -2027. This report describes the background and consultation that has been carried out on a replacement Strategy for 2023 – 2027 and seeks approval for it.

The School Places Strategy 2023-2027 pulls together the information required to form a strategic view of the need for mainstream school places across Wiltshire. It provides a summary analysis of current provision, identifies gaps and over-provision and sets out how the LA intends to address these. Specifically, the strategy provides a revised and updated policy framework for considering the following:

- statutory proposals, (opening, closing and defining the size and organisation of schools);
- planning and commissioning new school provision;
- supporting the development of school organisation change including informal and formal school partnership arrangements which support school to school improvement and make efficient use of resources.

The strategy therefore sets out:

- demographic trends in Wiltshire including a summary of new major house building planned in Wiltshire;
- details of current school provision;
- an analysis of the impact of demographic changes on current provision - surplus places/deficit of places. The data is used by the Local Authority and its partners to inform decision making;
- emerging proposals for future provision of places for children and young people in Wiltshire;
- guiding policies and principles upon which decisions will be informed;
- details of the Council's strategy for capital investment in schools to secure a place for every child.

The strategy is intended to help key stakeholders and partners in the Local Authority, schools, Academy Trusts, governors, parents, diocese, local communities, businesses, and other providers of education, to understand what school places are needed in Wiltshire, now, and in the future, and how they will be provided.

Proposal

Cabinet is asked to approve the School Places Strategy 2023 – 2027.

Reason for Proposal

To enable the Council to fulfil its statutory duties to ensure sufficient school places and increase opportunities for parental choice.

Terence Herbert
Chief Executive

Wiltshire Council

Cabinet

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Subject: School Places Strategy 2023 - 2027

Cabinet Member: Cllr Laura Mayes – Cabinet Member for Children’s Services, Education and Skills

Key Decision: Key

Purpose of Report

1. For Cabinet to note and approve the School Places Strategy 2023-2027.

Relevance to the Council’s Business Plan

2. The Council has a statutory duty to provide sufficient school places to meet the demand arising across Wiltshire, whether from demographic or population change, strategic housing development growth or military moves. Under the *Right Skills to Prosper* priority, Wiltshire Council’s Business Plan states that there is an aim to ensure that schools are spaces that encourage learning, and that there are the right number of places for pupils where they need them. It also says that it will implement a School Places Strategy to manage the supply and demand for places.

Background

3. Wiltshire's current School Places Strategy 2017 - 2022 now needs to be replaced with a new version for 2023 -2027.
4. The School Places Strategy 2023-2027 pulls together the information required to form a strategic view of the need for mainstream school places across Wiltshire. It provides a summary analysis of current provision, identifies gaps and over-provision and sets out how the LA intends to address these. Specifically, the strategy provides a revised and updated policy framework for considering the following:
 - statutory proposals, (opening, closing and defining the size and organisation of schools);
 - planning and commissioning new school provision;
 - supporting the development of school organisation change including informal and formal school partnership arrangements which support school to school improvement and make efficient use of resources.
5. The strategy therefore sets out:
 - demographic trends in Wiltshire including a summary of new major house building planned in Wiltshire (as at March 2023);
 - details of current school provision;

- an analysis of the impact of demographic changes on current provision - surplus places/deficit of places. The data is used by the Local Authority and its partners to inform decision making;
- emerging proposals for future provision of places for children and young people in Wiltshire;
- guiding policies and principles upon which decisions will be informed;
- details of the Council's strategy for capital investment in schools to secure a place for every child.

6. The strategy is intended to help key stakeholders and partners in the Local Authority, schools, Academy Trusts, governors, parents, diocese, local communities, businesses, and other providers of education, to understand what school places are needed in Wiltshire, now, and in the future, and how they will be provided.

Main Considerations for the Council

7. School places are no longer solely provided by the council, and the council must work with other providers to ensure that the need for school places is met. However, the council has a unique responsibility to make sure there are enough school places available for local children and young people. No other local or national body shares the duty to secure sufficient primary and secondary school places. Although there has been no statutory requirement to publish a School Organisation Plan since 2004, it is considered good practice to produce a plan or strategy related to pupil place planning to clearly set out the framework for, and approach towards, the provision of places.

8. The School Places Strategy, as at **Appendix 1**, is presented as 5 separate sections:

- The Wiltshire context – population figures and geographical information.
- Legislation – statutory duties, key national legislation and policies affecting school organisation.
- Wiltshire policies and principles relevant to the provision of school places – Our local policies and principles e.g. preferred sizes for new schools.
- School organisation and planning – Wiltshire level information on the factors that influence school places including the birth rate and housing development.
- Detailed planning area assessments – Separate sections for each community area which look in detail at the level of surplus places, birth rate, local housing developments, the implications of these and finally a summary of projects that are likely to be required in the short, medium and long term to meet the requirement for any additional school places.

9. Taking these in turn, the Wiltshire Context section looks at population growth in the County and the ONS forecast of further population growth by 2028. As at January 2023 there were 119 maintained schools and 116 academies in Wiltshire giving a total of 235 schools overall. The table below gives a breakdown of schools in Wiltshire by category.

Category	Primary	Secondary	Special	Total
Community	29	2	2	33

Foundation	8	1	0	9
Academy/Free School	89	25	2	116
Voluntary Aided/Controlled	76	1	0	77
Total	202	29	4	235

10. The second section of the Strategy summarises the key national legislation and policies affecting school organisation. Specifically, it details the regulations and processes to follow when doing the following:

- Making changes to maintained (non-academy) schools e.g. expansions
- Closing maintained (non-academy) schools
- Making changes to academies e.g. expansions
- Routes to opening new schools

11. The third section of the Strategy then sets out the local policies and principles that will be applied by the Council when managing school places. Including, stating Wiltshire Council believes that:

- Parental preference is a key consideration and ability to access a school place close to home within the local community is an important factor.
- Securing the sustainability of schools is best achieved working in partnership.
- Good financial health is essential for achieving educational excellence.
- The quality of education is of paramount importance and closure of small schools which are no longer individually viable is a last resort.

12. The strategy explains that educational viability, efficiency and effectiveness are all potential triggers for considering a review of school organisation and subsequent re-organisation of school provision in an area. The 'triggers' that might provide an indication that a review is necessary are set out below:

- Where there are concerns over standards, identified by Ofsted or the LA, at one or more schools in an area.
- Where there are significant surplus places across an area, usually exceeding 25%.
- Where there is a significant shift in parental preferences for a school and the intake of a school consistently varies by 20% from its published admission number.
- Where there is population change in an area (to include growth from new housing).
- Where there are school premises issues and accommodation seriously impacts upon learning.
- Where the financial viability of school/s is called into question when funding impacts negatively on the delivery of the full range of curriculum opportunities and organisation of classes.

13. As part of a school organisation review, in order to remove surplus places and secure the long term educational and financial stability of Wiltshire schools, the following will be considered:

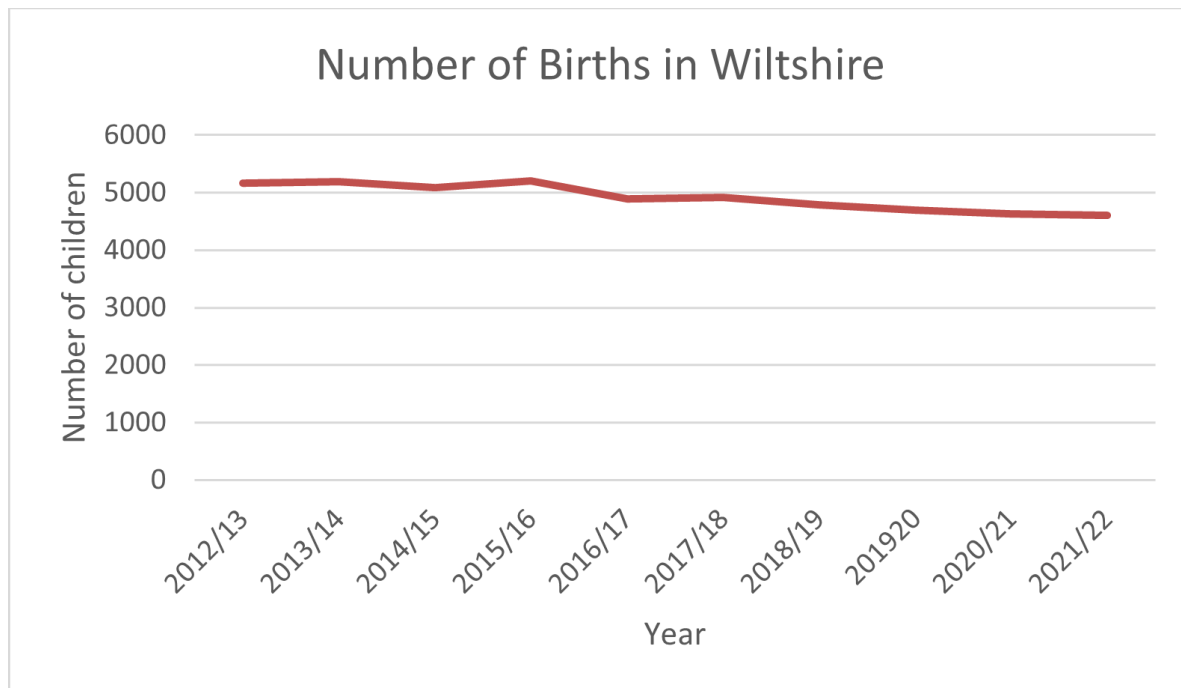
- Identify schools which can temporarily or permanently lower their Published Admissions Numbers (PAN). This would create a better fit between demand and places and would enable more effective planning, class organisation, higher class size numbers and therefore increased efficiency. PAN's which are multiples of 15 are preferred for class organisation purposes.
- Remove and not replace temporary accommodation (pratten's and mobiles) in schools with surplus places.
- Work with the early years commissioning team to identify whether any pre-schools could move into surplus school accommodation. Particularly those pre-schools who are already on school sites in old mobiles.
- Work with the SEND team to identify whether any specialist SEN provision is needed in areas/schools with high levels of surplus places.
- Consider other community uses of school sites which can be achieved whilst maintaining safe school sites.
- Where there are high levels of surplus places across an area which cannot be removed through the above measures alone, closure of school/s will be considered.

14. The strategy then says that Wiltshire Council recognises the government's presumption against the closure of designated rural schools and will only bring forward proposals to close schools designated as rural where it can be demonstrated that one or more of the following criteria can be met:

- There is only very limited demand for places at the school from children living within the designated area.
- Surplus places at the school exceed 25%.
- Standards are low and there is little confidence in the likelihood of improvement.
- Recruitment of a head teacher has not proved possible.
- The necessary improvements to the school accommodation are either not possible or not cost effective.
- The school has a deficit budget without realistic prospects of recovery.

15. Once the strategy has been adopted, work on School Organisation Reviews can commence. It is important to note, that reviews are also necessary where demand is rising, not just falling. This will be particularly important for areas where there is a significant amount of new housing planned.

16. The fourth section of the Strategy looks at the Wiltshire level place planning data, including the birth rate, current cohort sizes, housing development, armed forces movements, and children arriving from overseas. In line with national trends there has been an overall drop in the birth rate in the last few years across Wiltshire from around 5,200 births a year to under 4,700. This is shown in the graph below.



17. The pressure on primary school places from 2009 was significant, but now the lower birth rate is beginning to feed into primary schools. The oldest children from the peak years have now begun to feed through into secondary education. We do see growth in cohorts between birth and when they start school. For instance, the 2017/2018 birth cohort had increased from 4914 to 5404 children by the time the cohort turned 4.

18. The number of pupils in mainstream Wiltshire schools as at January 2023, per cohort, were as follows:

Year Group	Rec	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4	Year 5	Year 6
Number of pupils	5068	5212	5520	5329	5527	5427	5572

Year Group	Year 7	Year 8	Year 9	Year 10	Year 11	Year 12	Year 13
Number of pupils	5679	5493	5210	5299	5057	2396	2228

19. The data above shows that the largest cohorts are now in year 7, and also key stage two so will be feeding into secondary schools over the next few years. As secondary schools will be admitting larger cohorts into year 7, whilst losing smaller numbers from the top of the school, the secondary sector will see significant growth. The opposite will be true for primary schools.

20. At the time of writing the Strategy, the draft local plan had not been published. However, information was included from the Housing Land Supply Statement April 2022 and the consultation on the local plan carried out in January 2021. School place planning is a continuous process and will continue to advise the local plan and vice versa.

21. The final section of strategy is broken down into community areas. The community areas are based on the geographical areas defined by the secondary school

catchments and feeder schools aligned to them. Each section includes information on the schools in the area, current and projected pupil numbers, surplus places, current and proposed new housing and the implications of this data on primary and secondary provision.

22. For each community area, any infrastructure projects that are required to ensure a sufficient supply of school places are summarised. The strategy does not seek approval for schemes nor allocation of funding. It simply provides a strategic view on where new schools or expansions may be required in the short, medium and long term. Cabinet approval to allocate funding for any new projects will be sought through the annual report on the School Capital Programme. It is anticipated that new projects will be funded by section 106 funding where demand is caused by new housing, or through the DfE Basic Need grant.
23. The draft School Places Strategy 2023 – 2027 was published for comments on the 1st March 2023. As well as being placed on the Council's website, it was sent directly to all Councillors, Town and Parish Councils, schools, academy trusts and the relevant Diocese. A press release was also published on the 1 March 2023. Comments were received until the 31 March 2023.
24. The strategy has been received well by schools and academies trusts who have commented that the information contained is extremely useful for their own planning purposes and having data on the wider community areas enables them to understand the contextual position for their school/schools. Specific feedback was received from four schools, 2 parish councils, one Academy Trust and one Councillor.
25. These comments included:
 - Concern from one school regarding a new school proposed near them to meet the needs of new housing.
 - A Councillor request that consideration is given to transport and highways implications when schools are expanded or new schools are proposed.
 - A concern regarding the financial struggles faced by early years providers at present (not a consideration for this Strategy).
 - A concern (from a Parish Council) regarding the suggestion that secondary schools may be asked to host satellite provision on behalf of Special Schools.
26. Minor amendments have been made to the draft School Places Strategy to reflect the comments received and to provide further clarity where needed. The final version has been provided in Appendix 1 with this report.

Overview and Scrutiny Engagement

27. The Children's Select Committee requested a briefing on the Strategy rather than receiving it at a meeting. This briefing was held on 17 July 2023.

Safeguarding Implications

28. Although there are no direct safeguarding implications arising from the adoption of the School Places Strategy, this a key document to ensure that children can access education in their local community. Insufficient school places, meaning that children would be without a school place, would create a safeguarding risk.

Public Health Implications

29. The built and natural environment is a key environmental determinant of health and wellbeing. Well planned locations for school places, particularly new schools, helps to encourage active travel which can lead to an increase in physical activity levels and improve physical and mental wellbeing. Active travel can also reduce over reliance on motorised transport, contributing to improved air quality and a reduction in road injuries.

Procurement Implications

30. There are no direct procurement implications relating to the adoption of the School Places Strategy. Any future procurement will be undertaken in line with corporate procedures following Cabinet approval to commence individual schemes.

Equalities Impact of the Proposal

31. The aim of the Strategy is to ensure a sufficient supply of school places for all. The Local Authority has a duty and responsibility to provide sufficient school places both in terms of mainstream and specialist provision to meet demand arising from all areas of the community including in response to inward migration. The strategy has also considered the needs arising from military moves into the county.
32. Through detailed planning and effective design, officers continue to ensure that all school building improvements promote and deliver equality of opportunity and access to facilities.
33. The Equalities Act 2010 states that reasonable adjustments must be taken into consideration in design. By adopting compliant design principles, and ensuring all schemes meet Building Regulations it should be possible to eradicate disability access difficulties and discrimination in new school buildings. This will be a fundamental objective of any rationalisation and/or expansion works carried out at existing school properties.

Environmental and Climate Change Considerations

34. The fundamental aim in planning school places is to provide places near to where children live, to meet parental preferences as far as possible; to locate schools at the heart of their communities and to minimise travel to school distances. Thus preventing car journeys and promoting active travel.
35. In future, any new schools and significant school expansions will be designed and built to be carbon neutral in operation although it must be recognised that this will significantly increase the cost of providing new schools.

Workforce Implications

36. There are no direct workforce implications associated with the adoption of the School Places Strategy.

Risks that may arise if the proposed decision and related work is not taken

37. There are no direct risks appertaining to this report, however it is essential that we put in place a strategy that has full engagement and agreement of stakeholders to enable

school places to be effectively planned in the future. Without an adopted strategy there will not be an agreed strategic direction for the provision of school places nor an agreed set of policies and principles to guide future work.

Risks that may arise if the proposed decision is taken and actions that will be taken to manage these risks.

38. There are no identified risks for adopting the School Places Strategy. If the Strategy is adopted this would help mitigate risks identified on the Corporate Risk Register, notably "Implement a school places strategy creating a good match between supply and demand for places" (risk code ES27), but also "Failure to meet the statutory duty to provide education to all" (risk code ES18).

Financial Implications

39. As previously explained, the strategy does not seek approval for schemes nor allocation of funding. It simply provides a strategic view on where new schools or expansions may be required in the short, medium and long term. Cabinet approval to allocate funding for any new projects will be sought through the annual report on the School Capital Programme. It is anticipated that new projects will be funded by section 106 funding where demand is caused by new housing, or through the DfE Basic Need grant.
40. The size of the revenue budget for distribution to all schools is determined by pupil numbers. This means that where pupil numbers reduce, schools may have insufficient budget to maintain standards and retain and recruit teachers, particularly head teachers. By taking out surplus places the LA can ensure effective overall provision within an area and within the school system.

Legal Implications

41. There are no specific legal implications from the implementation of this strategy although its adoption will help the Council to ensure it is able to meet the statutory duties to provide sufficient school places and promote parental choice.

Options Considered

42. Whilst there is no legal requirement for the Council to have a School Places Strategy it is considered good practice to do so. Having an up-to-date plan in place provides schools and the local community with information on how the Council will ensure an affective balance between the supply and demand for school places. The 2017 – 2022 strategy is now out of date and therefore replacing it with a new version is considered as the only option.

Conclusions

43. The School Places Strategy 2023- 2027 is therefore commended to Cabinet for approval.

Helean Hughes (Director, Education & Skills)

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30 August 2023

Appendices

Appendix 1 - School Places Strategy 2023 - 2027

Background Papers

None