

Additional Government Funding for Extra SEN School Places

I have received a letter from Helen Watson, Interim Director of Children's Services at Wokingham Borough Council regarding extra Government funding for additional SEN school places in Wokingham.

I welcome the extra money the Government is providing to Wokingham to make additional provision for special educational needs. The Borough does need extra school places to meet demand and this expansion should take care of the requirements of families.

Dear Mr Redwood

Wokingham Borough Council was successful in securing funding from the Department for Education (DfE) to build two new and much needed special schools in the borough. As you are aware, the schools are proposed to be located at Rooks' Nest Farm in Finchampstead and it is hoped will open by September 2026.

The original plans for the schools called for each school to have 100 places, but after consideration of a business case the DfE have agreed to both school's capacity being increased to 120 places. Obviously, this is fantastic news for the Borough and is worth around £5m to £8m additional capital funding and the opportunity to support 40 more of our most vulnerable young people in their own community. There were two key reasons for this request:

1. Demand for Special School Places

The original capacity of the two planned special schools was based on pre covid data but post lockdown the demand for special school places in Wokingham continues to increase rapidly. In the last five years, the number of children with Special Educational Needs & Disability (SEND) has increased by 20% to 25%.

This is leading to several problems, including:

- Children with SEND are being placed in schools outside of the borough, which can be disruptive to their education and social life.
- Children with SEND are being placed in mainstream schools, where they may not receive the support, they need.

The benefits of increasing the size of the schools include:

- Improved educational outcomes for children with SEND.

- Reduced cost of transport for children with SEND.
- Reduced pressure on mainstream schools.
- Increased choice and flexibility for parents.
- Increased capacity to meet the growing demand for special school places.
- Reduced disruption to children's education and social life.
- Increased access to specialist support for children with SEND.
- Reduced financial hardship for parents of children with SEND.

2. Improved operation and financial viability of the schools.

Working with our existing special schools and Trusts in the area, it is clear long term financial viability of the school's increases with size. The two key considerations being class sizes and the proportions of fixed and variable costs to operate the schools.

In terms of class size for the cohorts we are looking to support, namely Severe Learning Difficulties (SLD) and higher level Social Emotional Mental Health Needs (SEMH), classes of 8 or 9 represent the sweet spot in balancing staffing resources with a manageable group, 120 places allow for this across all age groups in both schools.

I'm sure you will agree this is fantastic news for the Borough.

Yours sincerely

Helen Watson
Interim Director of Children's Services