

Education Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Mainstream School Pupil Place Planning

Wards All

Service: Admissions & Education Sufficiency Team, Access Service

Portfolio: Councillor Kaur

1. Aim

The aim of this report is to provide the Education Scrutiny and Overview Committee with an update on:

- School Place Planning – Mainstream Primary and Secondary Schools
- Free School Development

2. Recommendations

That the Education Overview and Scrutiny Committee:

- notes falling birth rates impacting on surplus places in primary schools which will mean a requirement for conversations with schools about possibly reducing their Published Admission Number (PAN), or alternatives, to ensure a school does not become financially unsustainable.
- may require a further report on primary places in Spring or Summer term.
- notes the positive working to meet the forecasted demand for places with our secondary schools.
- considers the contents of this report and decides whether any further information or updates are required.

3. Report detail

The Council has a statutory duty to ensure there are sufficient school places for resident children who want a school place. A local authority has a general duty, under section 14 of the Education Act 1996, to ensure that there are available, in its area, sufficient schools 'in number, character and equipment to provide for all pupils the opportunity of appropriate education'.

To meet its statutory responsibilities Walsall Council needs to ensure it understands where the pressures on school places will come from. These pressures include changes in the population, housing developments, and cross border migration.

The projections of future demand for school places are based on birth data sourced from the Office of National Statistics, historical pupil retention data from the school census, pupil yield from housing developments obtained from the council's planning department and inward and outward migration data.

For mainstream pupil place planning purposes, the borough has been divided into planning areas. There are 11 primary planning areas and 4 secondary planning areas. These areas were drawn up taking account of ward boundaries, geographical features (such as major roads and housing developments), and patterns from historical school admissions data. (See Appendix A & B)

In order to plan pupil places effectively the Council must be open and transparent in communicating the details on the pressures on school places in each planning area. The Council must also manage expectations and avoid any adverse impact on schools regarding school development proposals. When new capacity is needed, it is important to establish guidelines to ensure that this new capacity is provided appropriately and in the right place:

- We should seek to meet demand locally to allow children a school place within a reasonable walking distance from their home.
- Our planning of school places should reflect our school improvement strategy: we should work to make all schools good or outstanding. When seeking to expand schools, we should favour the expansion of schools where there is proven demand and well-established and successful leadership and management at a good or outstanding school.
- We should consider the impact of any changes on the viability and standards at existing schools. Where necessary we should work with schools to provide optimum forms of entry appropriate to the capacity of the school site and the level of demand for that school. On occasions, over time, it may be appropriate to reduce the capacity of some schools as others grow in size.
- The guidelines set out above will need to be balanced against the need to make best use of scarce capital resources and the physical practicalities of available sites.

The Local Authority adopts an annual cycle to school organisation and place planning, linked to the Department for Education School Capacity (SCAP) survey for mainstream schools. This survey is submitted in July each year and comprises four parts:

- capacity of schools
- forecasts of pupil numbers per national curriculum year group by planning area
- additional places due to be created by planning area
- place planning commentary by planning area of local circumstances e.g. migration, changes of school category

The school place planning service prepares and submits this survey and its component parts, and during the yearly planning cycle updates its core data including changes to school capacity data following alterations and expansion of the school estate, planning department data on housing completions in each planning area, school census numbers and school admission application numbers and preferences.

The outcome of the validated and moderated submission by the DfE is an allocation of funding known as basic need funding. This capital grant is allocated

to all LAs who have a forecasted demand for places above their existing capacity to help in meeting the statutory duty in making sure there are enough school places for children in our area.

3.1 Primary Sufficiency

School place planning forecasts must be agile and robust and will need to align to the Council’s wider housing and regeneration plans and those of our neighbouring local authorities to ensure the impacts of new housing developments and cross border movement of pupils continues to be sufficiently planned for.

The table below shows the projected number of Reception places required against the capacity in terms of Published Admission Number (PAN) for Walsall as a whole.

Measure	Sep-25	Sep-26	Sep-27	Sep-28
PAN	3937	3937	3937	3937
Projected Intake	3465	3433	3447	3433
Surplus/(Shortfall)	472	504	490	504
Surplus %	12%	12.8%	12.4%	12.8%

Planning a sufficiency of school places requires a balance between two conflicting objectives. The first is to provide enough places to meet need along with a margin to allow some exercise of parental preference; the second is to ensure that there is not an excess of places overall or in any school or planning area. A working surplus across the whole borough however is necessary to ensure there are sufficient places for in-year admissions and an ability to meet parental preference.

Falling birth rates suggest that there will be a requirement for conversations with schools about possibly reducing their Published Admission Number, or alternatives, to ensure a school does not become financially unsustainable.

Work within the school place planning team is ongoing to develop a plan to ensure that schools remain financially sustainable during the years that this reduction is showing. This work has been communicated to primary schools through the Primary, Nursery and Special (PNS) head teachers’ group and further conversations are being communicated with schools at planning area level.

A further report on the outcome of the conversations with primary schools and any proposed changes to admissions numbers for future years can be brought back to the committee in the Spring or Summer term if requested.

3.3 Secondary Sufficiency

As part of the SCAP submission this summer, the school place planning team has revised the forecasted model based on the variances in the in/out of borough demands. The submitted SCAP model, therefore shows a forecasted shortfall of 315 Year 7 places against the schools published admission numbers for September 2025.

The current forecasting model for secondary pupil places for Year 7 intakes shows the following:

Measure	Sep-25	Sep-26	Sep-27	Sep-28	Sep-29	Sep-30
PAN	3743	3743	3743	3743	3743	3743
Projected Intake	4058	4051	4138	4151	3946	4160
Surplus/Shortfall	-315	-308	-395	-408	-203	-417
Surplus %	-8.40%	-8.20%	-10.60%	-10.90%	-5.40%	-11.10%

Future projections are reviewed regularly based on the October census information, and on-time applications for school places to ensure the forecasted model is as accurate as possible with known information.

The expected shortfall of places across the Local Authority over the coming years is significant, therefore additional capacity is needed across the borough to ensure sufficient places are available.

Through ongoing conversations with schools and academy trusts/governing bodies, additional places have been secured for September 2025.

To date, 10 schools (shown in green in the table below) have offered an additional 169 places without requiring any works to be undertaken at the site.

Agreed PAN uplifts – No capital works required					
Planning Area	School	Base PAN	Uplift	Total Admission Number	Offering uplifts with no capital works since
1	Brownhills School	150	17	167	Pre-September 2019
	Shire Oak Academy	270	30	300	Pre-September 2019
	TOTAL PA1	420	47	467	
2	Aldridge School - An Academy	270	15	285	September 2022
	St Francis of Assisi Catholic Technology College	180	15	195	Pre-September 2019
	The Streetly Academy	260	10	270	Pre-September 2019
	Barr Beacon School	252	9	261	September 2021
TOTAL PA2	962	49	1011		
3	Joseph Leckie Academy	240	20	260	Pre-September 2019
	Blue Coat Church of England Academy	150	10	160	September 2022
	Grace Academy Darlaston	180	40	220	September 2022
	TOTAL PA3	570	70	640	
4	Bloxwich Academy	180	3	183	Pre-September 2019
	TOTAL PA4	180	3	183	
GRAND TOTAL		2132	169	2301	

Following the Cabinet paper in September 2024, both Pool Hayes Academy and West Walsall Academy are currently in the process of completing the works at their schools to provide a combined 80 places per year.

In addition, the September Cabinet paper approved design feasibility studies for expansions at Willenhall EACT (up to 90 places per year) and Ormiston Sheffield Academy (30 places per year). Based on this approval, following conversations with both schools, they have agreed to support the demand for places for September 2025 whilst the feasibility study works are completed.

A total of up to 339 additional places have therefore been secured for September 2025.

It is positive that the forecasted demand for places has been secured with the support of several secondary schools. It would be beneficial to secure a 'planning' tolerance to allow for some additional migration impacts of in/out of borough preferences.

Officers in the school place planning team are continuing to engage with secondary schools to secure additional places if they are needed for allocation of school places on 01 March 2025.

Schools will exceed the Published Admission Number (PAN) for September 2025 to admit additional pupils into the cohort – the additional places offered will allow more pupils to secure one of their preferences for school admission and lead to less pupils being offered a non-preference school which will reduce admission appeals and home to school transport assistance for those pupils offered a place at alternative schools.

Secondary Free School

The Windsor Trust applied to the DfE to open a new secondary school in Walsall as part of Wave 12 round of applications and was approved to open by the Secretary of State in April 2017. At that time the project, the 'Swift Free School' moved to 'pre-opening stage'.

Windsor Academy Trust currently has fifteen schools – seven primary schools and eight secondary schools. Two of the primary schools are in Walsall (Goldsmith Primary and Rivers Primary); the remaining schools are in Dudley, Staffordshire and Sandwell. The Trust has recently opened a new Free School in Sandwell, the Windsor Olympus Academy.

The approved DfE application is for a mainstream secondary phase school with a proposed capacity of 1150 pupils (900 secondary places in years 7-11, plus 250 places in post 16)

As part of the pre-opening stage the DfE had to find an appropriate site within the Walsall North area to meet the forecasted demand for additional places.

Despite DfE and its associated organisation, 'Located' attempting to find an appropriate private sector site in Walsall, none were found. At this stage, the Swift project was at risk of being removed due to site un-availability.

Given the forecasted demand for school places, dialogue between the DfE and LA, led to a number of LA owned sites being put forward for consideration to the DfE.

The DfE delivery unit carried out a range of desk top due diligence on the LA sites and due to a range of factors including location, site size, highway/access issues, overhead cables, etc the DfE have focussed their work on a preferred site – known locally as the ‘former Reedswood Golf Course site’

The project is currently scheduled to deliver the new school in its permanent accommodation in time for September 2027 intake.

The free school delivery team have a licence from the LA (corporate landlord) to undertake surveys on the site including:

- Air Quality
- Arboriculture
- Archaeology
- Asbestos
- Ecological
- Flood Risk
- Heritage
- Intrusive Geotechnical
- Noise and Acoustics
- Topographical and underground utilities
- Transport

The DfE delivery team advise the high-level programme they are working to as follows:

- Feasibility complete and approved by DFE – end December 2024
- Decision to proceed from feasibility to design solution – February 2025
- Start of procurement – March 2025
- Contractor appointed – May 2025
- Planning submission – June 2025
- Start on site – November 2025
- Completion – June/July 2027

Officers continue to engage the DfE (delivery team and regional directorate team) on a two weekly basis to discuss a range of delivery and operational processes, timescales and issues arising.

Working alongside the delivery of the permanent school, all parties (LA, DfE and Windsor Academy Trust) are aware of the wider sufficiency implications the

delayed delivery of the Free School has in Walsall. All parties are keen to ensure that the Free School can open for the 2027 academic year and the ongoing engagement meetings have a focussed agenda item on this.

The next stage is to wait for the feasibility report on the permanent site, due end of December 2025

4. *Financial information*

Any capital costs arising from works required will be funded from DfE grant funding Basic Need.

5. *Reducing Inequalities*

It is of crucial importance to the Council's strategic objectives that the young People of Walsall can access the right provision to meet their need to achieve the appropriate qualifications, progressing to employment and / or training and to make a positive contribution within the Borough in the future.

6. *Decide*

The Committee may decide to note the current position and request further information or assurance if necessary.

7. *Respond*

Any recommendations made by the Committee will be assessed against the Access planned work and performance board programmes.

8. *Review*

The work of the Admissions & Education Sufficiency Team is subject to constant monitoring and assessment via the Children's Services Performance Board process.

Contact Officer(s)

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