

KENT COUNTY COUNCIL – RECORD OF DECISION

DECISION TO BE TAKEN BY:

Cabinet Member for Education and Skills

DECISION NO:

25/00030

For publication**Key decision: YES**

- *It involves expenditure or savings of maximum £1m*

Subject Matter / Title of Decision

Proposed Additional Pathway of The Oaks Specialist College

Decision:

As Cabinet Member for Education and Skills, I agree to:

- (i) Approve the allocation of £2,010,300 from the Children Young People and Education Services High Needs Capital Budget to fund the permanent expansion of The Oaks Specialist College by 10 places from September 2025.
- (ii) Delegate authority to the Director of Infrastructure, Strategic and Corporate Services in consultation with the General Counsel and Director of Education enter into any necessary contracts or other legal as required to implement this decision.
- (iii) authorise the Director of Infrastructure, Strategic and Corporate Services to be the nominated Authority Representative within the relevant agreements and to enter into variations as envisaged under the contracts.

Reason(s) for decision:

Within the North West Kent area the current pathway for young people aged 19 with complex medical or Physical Disabilities leaving a state maintained special school such as Valence, Milestone and Nexus is often to college provision outside of the county. This is because there is not post 19 provision locally within Kent that can meet the physical needs of this cohort and offer a Pre-Entry to Level 2 curriculum.

The out of county settings are a significant distance from home, including in Hampshire and Surrey, with the majority of places being residential, if the setting were closer to the learners' homes then residential provision would not be required for education or social care reasons. Residential placements not only require young people to move away from their existing support network when there is not an identified social care need for them to be in a residential setting, but these places also come at a significant financial cost. The average cost per learner in 2024 to KCC for those within this cohort was £141,750, with some in excess of £200,000 per annum.

Establishing an education pathway for these young people within the area where they live would prevent the need for young people to move away from their existing support networks, change their medical services and as it would not require residential accommodation, cost significantly less to the County Council than those placements which do.

The Proposal

The Oaks Specialist College is a Special Post 16 Institution (SPI) based in Tonbridge that was established in 2018 and is a successful provision for 18 to 25 year olds with learning difficulties. The college offers a range of functional and accredited qualifications. The college offers a Pre-Entry, Level 1 and Level 2 curriculum pathway, with each learners' study programme being personalised so they can achieve their potential. All learners participate in activities relating to preparing for adulthood, independence and work related activities.

It represents an appropriate placement for a significant number of learners, however the college does not currently have the physical ability to accommodate learners from the local cohort that have more complex physical disabilities; it does however have a strong desire to do so.

It is proposed that The Oaks establish an additional pathway for young people with more complex Physical Disabilities. To do so a building designed to meet the needs of the cohort would be constructed.

The proposed building would contain:

- Classroom
- Workshop
- Kitchen/ Life Skills Studio
- Media/Virtual Room
- Hygiene Room
- Therapy Room
- Care Suite
- Wheelchair Charging Area
- Office and ancillary spaces

The building would be highly accessible and all areas equipped with ceiling track hoists. It is proposed to be constructed alongside the College's buildings at Cage Green Road, Tonbridge. The freehold of the land on which the college operates is owned by Kent County Council and a lease is in place with the college as a tenant; the proposed additional building will be incorporated into the lease and will also be on KCC owned land.

The Oaks would manage the construction of the build and KCC provide a capital grant of £2,010,300 to The Oaks, pursuant to a legally enforceable development agreement. The Oaks has demonstrable experience with delivering capital projects of a similar size, this included extensive refurbishment of one building and construction of another in the last 5 years.

The pathway would provide for a minimum of 10 learners; whilst the College hopes to be able to achieve up to 15 learners within the new pathway, all analysis has been undertaken using 10.

The revenue placement cost for a learner at The Oaks is in the region of £42,000, this compares to the average out of county placement for this cohort of £141,750 per learner.

Financial Implications

Capital Funding: There would be an allocation of £2,010,300 from the Children Young People and Education Services High Needs Capital Budget. This capital outlay would be used to provide The Oaks with a capital grant to accommodate a pathway for 10 additional learners that currently will need to be placed in independent out of county settings.

Revenue Funding: The cost of placing 10 learners in out of county provision is estimated to be circa £1.42 million per annum. Conversely, the comparative revenue cost of placing 10 additional learners at the Oaks in a new pathway would be around £420,000 per annum. This potentially

presents an expected ongoing annual revenue saving of circa £1m (£997k), a reduction of 70% compared to out of county residential places. The saving is predominantly expected to benefit the High Needs Block of the Dedicated Schools Grant that is currently significantly overspent. This proposal forms part of the Council's wider response in delivering the safety valve arrangement by putting in place more cost-effective education placement solutions.

Legal implications

The College would be responsible for securing all licenses and permissions, including planning permission. The College would also enter a contract with KCC setting out the conditions of spend and providing KCC with rights regarding seeking of information.

Equalities implications

An Equality Impact Assessment (EqIA) has been produced and no issues were identified in the early stage EqIA, but the assessment will be reviewed as the project continues.

Cabinet Committee recommendations and other consultation:

No consultation on the principle of the college's expansion is required, however should the proposal proceed then public consultation to support a planning application would be required to be undertaken by the college.

Any alternatives considered and rejected:

Do Nothing

The County Council currently seeks appropriate placement of young people within this cohort as the need arises each year, with institutions outside of Kent being consulted at the time of placement need. This approach could continue, it would not enable more Kent resident young people to stay in Kent, would not secure an ongoing pathway for the young people and would see high cost placements continue.

Commission Additional Pathway

The financial benefits set out above would be realised and fewer young people would be educated out of county.

Any interest declared when the decision was taken and any dispensation granted by the Proper Officer:

None



21/03/25

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signed

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date