

# Central Bedfordshire Council

01 April 2025

Executive Committee

## Ivel Valley options paper

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**The following sections of this report are exempt: -**

Report part exempt – Appendix A exempt.

**This report relates to a decision that is:** *Key*

**This report relates to a decision that is urgent/exempt from call-in: No**

## Purpose of this report

This report seeks for the Executive to make a decision as to the choice of option for the progression of Ivel Valley development.

### RECOMMENDATION(S)

The Executive is asked to:

1. Consider the information contained in the report and the options for consideration set out at Table A.
2. Approve option 1b as the preferred option for progression for the reasons as set out in the report.
3. To authorise the Director of Resources and Organisational Change, in consultation with the Director for Children's Services, the Director for Finance, the Executive Member for Children's Services, the Executive Member for Assets and the Executive Member for Finance to enter into all appropriate legal documentation, including the award and execution of contracts required in order deliver the preferred option 1b.

## Executive Summary

1. Central Bedfordshire Council has a statutory duty to ensure sufficient specialist school places for children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND). The Specialist School Place Plan (2022-2030) identifies Ivel Valley Special School as a priority due to the increasing demand for places. The initial plan proposed a new school build to expand capacity to 300 places, later revised to 330, with an initial capital allocation of £43M. However, a detailed cost estimate in June 2024 placed the total cost at £66M, creating a £23M funding shortfall. As a result, the project was paused to explore alternative solutions that could deliver the required places within the existing budget in place at that time.
2. In February 2025, Full Council agreed to increase the budget for Special School and ARPs to gross £60.313M, net £51.422M following a proposed budget amendment that was agreed. Provision for Ivel Valley is within that overall budget envelop.
3. To identify a viable and cost-effective way forward, the Council commissioned independent technical and feasibility assessments. These studies considered a range of options. A detailed assessment of these options was undertaken, evaluating factors such as financial viability, operational feasibility, and the ability to meet future demand with the preferred option being Option 1b.
4. The Executive is asked to consider the options presented, noting the financial and operational implications of each. Options requiring additional funding beyond the approved budget are not currently affordable, while the split-site model introduces logistical complexities that are likely to increase running costs whilst offering no proportional well-being or educational benefit. Option 1b is recommended as the most cost-effective solution, ensuring that 330 specialist places can be provided in a sustainable manner while optimising resources and minimising disruption. Approval of this approach will enable the Council to meet its statutory duty to provide sufficient SEND places while ensuring best use of available capital funding.

## Main body of the report

5. Central Bedfordshire Council has a statutory duty to ensure sufficient school places are available for children and young people with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND). The Council's Specialist School Place Plan (2022-2030) sets out the forecast demand for specialist provision, the current supply, and plans to address the growing need for places. Ivel Valley Special School has been identified

as a key priority within this plan due to the necessity of increasing capacity to meet the local demand.

6. Ivel Valley currently operates across multiple sites and accommodates 245 pupils. The 2022 Specialist School Place Plan initially proposed the construction of a new school to replace the current facility, increasing capacity by 55 places to 300. A subsequent revision of the plan in 2023 further increased this target to 330 places. The Council had initially allocated £43M in its capital budget to support this project. However, in June 2024, a detailed cost estimate conducted by AECOM placed the total cost at £66M, highlighting a £23M shortfall. Given this funding gap, work on the project was paused to explore alternative solutions that could meet the required places while remaining within the existing budget.
7. This process aimed at identifying feasible alternatives that could still meet the required pupil places while remaining within the available capital allocation of £43M available at that time.

### **Key Areas of Work**

8. To ensure a comprehensive review, the Council commissioned further technical and feasibility studies, engaging a Technical Advisor with expertise in Special Educational Needs provision. This work was conducted independently from the initial AECOM assessment to ensure a fresh perspective and unbiased evaluation of potential solutions.
9. The key focus areas of this work included:
  - Maximising the use of the existing infrastructure where refurbishment and new build elements could meet the required standards.
  - A site re-evaluation and an examination of alternative locations was undertaken with an assessment conducted to determine whether the land could support a mixed-use approach, including new-build elements.
  - To understand the impact on the day-to-day operation of the school, operational and logistical feasibilities were undertaken, considering different development approaches.
10. A specialist consultant was engaged to review potential traffic impacts and access issues related to different site configurations. The study recommended that all parking and drop-off areas remain off-highway to prevent congestion and ensure the safety of students, staff, and parents. To support decision-making, a high-level cost plan was developed to compare different scenarios and ensure affordability within the Council's approved capital envelope. Alternative construction approaches

were evaluated, including the feasibility of modular construction as a means of controlling costs and reducing timelines. To mitigate financial risk including contingency was built into the revised costings to account for potential unforeseen challenges.

11. A phased approach was also analysed to explore the possibility of staging construction to minimise disruption to staff and students. Additionally, the challenges of a split-site model were assessed, particularly in terms of transport logistics, access to specialist facilities, and operational management.
12. The Local Authority appointed a specialist consultant who have a proven track record of delivering SEND projects, specifically where the site is occupied during the construction phase.
13. Using their experience, they looked at the current estate (in terms of condition and available space), and a number of other available off-site pieces of land in the local area to see if the project could be delivered in a different way, but still provide the places required.
14. They looked at several different options to try and find the best value use of space, whilst minimising the disruption to the school and ensuring that the scheme could be delivered successfully. As would be normal at this stage, some assumptions have to be made pending detailed surveys and development of the design, but with this in mind a robust contingency was applied in each instance.
15. A highways specialist has looked at the number of parking spaces and drop off area required. This is to ensure that any proposal taken forward improves the overall parking drop off, allowing sufficient space for staff to park and for the forecast increase in pupils being dropped off and collected each day.
16. Following this comprehensive assessment, a revised set of options was developed, each balancing cost-effectiveness with the need to deliver the required 330 places, see Table A.
17. Stakeholder Engagement
  - Key stakeholders were originally briefed on the challenges arising from the AECOM cost estimates and the subsequent need to reassess the project scope. More recently, follow up meetings were conducted which included an overview of the types of options available and an invitation to provide operational perspectives on the feasibility of different models. This included discussion of the practical implications for school management, student experience, and staff retention. Particular attention was given to the potential impact of phased construction, split-site models, and full relocation

scenarios. Additional input was sought on how the school could function effectively during a potential refurbishment or partial rebuild.

- This engagement with key stakeholders has been an integral part of the decision-making process which gave insights into the operational, logistical, and educational implications of each proposed option. These have been used to inform the Council's recommended approach.

18. This process ultimately led to the identification of the key options presented to the Executive Table A.

19. All options can be delivered whilst the school remain in occupation. This has been demonstrated through careful phasing of works and the retention of the existing modular units in the early phases. By completing early works to provide additional parking, and then subsequently the new build elements it has been shown that the current numbers on roll can be accommodated in those buildings, and once decanted the refurbishment of the existing school can take place with any final uplift in pupil numbers not happening until all works are completed.

20. The consultants have carefully considered the disruption to external spaces also and ensured that as much displaced space as possible will be re-provided in the initial phase while works are underway. Naturally if space is confined there may be some compromises during the construction period. More detailed site logistics, vehicle movements and temporary fencing are considered in the next stage of design.

21. Each of the options (except Option 5) under consideration in Table A would create an additional 85 special school places, bringing the total places at Ivel Valley to 330:

- The 85 new places forms 20% of the total identified requirement of 415 additional places in Special School within the Specialist School Place Plan 2022–2030.
- In addition, there is an identified need for 284 new ARP placements across 14 new sites. Therefore these options represents 12% of the total 614 additional specialist school places requiring delivery over the next five years across Central Bedfordshire.

22. There is a requirement for the improvement of the Ivel Valley site and/or a viable alternative to be found. Option 1b represents a clear way to achieve that aim whilst having due regard to the needs of all children with SEND in Central Bedfordshire.

The recommended option allows for the needs of children at Ivel Valley to be met and ensures value for money whilst optimising available capital resources for the provision of SEND places to other children in Central Bedfordshire as set out in the Specialist School Place Plan 2022 – 2030.

23. The approval to progress with option 1b will be subject to any requirements in relation to consultation/publication arising from relevant legislation as referred to in paragraph 29-31 and statutory guidance.
24. When taking spending decisions, Councillors need to consider the Best Value Duty which relates to the statutory requirement for local authorities and other public bodies defined as best value authorities in [Part 1 of the Local Government Act 1999](#) (“the 1999 Act”) to “make arrangements to secure continuous improvement in the way in which its functions are exercised, having regard to a combination of economy, efficiency and effectiveness”. In practice, this covers issues such as how authorities exercise their functions to deliver a balanced budget ([Part 1 of the Local Government Finance Act 1992](#)), provide statutory services, including adult social care and children’s services, and secure value for money in all spending decisions. The recommended proposal meets the identified needs for SEN provision at the Ivel Valley site and so any proposal to spend more than the recommended option is not providing any additionality in terms of SEN placements and so would not represent best value.

**Options for consideration – Table A**

Options	Description	Cost including contingency	Cost per pupil place	Cost per new pupil place	Risks	Est. Delivery Timeline
Option 1a: Refurbishment and New Build on Existing Ivel Valley Site	<p>This option involves a significant refurbishment of the existing school alongside the construction of new teaching blocks to ensure compliance with BB104 Department for Education standards for SEND provision. It includes extensive repairs to the existing roof, replacement of mechanical and electrical systems where necessary, and refurbishment of six classrooms and storage spaces.</p> <p>External facilities would be improved with a new multi-use games area (MUGA) and sports pitch. Temporary structures, including dining areas, would be replaced, and new SEND-specific spaces such as a hydrotherapy pool, quiet rooms, and hygiene rooms would be included.</p>	£41M	£124,242	£482,352	Risks: Older parts of the school infrastructure will remain in use, and there could be operational disruption during construction.	Jan 2029

Options	Description	Cost including contingency	Cost per pupil place	Cost per new pupil place	Risks	Est. Delivery Timeline
Option <b>1b (Recommended)</b> : Combination of Refurbishment and Adjacent Site Development	<p>This approach builds upon Option 1a by expanding onto a near-by site, allowing a more cohesive layout and enhanced access.</p> <p>The expansion improves logistical aspects such as parking, drop-off zones, and future-proofing for potential growth.</p>	£46M	£139,393	£541,176	Risks: As 1a plus requires negotiation regarding the use of a near-by site.	Dec 2028
Option <b>2</b> : Split Provision Between Ivel Valley and an alternative site in Biggleswade	<p>This option involves retaining part of the existing Ivel Valley site while constructing additional facilities at an alternative site in Biggleswade.</p> <p>The split-site model would allow for some existing infrastructure to be reused while providing additional capacity through a new build.</p>	£44M	£142,424	£552,941	Risks: Managing a split-site model may introduce logistical challenges in terms of staffing, transport, and curriculum delivery.	April 2028



Options	Description	Cost including contingency	Cost per pupil place	Cost per new pupil place	Risks	Est. Delivery Timeline
Option 3: Full New Build on an alternative site in Biggleswade	<p>A completely new build on an alternative site in Biggleswade, replacing the existing Ivel Valley site entirely.</p> <p>This would provide a single build but comes with a significantly higher cost.</p>	£78M	£245,454	£952,941	<p>The high cost presents financial challenges, and additional land acquisition work may cause delays.</p> <p>This is beyond that agreed in capital budgets and so the funding source is not identified.</p>	April 2028
Option 4: Full New Build on the originally proposed site	This option involves proceeding with the originally proposed full new build at an estimated cost of £66M.	£66M	£200,000	£776,470	This costing will be time expired and so the costs are likely to have increased since this point.	

Options	Description	Cost including contingency	Cost per pupil place	Cost per new pupil place	Risks	Est. Delivery Timeline
Option 5: Do Nothing	This option involves making no changes to the existing school infrastructure.				<p>While it allows the capital budget to be reallocated elsewhere, it does not meet the identified need for additional places.</p> <p>Risks: Leaves the school in its current condition, with existing limitations; No expansion of places, worsening pressure on specialist provision; Potential long-term maintenance costs without significant improvement in facilities.</p>	

## **Reason/s for decision**

25. To ensure the Council has sufficient special school places to meet the increasing demand and that the places are in the area of need.
26. To ensure that good quality school places can be provided where they are needed and that they are provided in a cost-effective manner and are in line with the Best Value Duty in Paragraph 23.

## **Council priorities**

27. Create opportunities for all children and young people to reach their full potential.
28. Enable the right care, at the right time, in the right place for those in need of support

## **Legal Implications**

29. Section 14 of the Education Act 1996 places a duty on councils to secure sufficient primary and secondary schools to provide appropriate education for pupils in their areas. This includes the requirement for councils to have regard to the need for securing that special educational provision is made for pupils who have special educational needs. This duty extends to ensure that there are sufficient school places available to meet the increasing demand within the Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) sector. Sufficient places should reduce the volume of legal challenge for special school places.
30. Section 14A of the Education Act 1996 imposes a duty on councils to consider representations from the parents of children of compulsory school age or under, about the exercise of their functions in relation to the provision of primary and secondary schools.
31. The School Organisation (Prescribed Alterations to Maintained Schools) (England) Regulations 2013 provide requirements for councils and governing bodies when exercising their functions in respect of proposing alterations to maintained schools, including special schools, pursuant to provisions contained in Part 2 of the Education and Inspections Act 2006.

## **Financial and Risk Implications**

32. The report has choices that are inside and outside of the MTFP. It also should be considered in line with wider Specialist School Place Planning.
33. The recommended proposal 1b meets the need for the special school places in Ivel Valley but also retains sufficient budget within the overall budget envelop to progress other special education provision across the rest of the Council area.
34. The annual review of the Council's Children's Capital Programme within the MTFP, reported to Executive in February of each year, outlines the financial implications of the next five years of the rolling programme and of specific options for commissioning provision.
35. The total funding available for both Ivel Valley and also other SEND provision is a gross budget of £60.313M and a net budget of £51.422M.

## **Equalities and Fairness Implications**

36. Central Bedfordshire Council has a statutory duty to promote equality of opportunity, eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation and foster good relations in respect of nine protected characteristics: age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex and sexual orientation.

## **Biodiversity and Sustainability Implications**

37. The building options would be appraised as the biodiversity and sustainability implications as part of ongoing work.

## **Other Corporate Implications**

38. None

## **Conclusion and next steps**

39. For Executive to make a decision on one or none of the options given.

## **Appendices**

Appendix A: (exempt) (Table A including site specific information and other commercially sensitive information)

## **Background Papers**

The following background papers, not previously available to the public, were considered and are available on the Council's website:

- None

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