

Report:	EXECUTIVE
Relevant Officer:	Victoria Gent, Director of Children’s Services
Relevant Cabinet Member	Councillor Kath Benson, Cabinet Member for Young People and Aspiration
Date of Meeting:	5 February 2024

EXPANSION OF HIGHFURLONG SPECIAL SCHOOL

1.0 Purpose of the report:

1.1 To seek approval for the increased budget for the development of The Meadow site at Highfurlong School to accommodate a two-storey extension and associated facilities, to ensure sufficient local provision for children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND).

2.0 Recommendation(s):

2.1 To approve the overall project budget of £8,010,979.25 million for phase one and two of this scheme (£6,020,979.25 for phase one and £1,990,000 for phase two). The below approvals have previously been granted:

- £4.8m previously approved via EX48/2022 on 5 December 2022 [phase 1].
- £1.99m previously approved via EX48/2023 on 12 December 2023 [phase 2].

As a result, an uplift to the budget is required of £1,220,979.25.

The uplifted costs will be funded by the funds made available through the Safety Valve agreement between Blackpool Council and the Department for Education previously approved via EX4/2023 on 23 January 2023.

3.0 Reasons for recommendation(s):

3.1 Planning applications have been approved (ref: 23/0607) to develop The Meadow on Garstang Road West to accommodate a two-storey extension with associated facilities and a single storey hydrotherapy centre, to ensure sufficient local provision for children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). Construction works have commenced on site and the phase 1 build is scheduled for completion in June 2024.

Highfurlong Special School reached a cohort of over 110 students in the summer term 2022, which is three times the number five years ago. The growing number of pupils in special schools is in part as a result of changes in legislation introduced in 2014, but also due to children surviving with more complex medical needs than historically was the case.

Despite additional building works being undertaken during that time to create extra space at the school, the capacity of the existing building is now over stretched. An independent school capacity report dated March 2022 found that Highfurlong's building has a deficit of space equivalent to four classrooms when compared against current pupil numbers. The school has now saturated its existing footplate and is no longer able to effectively deliver complimentary curriculum activities such as design technology, music and life skills, despite winning the prestigious School of the Year award in 2021.

The Local Authority has a statutory duty to ensure sufficient suitable places are available for all pupils across the town. The proposed expansion at Highfurlong School would help to ensure that Blackpool Council can meet the needs of children with complex physical and medical disabilities.

3.2 Is the recommendation contrary to a plan or strategy adopted or approved by the Council? No

3.3 Is the recommendation in accordance with the Council's approved budget? Yes

4.0 Other alternative options to be considered:

4.1 If additional provision is not provided the Council would have to rely on Out of borough SEND provision, including associated transport costs, which is both expensive and not always in the best interests of children and their families.

5.0 Council priority:

5.1 The relevant Council priority is: "Communities: Creating stronger communities and increasing resilience".

6.0 Background information

6.1 Highfurlong Special School benefited from a single storey infill extension in the summer of 2021, which enabled it to continue to meet the needs of their increasing pupil numbers. The school has used its existing space as flexibly as possible and has now reached saturation point of their existing footprint due to the nature of the physical requirements and associated equipment of the current cohort.

- 6.2 Land known as “The Meadow” currently sits unused on the site due to significant level differences. Phase One will see the two-storey extension built, with a covered walkway created to link to the existing site via the top floor of the new building. The ground floor of the new building will comprise facilities for post-16 students, alongside a new kitchen that will serve the whole school (currently facilities are shared with Aspire Academy). There will also be a community café at the front of the school designed for post 19 students to gain valuable employment skills and increase the commercial viability of the venture through improved public access from the main road. The upper floor will comprise classrooms and ancillary spaces for secondary aged pupils. Under the development proposals the existing building will house primary pupils.
- 6.3 Following a tender exercise in early 2023 via the Procure NW Framework, Conlon Construction returned the most economically advantageous tender. Due to inflationary pressures in the construction market because of material shortages and the consequential impacts of the global pandemic, the best value tender price exceeded the project budget. A value engineering exercise was undertaken to reduce costs, however this still resulted in a budget deficit. Further cost reduction measures would have significantly impacted upon the project achieving its objectives. Following the award of the Department for Education Safety Valve funding, Conlon Construction were appointed for the construction of the phase 1 development. Construction works commenced on site in July 2023 and are progressing well.
- 6.4 The report to Executive on 23rd January 2023 (EX4/2023) on the proposed Safety Valve agreement between Blackpool Council and the Department for Education expansion scheme contained a confidential appendix setting out the projected costs of the scheme, together with a schedule of the funding streams to be used towards phase 1 of the scheme. Given that local authorities have to demonstrate that all of the High Needs Provision Capital Allocations have been fully committed in their Safety Valve capital bids, an adjustment was proposed to the funding makeup of the £4.8 million budget. This report seeks to further clarify the funding streams for both phase 1 and phase 2 of the Highfurlong School Extension and demonstrate the total cost of the project.

- 6.5 Does the information submitted include any exempt information? Yes

Appendix 8a is not for publication by virtue of Paragraph 3 of Part 1 of Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972. It is considered on balance that the public interest would not be served by publishing information at this stage, as this information would undermine the Council’s position in future negotiations.

7.0 List of Appendices:

- 7.1 Appendix 8a – Financial considerations (exempt)

8.0 Financial considerations:

- 8.1 See exempt information at Appendix 8a, to the Executive report.
- 8.2 Children's Services had allowed a budget envelope of £4.8 million for phase one of the scheme. The scheme is being funded from a combination of education capital, including Basic Need, High Needs Provision Capital Allocations, School Condition Allocations and additional funding as part of the Safety Valve agreement with the Department for Education. The initial budget was approved by Executive on 5 December 2022. Due to an increase in building costs, this phase will now cost £6,020,979.25, which requires additional approval from Executive of £1,220,979.25. The extra funding has been provided through an additional allocation from the Department for Education as part of the Safety-Valve funding for local authorities with a Dedicated Schools Grant deficit. The Department for Education provided Blackpool Council with an additional £6.2 million of funding for capital investment in the school estate. The Safety Valve agreement between Blackpool Council and the Department for Education was previously approved via EX4/2023 on 23 January 2023.

9.0 Legal considerations:

- 9.1 The procurement position and terms of funding to be reviewed to ensure continued compliance with the Council's procurement process and the funding terms in view of the additional budget spend.

10.0 Risk management considerations:

- 10.1 Not progressing the proposed expansion would mean the local authority would be unable to meet its statutory duty to ensure that sufficient suitable places are available for all pupils across the town. This would create further pressure on the High Needs budget, as places would need to be secured in more costly independent special schools outside of Blackpool.

11.0 Equalities considerations and the impact of this decision for our children and young people:

- 11.1 Highfurlong Special School caters for the needs of children with special educational needs and disabilities. The expansion scheme will ensure that the needs of more children can be appropriately met in local provision, reducing the need for lengthy transport journeys, and enabling children to be part of their local community.

12.0 Sustainability, climate change and environmental considerations:

- 12.1 The scheme at Highfurlong Special School is being developed in line with Blackpool Council's Climate Change Declaration. The scheme will include the provision of air source heat pumps in lieu of conventional gas boilers. Provision will also be made for a number of solar panels to be installed. The scheme is also required to achieve a BREEAM rating of very good.

13.0 Internal/external consultation undertaken:

13.1 A planning application was approved on 4 December 2023 (ref: 23/0607) to develop The Meadow on Garstang Road West to accommodate a two-storey extension with associated facilities and a single storey hydrotherapy centre, to ensure sufficient local provision for children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND)

14.0 Background papers:

14.1 Planning application 23/0607 is available on Blackpool Council's website at [Simple Search \(blackpool.gov.uk\)](https://blackpool.gov.uk)

15.0 Key decision information:

15.1 Is this a key decision? No

15.2 If so, Forward Plan reference number:

15.3 If a key decision, is the decision required in less than five days? No

15.4 If **yes**, please describe the reason for urgency:

16.0 Call-in information:

16.1 Are there any grounds for urgency, which would cause this decision to be exempt from the call-in process? No

16.2 If **yes**, please give reason:

TO BE COMPLETED BY THE HEAD OF DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE

17.0 Scrutiny Committee Chairman (where appropriate):

Date informed:

Date approved:

18.0 Declarations of interest (if applicable):

18.1

19.0 Summary of Discussion:

19.1

20.0 Executive decision:

20.1

21.0 Date of Decision:

21.1

22.0 Reason(s) for decision:

22.1

23.0 Date Decision published:

23.1

24.0 Alternative Options Considered and Rejected:

24.1

25.0 Executive Members in attendance:

25.1

26.0 Call-in:

26.1

27.0 Notes:

27.1