

## School place planning case studies

### Oxfordshire County Council

Oxfordshire has seen demand for primary places rise by three per cent a year on average, up to 10 per cent in urban areas. The council created just over 4,000 new places between 2009 and 2013.

The demand has not always been predictable, as urban areas have been greatly affected by inward migration and denser occupation of housing. Some emergency action has been necessary such as creating bulge classes, even on occasion where this was opposed by the governors. Following five years of such measures, school capacity growth is now keeping up with population growth.

The extra provision has mainly been through whole- or half-form entry expansion, accommodated in extensions or by bringing existing spaces into use. A secondary school has been extended to create a new primary, and there are two new free schools.

### Free schools/academies

Oxfordshire has a proactive approach to free schools and works with applicants to influence their location. A free school opened in Oxford in 2013, and the council has a good relationship with the provider.

In a less successful situation, a free school opened in a village location alongside a planned development with, as yet, no housing. The developers refused the council's request for Section 106 funding for a new-build, one-form-entry primary and a contribution towards the council-approved local secondary school strategy. Instead, they have opened a free school, converting buildings into a two-form entry primary and a secondary school.

This has created surplus capacity in the wrong place, undermining existing schools and strategic planning. The Department for Education could not confirm that the school was opening until a day before term began, so the council had to double-allocate the pupils, creating uncertainty for schools and parents. In another case, a primary academy received EFA funding to double in size when the council already had expansion projects underway in that area.

### Studio schools and UTCs

Demand for secondary places will increase from 2014 in some parts of Oxfordshire. By 2019, at least 600 additional year seven places will be needed, provided through a mix of existing accommodation and extensions.

A university technical college (UTC) is opening in 2015 in an area of housing growth where the council had already secured a site for a secondary school. The UTC will provide some, but not all, of the secondary places needed. At the time the application was approved, the council had begun consultation on finding an academy provider for the planned school. The separate processes caused confusion locally. In this case, the site was large enough for co-location. However, elsewhere the council faces a similar situation with a studio school and a site too small for co-location, which is complicating the process of finding academy providers.

### Joined-up plans

Councils should be properly empowered, or at least there should be area-wide joining-up of proposals, says Barbara Chillman, service manager for pupil place planning. "We need a local plan that all parties can help shape, which is given credence when decisions are made. Without coordination, resources will be wasted at a time when the council is cutting other services."

## **Reading Borough Council**

Reading is creating 2,520 additional primary places by 2016. It began by conducting two community consultation exercises. The message was clear: people wanted quality school places local to them. Myles Milner, school services service manager, says the extra demand is concentrated in pockets of the borough. The solution has been the provision of bulge class facilities in existing school buildings, and sometimes in modular buildings.

### **Funding**

As part of its long-term strategy, Reading looked at the feasibility of different options, identified 13 schemes and bid for government funding for eight of them (one new school and seven expansions). All eight bids were successful and the council will receive a total of £19.1 million. That accounts for only 40 per cent of the actual cost, and Reading is now looking to borrow £34.5 million. While the government grant is welcome, the loan will cost around £2.5 million a year from the council's revenue funds, putting more pressure on non-statutory services. However, councillors were sympathetic to the need to meet the council's obligations around education.

Reading would like to see the introduction of three-year spending reviews so resources can be directed to the key areas of demand. It sees the two-year allocation of basic needs funding as a step in the right direction, but there is a problem with deteriorating school buildings, and longer-term funding would help to address that.

### **Secondary schools**

Another issue is how to meet the rising demand for secondary school places, which will be exhausted by 2016. The lack of control over free schools and academies is making it more difficult to plan for this. Myles suggest that there are two solutions to meeting secondary demand. One is to encourage free school applications and get the government to recognise that these must provide the right thing in the right place (one current free school application could provide six of the 16 extra secondary forms of entry needed by 2021). The other solution is to negotiate with existing schools, but most are academies so do not have any obligation to meet this demand.

### **Infrastructure**

Community consultation was the foundation of Reading's approach, but it can be difficult to balance everyone's needs. Existing schools can't necessarily cope with increased pressures such as traffic and car parking. As a unitary authority, Reading has its planning and transport planning departments under the same roof, which can be an advantage.

There is also doubt that the figures quoted by central government for the cost of projects can really be achieved. The government figures appear to be "stripped down" and don't reflect the real issues that urban authorities face in developing brownfield sites.

## **Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council**

In Sandwell, the birth rate has risen by almost 20 per cent in seven years. By 2015 an extra 25 primary school forms of entry will have been created, or over 5,000 extra places. The reception cohort of 2012 was the first big increase.

Most provision has been through school expansions plus a small number of bulge classes. Some temporary accommodation was used due to the late announcement of capital funding in 2013, but this will be replaced over time.

Sue Moore, Sandwell's school organisation manager, says the biggest single challenge is the allocation of resources on a yearly basis. This is severely restricting their ability to plan ahead, and there is an urgent need for at least a three-year allocation. "Local authorities need some certainty about what's coming over the horizon."

### **Secondary schools**

By 2023 an extra 26 secondary school forms of entry will be needed, which is 3,900 school places. However, with the focus on primary schools, the borough has no money to spend on planning for this future demand.

Sandwell believes that the school capacity return, which provides evidence to the DfE on future demand, could be used to support a three-year, or longer, allocation of resources. Secondary demand can be forecast over a long period. Earlier access to resources would mean the solutions could be more cost efficient and timely.

Sandwell closed a secondary school seven years ago due to over-provision. Re-use of that site would provide eight of the required 26 extra forms of entry. It hopes to find a provider to re-open the school, but is concerned the DfE will reject the proposal, as its guidance says councils should have all the capital monies for a project from the outset.

### **Funding**

Sue Moore says the borough is running out of solutions and space, and the options are becoming more complex and costly. "The solutions are getting more difficult, and as a result there are more objections from other schools and communities."

There are also concerns around the cost-per-place formula. For example, the highways department often asks for traffic calming measures, but this cost is not taken into account. "For most situations we have a solution. The concern is whether we can afford to deliver these solutions as they become more complex. We certainly can't do it for what they say we can per square metre."

### **Academies/free schools**

Free schools are not yet filling the gap. Sandwell expected provision in one area to increase through a new free school. However, the project was abandoned and the council had to create those places at short notice. The DfE did not say why the application had failed as it only engages with councils at approval stage, which can make planning very difficult.

Chris Ward, learning services manager, says: "The challenge to the council is to balance its school place planning responsibility with other priorities at a time of diminishing resources and rising numbers. Local authorities have to respond quickly to changing legislation as more schools opt out of council control and have greater autonomy in setting admission limits."

## London Borough of Richmond upon Thames

Back in 2008, having noted the growing demand for school places since 2005, Richmond was one of only three London boroughs to successfully bid for basic need funding for growth. This, along with other capital funding, Section 106 receipts, council reserves and borrowing, enabled it to embark on a major primary expansion programme.

Richmond has created 27 new primary forms of entry, from a base of 57, most of that since 2010 and most through straightforward expansion by one form of entry. Two schools have expanded twice, and one of them onto a third site, a former mental health facility. Two schools have been converted from three-form entry infant and junior schools into two-form entry all-through primary schools, creating a fourth form and a second geographical entry point between them.

A 'shared form of entry' system has been introduced in three Catholic primaries which couldn't expand but are located close together. A set of three community primary schools followed suit. This system groups schools to provide the extra classrooms needed for a full form of entry between them: each admits an extra form of entry every three years.

Matthew Paul, head of school place commissioning, says all these strategies have been very successful. "Close cooperation with schools is vital. No-one should underestimate the difficulties expansion can create for schools. It can be a distraction and has to be managed well."

The council has leased land on a peppercorn rent basis for a new voluntary-aided primary and secondary school and two primary free schools. Both free school providers were directed towards areas with an acute need for places. Richmond welcomes and works closely with high-quality free school providers where the provision will augment its expansion plans.

Richmond does see a problem in the design of the basic need funding formula, which provides more money for secondary places than for primary. Some London boroughs have pressure across all year groups, but in Richmond this has mainly been at key stage 1. With a primary expansion costing up to £3 million, the basic needs allocation doesn't go far. As a result, permanent expansions have been supplemented by a large number of bulge classes. One solution would be to have more schools expanded across split sites, but land here is extremely expensive.

The pressure on school places is growing. Richmond's primary schools top the league tables in England and are very attractive to parents. There is a large drop-off to the private sector, but this fluctuates. The recession reduced the size of that drop-off at a time when birth rates were growing and new housing being built.

Matthew welcomes the fact that the EFA now has a pupil place planning team and is making an effort to consult with local authorities. "Whether that will translate into allocations taking account of local circumstances remains to be seen." As in many areas, Richmond has exhausted the "easy" expansions and the remainder are more difficult and expensive – such as building an extra storey or dealing with difficult access issues.