

Scrutiny Report



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Primary Place Planning and addressing the surplus

Name of Scrutiny Committee **Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee**

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Exempt / confidential / not for publication	No
Council Plan reference	Ref number / Not in Council Plan
Wards affected	All wards / list individual wards

Purpose

To consider the challenges of planning primary school places, and what measures can be taken to address the current surplus of places.

Background

Local authorities have a statutory duty to ensure there are sufficient school places in their local area to enable all children to access a school place. The number of places offered and priority criteria of how these are allocated is determined by the admission authority for each school. Milton Keynes Council is responsible for admission arrangements for community and voluntary controlled schools which account for 49% of schools, so must work in partnership with other admission authorities (such as academies, foundation, and voluntary aided schools) in order to fulfil our statutory duty.

All admission authorities are required to comply with the national school admissions code, which is predicated on providing parental choice to promote competition as a driver to help improve outcomes for children. Local authorities are judged nationally and locally on the percentage of applicants able to secure places at their preferred schools, and the ability for children to access local provision. In addition to providing parental choice, surplus places are also required (particularly in the primary phase) to enable children moving into the area to

secure a school place; however too much surplus can cause financial and operational challenges for schools. There clearly needs to be a balance between these priorities.

Projecting the future demand for school places is extremely challenging, particularly for primary phase provision, due to the limited time between a child being born and accessing a school place. There are also a number of factors that need to be taken into consideration, which will significantly impact on and influence the number of school places which will be required in the system. Some of the main influences are detailed below. The majority of these are volatile and can change significantly from year to year.

External influences	Educational influences
Covid	Parental preferences (catchment v non catchment choice)
Brexit	Ofsted ratings
Housing Market	Schools educational structures (infant v primary v all through)*
Economics- Recession	Admission responsibilities (academies v maintained)
Global issues- Syrian/Afghan refugees/Hong Kong nationals	Grammar schools locally (importer v exporter of pupils)
Birth rates- nationally/locally	Neighbouring LAs activities- Central Beds move to 2 Tier and Bucks Council border developments impact

* 8 of the 12 schools with YR vacancies of more than 40% at the end of the coordinated process were infant schools. This potentially indicates that the infant / junior model currently may not be a popular choice for parents compared to 'all through provision'.

Despite these complexities, Milton Keynes Council has a strong track record of accurately projecting the overall demand for places, including the demand arising from new housing developments. Analysis of projections compared to the number of children applying for primary school places in recent years shows our overall projections are accurate to within 5% and to within 2% when considering admissions for the following year. Parental preference will however impact demand seen by schools at a local level.

Achieving balance with changing demand

Previously, following the great recession in 2008/9 there was a significant rise in birth rates within the established areas of Milton Keynes. This led to a need to increase the supply of school places within these established areas from 2012, which was largely achieved by expanding the number of places provided at existing schools. Since 2014/15, the birth rate within established areas of Milton Keynes has been declining which has led to a significant surplus of school places within these areas. The current vacancy position at YR is 651 places (16% surplus), and projections indicate that the YR surplus will continue to be significantly high (+16%) over the coming years with the reduction in birth rates continuing to impact the primary sector. The overall population of Milton Keynes is expected to continue to grow significantly, from ~270,00 today to at least 310,00 by 2031, in line with government growth targets, but this growth is largely projected to occur within the planned new communities across the borough.

Addressing the changing demands for school places at this time requires significant partnership working between schools and Milton Keynes Council. Our approach thus far has been via the following measures:

1. Meeting the needs of growing new communities:

- a) Needs analysis: Initial analysis at the time of the development proposal of the need for new a new school / additional places dependent on the size / make up of the proposed development and availability / accessibility of places at other local schools
- b) Monitoring of need and timing of delivery: continued liaisons with developers / planning colleagues regarding the proposed timing of new housing developments, along with any changes occurring within the accessibility of places at other local schools, which may impact the need or proposed timing of the additional school places
- c) Identifying preferred providers: Whilst all new schools are required to be academies, appointed by the Regional School's Commissioner, Milton Keynes Council seeks to provide local influence to the decision making process by running local competitions and providing a recommendation. This serves to ensure the new provider will have a clear understanding of the local needs, and a commitment to be sensitive and work in partnership with other local schools.
- d) Staged opening of new places: New schools are opened slowly, typically releasing limited places initially in key stage 1, and grown in line with the projected growth of the new communities. The need for additional places is reviewed annually and supported by growth funding, to ensure (as much as possible) that places are not filled by children from other communities and are kept available for children due to move into the new housing developments.

2. Reducing the supply in established areas:

- a) Projection sharing: Milton Keynes Council provides annual projection information to schools to support them with future planning and allowing them to begin to develop strategies to manage any future projected surpluses.
- b) Highlighting opportunity: when projection information is shared with schools, Milton Keynes Council highlights where appropriate the reduction opportunities available for schools to consider
- c) Improvement Partner engagement: Improvement Partners are copied into projection data that is circulated to schools so they are fully informed and can use the information to support with school visioning discussions
- d) Analysis & direct service engagement: following the sharing of projection data/national offer day analysis, the Sufficiency and Access Service makes direct contact with schools to recommend reductions where appropriate and explore other opportunities that can support the school (e.g. PAN caps)

Opportunities available to schools

PAN Reductions

- Reduces the number of children the school will be required to admit to at the point of entry only (i.e. YrR or Yr3)
- Admission authorities must follow a statutory process including consultation which must be carried out c.1.5 years in advance – therefore impacts future admissions.
- Protects schools from being required to admit beyond an operationally viable number during the normal co-ordinated admissions process (e.g. reducing to PAN of 30 removes risk of having to admit 31 children if PAN was 60)

PAN Caps

- Limits the number of pupils that will be admitted to a any existing year group (in Year admissions)
- Can be applied individually to particular year groups (doesn't have to be across all)
- Can't be implemented on a YR cohort until the coordinated admissions process for that year's admissions entry point is finished on 31 August and admissions move into the "in year" process.
- They are flexible and can be promptly implemented or removed by the admission authority at any time. MKC must be notified of this change, but ideally this should be done in partnership with MKC supporting the decision-making process as this may impact ability to deliver statutory duty.
- It is also important that schools remain flexible with regards to removing the cap and taking on additional children at a time of significant increased pressure for places.

Federations / Mergers

- Opportunity for schools to deliver efficiency savings by formalising relationships with other schools
- Particularly beneficial for school which already have strong links, such as local infant and junior schools which serve the same communities.
- Requires formal statutory process
- Federation is a 'lighter' process which reflects the looser alignment between schools and can be undone.
- Merger is a clear alignment to become one organisation and removes the need to apply to transfer between the two schools (e.g infant - junior transition).

School closures

- This should only be considered as a last resort as it is likely to have a significant impact on the local community and accessibility of local school places, including impact on home to school transport.
- This is a permanent reduction in school places which must follow a statutory process including consultation.

Primary reduction- progress so far

Permanent PAN reductions

A number of schools have taken steps to reduce their PAN permanently, removing 357 places so far at the point of entry to the school

Year PAN reduced for	School	No. places reduced	Liaison group
2018	Howe Park	-30	Shenley Brook End
2019	Glastonbury Thorn	-30	Denbigh
	Loughton Manor	-30	Denbigh
	Knowles	-30	Sir Herbert Leon
	Langland	-30	Milton Keynes Academy
	Emberton	-12	Ousedale
	Heelands	-30	Stantonbury
2020	Holne Chase	-15	Lord Grey
	New Chapter	-10	Milton Keynes Academy
	The Willows	-15	Milton Keynes Academy
	Germander Park	-15	Stantonbury
	Kents Hill	-30	Walton High
2021	Cold Harbour	-15	Lord Grey
	New Chapter	-10	Milton Keynes Academy
	Russell Street	-30	Radcliffe
2022	Tickford Park	-10	Ousedale
	Falconhurst	-15	Milton Keynes Academy
	Total	- 357	

PAN caps

Since the recent announcement by the Schools Adjudicator confirming the ability to implement PAN Caps for in-year admissions, the Sufficiency and Access Service has worked with 17 schools over the past 18 months to introduce PAN caps to support the current reduction in demand. So far 1,155 places have been removed from the current year groups within the primary phase (YrR-6). Below is a breakdown of the number of places removed from each year group:

Year Group	Reception	Yr1	Yr2	Yr3	Yr4	Yr5	Yr6	Total
Places Removed 'in-year'	100	145	145	250	190	180	105	1,115

More needs to be done

Given the ongoing reduction in birth rates the primary surplus will continue to remain at a significant level unless more schools reduce their YR PAN permanently and continue to implement caps where appropriate. Without consideration of permanent PAN reduction schools with a historic reduction in parental preference/projected surplus of places will continue to have the uncertainty on pupil numbers. This potentially means that every year the school will have to go through a PAN cap process which is not as conducive to long term strategic planning and viability.

With that in mind it is important that we work together to consider and agree our key principles for school place planning, and how we can work as a sector and within quadrants to continue to reduce and manage the primary surplus.

Key principles for consideration

1. “Enough” places in the system but not “too much” - How much is “enough” and should this be measured boroughwide or across particular geographical areas?
2. Should new development areas have new schools, and when is the right time to deliver them? (local community/political pressures v system (school) pressures)
3. Are current educational models still popular or appropriate: infant/junior v primary v all through models? Are there opportunities for different ways of working moving forwards?
4. Should schools with low catchment demand and low parental preference reduce PAN?
5. Should schools with high catchment demand but low parental preference reduce PAN, or wait to CAP in-year? If PAN reduction, would it be appropriate for these schools to subsequently admit over PAN on national offer day to accommodate a significant change in parental preference to accommodate catchment children at any point in the future (e.g. following changes in Ofsted judgements to that school or neighbouring schools)?
6. Should popular high performing schools which attract children from other catchment areas reduce their PANs to only cater for catchment demand? – What would be the impact on parents/families/Children Missing Education and Attendance/ outcomes for children, and how could any negative impact be mitigated?
7. Is it appropriate for schools to vertically group classes, or should PAN reductions / PAN caps be limited to multiples of 30?