

The Walnuts Children's Home

Q&A

Q What is Walnuts Children's Home?

A It's a children's home in Hazeley, in Milton Keynes. It is currently home (52 weeks of the year) to five young people and also offers a place where children and young people can go for short term overnight stays.

When it was last inspected in February 2018, the children's home was judged 'Requires improvement to be good'. The headline finding was that "the children's home is not yet delivering good help and care for children and young people. However, there are no serious or widespread failures that result in their welfare not being safeguarded or promoted".

The children's home costs around £900K a year to run. 83% of the children's home budget comes from the ring-fenced Dedicated Schools Grant and the rest, just over £150K, from the general council placement budget.

Q What is its relationship with The Walnuts School?

A They are different organisations. The school is separately inspected and registered with Ofsted. The Walnuts Children's Home shares a building with The Walnuts School. The Walnuts School has over 180 children with autism on roll. The school costs around £6M a year to run. The Headteacher of The Walnuts School used to also have responsibility for The Walnuts Children's Home, but this is not the case at the moment.

Q Why are you reviewing it?

A The SEN Code of Practice 2015 expects us to regularly monitor our structures and arrangements for children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities to ensure that they continue to be effective and deliver positive outcomes.

We're also doing it now because the permanent Headteacher has recently stepped down and this is a good time to take stock. The Walnuts School has grown a lot over recent years, and although it is doing well it has become a complex organisation on three sites, providing education for children and young people aged 4-19 years as well as a children's home and a separately registered home care service. Following

recent headteacher recruitment no suitable candidates came forward – we think a three site school with a children’s home and homecare service is perhaps too much.

Q Why is closure being proposed?

A The Walnuts Children’s Home might not be the most appropriate way to provide full time, 52 week provision. When originally built it was designed to be a residential boarding school but many of the facilities are shared – for example the outdoor space and dining facilities are used by both the school and the children’s home. We think this blurs the boundaries between the school and the children’s home, limiting young people’s experiences and the making preparing for adulthood difficult.

It’s also quite expensive to run which means that the schools ring-fenced special educational needs budget is being put under pressure to fund it.

Q What will happen to the young people living there?

We will always do our best to support children and young people who are in care to live locally. If it was agreed then the proposal would be to close The Walnuts Children’s Home at the end of the summer term in 2019 and we would work very closely with young people and their families to find alternative placements that meet their needs. It’s important to remember changes to placements happen anyway – for example when children reach 18 or their needs change.

Q What about the targeted, short term stayover provision?

A The Walnuts School targeted provision is currently only accessed by a very small number of children and young people each term – currently there are four Milton Keynes young people using the provision. We think that the current offer is not the most effective or flexible approach to providing short term targeted interventions to children, young people and their families. We will want to look at developing Furze House, which can provide short term placements and other fostering options as well as developing a family support outreach offer in partnership with the school.

Q Is this just a savings exercise?

A We don’t think that the children’s home makes the most efficient use of resources and the budget pressures linked to The Walnuts Children’s Home are an issue, with the school’s budget having to support the children’s home budget.

It’s important to say the council has not reduced the budget, or has any plans to do so, in this area. Any financial benefits to closing The Children’s Home would be returned to the local schools budget.

Q When will a decision be made?

A We've launched an early consultation – we don't have to do this by law but think it's the right thing to do. If at the end of the eight week early consultation we proceed then there will be a formal consultation process in the autumn – which will involve a delegated decision being taken by the responsible cabinet member.

We're keen to hear as many views as possible and to learn what people think about these proposals. As part of this consultation, there will be two public information events where these issues can be explored in greater detail with managers from Milton Keynes SEND Team and with The Walnuts School Leadership Team.

The first one is on Wednesday 27 June 2018 at The Walnuts School, Admiral Drive, Hazeley, MK8 0PU at 5.00 to 7.00pm. The second is on Thursday 5 July 2017 also at The Walnuts School from 12.30 to 2.30pm. Alternatively, you can go online and complete a response form at our website to tell us what you think. This early consultation will end on 10 August 2018.