

Place and Resources Scrutiny Committee

16 November 2021

Former St Mary's School in Shaftesbury

Acquisition

For Review and Consultation

Portfolio Holder: Cllr A Parry, Children, Education, Skills and Early Help

Local Councillor(s):

Executive Director: T Leavy, Executive Director of People - Children

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Report Status: Public

Recommendation:

That the committee note the information provided in this report.

Reason for Recommendation:

This report provides an overview of the acquisition of the former St Mary's School site, near Shaftesbury, to become the Dorset Centre of Excellence, which is to be a 280 place Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) school.

1. Executive Summary

- 1.1 On the 8th December 2020 Dorset Council Cabinet considered the Business Case to approve the final bid to acquire land and property and assets at the former St Mary's School site in Shaftesbury, moving to exchange and complete on the purchase assuming the final bid was accepted by the Administrators for the former school.
- 1.2 The Dorset Council Cabinet report sought agreement to conduct a statutory consultation on a range of options for the use of the site, to include but not be limited to educational provision.
- 1.3 Following this consultation, a revised business case was considered by Cabinet at their meeting on 29th April 2021, which, taking into account the outcome of the consultation, considered the use of the site as an

independent special school for children and young people of Dorset and the longer-term vision.

2. Financial Implications

- 2.1 Included in the exempt Cabinet report for the meeting on the 8th December 2020 was a reference to a budget requirement needed to purchase the site and then undertake works to make it compliant and suitable for use as educational provision that is compliant with Ofsted requirements.

3. Well-being and Health Implications

- 3.1 Not used

4. Climate implications

- 4.1 The buildings date from the late 19th century to the 21st century, however despite appearances, it is not a historic building. There are a considerable number of modern classroom buildings which are more energy efficient.
- 4.2 The site aims to operate in an economic and carbon efficient way, using low carbon fuels and self-sufficient methods of heating and lighting. In addition, the site is self-sufficient in terms of water provision.
- 4.3 A benefit of increasing specialist school provision for Dorset children will be a reduction in the distances children and young people travel both within and out of county to receive similar provision elsewhere.

5. Risk Assessment

- 5.1 Having considered the risks associated with this decision, the level of risk has been identified as:
Current Risk: Medium
Residual Risk: Medium

6. Equalities Impact Assessment

- 6.1 Equalities Impact Assessments were undertaken for the Dorset Council Cabinet reports.

7. Appendices

- 7.1 None,

8. Background Papers

- 8.1 Cabinet 8 December 2020 – Provision for Dorset Children – Business case.
- 8.2 Cabinet, 29 April 2021 – St Mary's Shaftesbury.

9. Background

- 9.1 The exempt Cabinet paper reviewed in December 2020, set out options for use of the former St Mary's school site, including the councils preferred option (subject to consultation) of the establishment of an Independent Special School.

- 9.2 The other options for use of the site identified at that time were –
- Centre for Respite Care, alternative support and provision of accommodation.
 - Training and Conference Suite leased to single corporate tenant.
 - Lease to an Independent Special School provider to operate.
 - Innovation Centre for STEM start-up businesses.
- 9.3 The consultation exercise took place between 4 February 2021 and 18 March 2021 and in total received 1,427 responses. Over 90% of those were from residents within the Dorset Council area. The outcome of that consultation exercise was reported to Cabinet at their meeting on 29 April 2021, who provided approval to proceed with the Council’s preferred option for the use of the site.
- 9.4 Contained in the revised Business Case which was presented in April 2021, was the preferred option to establish an independent 4-19 school for Dorset children and young people with SEND, alongside a wider vision for the use of the St Mary’s site as a Centre of Excellence.
- 9.5 The development of the Centre of Excellence would support the council in delivering a benefit to the Dorset community through learning and the promotion of healthy living, and also to act as a beacon in terms of a national centre of learning for professionals working with vulnerable children and young people. The chart below shows the principles of what is intended to be provided on the site.



10. Progress to date

- 10.1 Alongside ongoing works to ensure that the buildings are safe to use, the development and use of facilities needs to be phased over first three years of operation in terms of the school provision alongside the vision to create the Centre of Excellence.
- 10.2 As part of the due diligence process when the bid was being formed to purchase the site a high-level condition survey was undertaken by an independent surveying company to identify any significant works which were required to the buildings on the site. The financial outcome of that survey was included in the initial report to Cabinet in December 2020 and highlighted several items which required attention.
- 10.3 One of the most crucial matters which needed to be addressed was the electrical safety certification for the site. Prior to the completion of the purchase an electrical test was undertaken, and a certificate was issued. However, to ensure the electrical system on site is suitable for the intended use moving forward, work has been ongoing since June to upgrade the system and continues at present on a block by block basis.
- 10.4 To create the right environment for specialist teaching, three blocks on the site were identified to be used as the first phase of the school and works commenced as to how they needed to be re-configured for use. Consideration was given to how the site as a whole would operate in terms of traffic flows and site security, in order to ensure there was an appropriate and safeguarded learning environment in line with Ofsted requirements.
- 10.5 Initially it was felt that the work required to make the school suitable for SEND use would be procured through the Repair and Maintenance Minor and Small Capital Works (RMMSCW) framework. Once a more detailed review of requirements was undertaken, a procurement route including a tender exercise was required from the contractors on the framework to be able to appoint a preferred contractor based on a not to exceed cost. The procurement activity added at one month to the programme timeline.
- 10.6 Following the procurement process a contractor was formally appointed and they began the detailed design process. The main contract cost for the first phase of the school refurbishment has now been provided at a maximum cost of £1.4m. This covers the refurbishment and re-modelling of three blocks on the site as well as works to refurbish the dining area and this work is now underway.
- 10.7 Whilst the works focus on the accommodation required for school use, other works have been on going on the site since the summer 2021 with the ongoing electrical re-wire, the refurbishment of two of the houses on site for use potential use as care provision, and roof repairs.
- 10.8 Works have also been authorised to install a CCTV and intruder alarm systems, to install fencing to secure parts of the site more appropriately for school use.
- 10.9 The works to create suitable accommodation for the first phase of school use is currently due to be completed in February 2022. This delayed

- completion is due to a number of issues related to Covid restrictions earlier in the process as well as the industry supply and labour issues which are being felt in the construction industry at the current time. Every effort has been made to reduce any delays.
- 10.10 It is expected that works will be completed in order to allow the school to open after February half term, on the basis that it has been registered with Ofsted by that time. DfE registration is a prerequisite of being able to operate the school on site.
- 10.11 Costs associated with works on the site are monitored closely and are signed off in consultation with the Dorset Centre of Excellence Commissioning Group, Executive Director for Place and the Executive Director for People – Children. In the December 2020 Cabinet report a budget allocation of £15m was allocated to this project, to include the purchase price for the site, and to date costs of works undertaken or committed to are contained within this amount. Work is now starting to look at the next phase of works including the need to bring the rest of the accommodation required for the school in to use ready for September 2022, as well as developing the Dorset Centre of Excellence training facility.
- 10.12 Assets and Property also engaged in detailed discussions with the former schools Administrators over the heating system on the site, which was not part of the initial site purchase costs due to the contractual arrangements in place with the former school and their previous energy supply company who owned the equipment on the site. Assessments are currently underway to look at the condition of the equipment, which includes the biomass boilers and the solar farm. As the costs to replace or purchase the current heating system were not included in the initial budget allocation it may be necessary to seek additional funding in due course in order to ensure there is an adequate and appropriate heating system on the site.
- 10.13 The condition of the buildings on the site will require ongoing maintenance and whilst the lease arrangements which will be put in to place with the Dorset Centre of Excellence as the operator of the site on behalf of the Council, there will still be ongoing liabilities which will rest with the Council as landlord, and a budget allocation is being sought to ensure those liabilities will be able to be met going forward.
- 10.14 The council has established a wholly owned company to operate the site, as agreed in the cabinet decision. This company is operational and working alongside council services to ensure delivery of the full business plan.
- 10.15 The company is currently recruiting the staff required to open the school.

11. Conclusion

- 11.1 The proposal to purchase the former St Mary's site was developed in order to help reduce the overspend on the High Needs Block and to rapidly improve the quality of provision closer to Dorset for children and

young people who require SEND support in line with the Council's approved SEND Capital Strategy 2020-25.

- 11.2 This project is part of a wider strategy to invest in and expand specialist provision across Dorset.
- 11.3 The delayed timescale to enable to school to open to its first cohort of students is somewhat offset by the indicative cost and time it may have taken to acquire a site and build a new school of a comparable size, with comparable facilities. In addition, the school will be able to grow faster than originally projected meaning no detriment to the cost savings anticipated.
- 11.4 The indicative investment of £20m for a new school including the time needed to identify and acquire land can still be seen to have offered the most cost-effective solution to meet this need.
- 11.5 It is anticipated that the first pupils will be on site after February 2022.