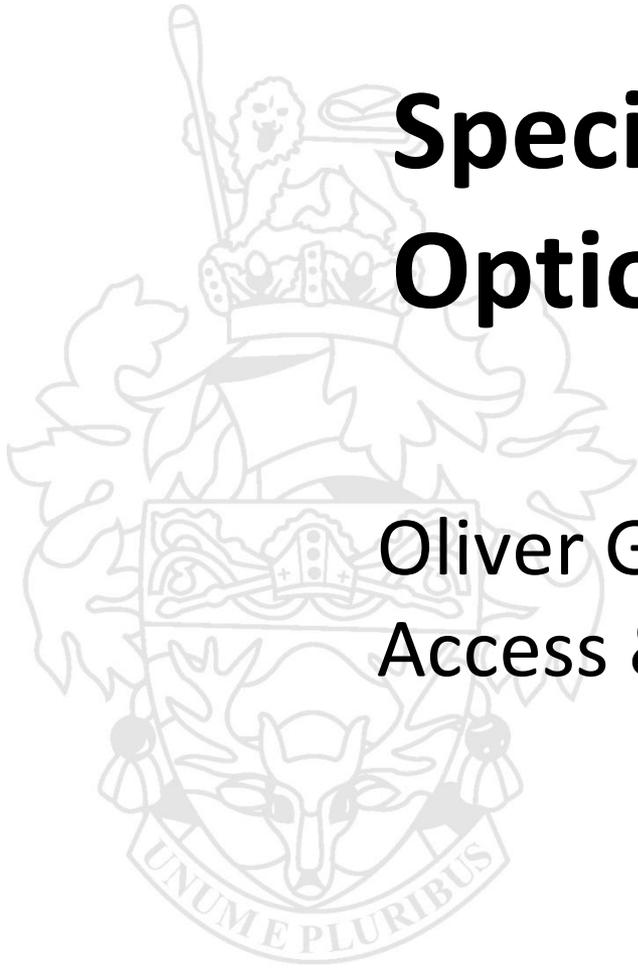


Special Free Schools Options Appraisal

Oliver Gill – Head of Education
Access & Sufficiency



Context

- **Programme Overview:** Two 120-place all-through schools are planned for pupils with Cognitive and Learning difficulties and Social, Emotional and Mental Health needs, originally intended for DfE delivery by September 2026. Delivery has been delayed indefinitely with unclear funding.
- **DfE Options for Delivery:** On 11 December 2025, the DfE offered WBC a choice to continue with DfE delivery (with no definite date, but potentially as late as 2035) or accept a direct financial settlement of £6.48 million per school over three years starting summer 2026. The Council may choose different options for each school. The funding option would broadly align with LA-led delivery of a single school.
- **Rising Demand and Need for Capacity:** Wokingham forecasts a 53.5% increase in EHCPs by 2030, underpinned by significant growth in Cognition & Learning and SEMH needs, necessitating increased specialist provision. The Council's capital programme focuses on resourced provision in mainstream settings, but special schools remain essential for pupils with complex needs.
- **Mitigation:** The Council has developed mitigations for potential non-delivery of the free schools, including repurposing the Spencers Wood surplus site (70-80 places) and a 28-place special school expansion. Combined, this would mitigate the loss of one of the DfE's planned schools.



Options Appraisal

| No. | Option | Benefits | Disadvantages | Rank |
|-----|----------------------|---|---|------|
| 1 | DfE Delivery | No additional capital cost (assuming delivered) Max. number of school places (240). Further specialist capacity or capital return (£5.2m) to the Council, via Surplus School Project. | Highly likely that both schemes will be delivered outside of the assumed delivery window (September 2028). Potential for one or both schemes not to be delivered, if pushed into the next parliament. | 4 |
| 2 | Financial Settlement | Delivers both special free schools; at reduced overall capacity. Likely to be supported by Ascendancy, in securing both free schools. Enables other strategic priorities in terms of one-half of the Rooks Nest development site. Largely secures SEND Sufficiency Statement. | Delivery risk, including cost exposure entirely transferred to WBC. | 1 |
| 3 | Partner | Delivers both special free schools at full capacity, albeit with division of place apportionment. Potentially enables other strategic priorities in terms of one-half of the Rooks Nest development site. Largely secures SEND Sufficiency Statement Potential for sharing delivery risk / workload. | Delivery risk, including cost exposure entirely transferred to WBC / its partner(s). Would likely delay delivery to September 2029, in view of the operational complexity. This would increase cost exposure relative to Option 2 (c. £8m). | 2 |
| 4 | Mixed | Potential for max. number of school places, assuming some Resourced Provisions delivered as refurb. Further specialist capacity or capital return (£5.2m) to the Council, via Surplus School Project. | Highly likely that both schemes will be delivered outside of the assumed delivery window (September 2028). Potential for one scheme not to be delivered, if pushed into the next parliament. Delivery risk, including cost exposure partially transferred to WBC, exacerbated by high no. of projects. Combines the risks of both options, without fully synthesising the benefits. SEMH resourced provision and special school provision not qualitatively equivalent. | 3 |

Indicative Timeline (Option 2)

| Action | Date |
|--|---------------------------|
| Provide formal response to the DfE | February 2026 |
| Secure capital commitment to the scheme(s) within WBC's MTFP | February 2026 |
| Appoint Consultant Team | January – February 2026 |
| Design / Pre-procurement Specification | March – June 2026 |
| Detailed Design / Planning | July – September 2026 |
| Procurement / Mobilisation | September – December 2026 |
| Construction Period | January 2027 – July 2028 |
| Building Handover | July 2028 |
| Provider Setup | August 2028 |
| New Free School Opens | September 2028 |

