

Proposal to Expand Cheswick Green Primary School



Background Information and Fact Sheet

1. The need for additional places

The Council has a statutory duty to provide sufficient school places for children living in its area.

Blythe Valley Park is a key strategic housing site that was given planning approval in 2017 to create a mixed development of residential and commercial properties. The residential development is expected to consist of a total of 750 dwellings when completed. Planning approval for the first two phases of residential development was secured in 2018.

Based on the latest analysis of primary pupils from completed housing developments in Solihull, the average number of pupils per year group per 100 houses is estimated to be 4. For a development the size of Blythe Valley this is expected to generate around 30 pupils per year group giving a total of 210 pupils across the 7 years of a primary school.

Blythe Valley Park sits in the catchment area for Cheswick Green Primary school, as does the recently completed housing development at Mount Dairy Farm.

2. How to add the additional places

When considering the need to add additional school places a range of options are considered including the implications of taking no action, expanding an existing school or proposing the opening of a new school.

No Action – If the Council takes no action in providing additional school places for families moving into Blythe Valley Park, families will be unable to secure a local school place.

All properties in Solihull fall within a primary and secondary school catchment area. If a school is oversubscribed by applications from children living in its catchment area, places are offered to those with siblings in school, then on a straight line distance with those living closest offered a place first, until all of the places have been allocated. One of the key aims of a catchment area system is to provide a level of certainty to families living in Solihull that that they can access a place at their local school should this be their preference. Although the Council does not offer a guarantee of a place in a child's catchment area school, we do endeavour as far as possible, to plan for catchment area demand for a school.

The families moving into Blythe Valley Park will live within the catchment area for Cheswick Green Primary School but will be the families living furthest away from the school. When the school is oversubscribed on catchment places it will be the families in Blythe Valley that will be unable to secure a place at their catchment area school. Their applications for other schools would be considered alongside all other applications for places and will depend on their distance from school, or families will be offered the closest school with a vacancy after all other preferences have been met. By having insufficient places at the catchment area school, families moving into Blythe Valley Park will be disadvantaged through the admissions process.

Open a new school – under current legislation the Council is unable to open a new school. All new schools are created as free schools which are independent of local authority control.

Under a 'presumption route' the Council can make a business case for a new school, that is then advertised to see if an Academy Trust comes forward to run the school. Under this arrangement the Council is responsible for providing a site and building for the new school as well as funding the revenue set up costs. No site has been identified for a school at Blythe Valley Park.

A school can only open once a funding agreement is signed between an Academy Trust and the Secretary of State for Education. The preferred model for Free Schools is a 2FE (420 place) school.

A key part of any business case for opening a school is evidencing sufficient demand. Blythe Valley Park is expected to generate in the region of 210 primary age pupils, half the number required for the preferred model of a 2 FE (420 place) school. In addition, the calculation of 210 pupils assumes that all families are new to the area and require a new school place. However, a proportion of families will already have children in schools in Solihull and will choose to leave them at their existing school rather than change schools. Some families will express preferences for schools other than their local school, such as a faith school.

The danger of creating over-provision of school places is that it has the potential to destabilise the viability of other schools in the area. Taking account of this demography it is Officer's view that there is insufficient demand to create a viable and sustainable school on Blythe Valley Park.

An application, made by a Multi Academy Trust, to create a Free School on Blythe Valley Park was considered by the Department for Education in 2017 and refused on the grounds of demonstrating sufficient demand.

School Expansion – The Council can create sufficient school places to meet the demand from Blythe Valley Park through the expansion of an existing school. When considering a school expansion to meet this demand, feasibility work was undertaken to consider the options for expansion at the three most local schools.

Feasibility work demonstrated that Hockley Heath Primary School does not have sufficient site space to accommodate an expansion of this nature and that the existing building at St Patrick's CE Primary Academy does not lend itself to an expansion of school places.

Blythe Valley Park sits within the catchment area for Cheswick Green Primary School and an expansion of this school would also meet the needs of the Mount Dairy Farm development in Cheswick Green. By catering for pupils from both developments the viability of the expansion is secured.

3. Funding

Capital investment – based on the detailed feasibility study for this scheme the expansion of Cheswick Green Primary School will mean a significant investment in this school site and buildings. Capital money is identified within the Children's Service Capital Programme and funded by S106 money secured from the housing developments at Blythe Valley Park and Mount Dairy Farm.

Revenue – additional pupils generate additional Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG), which funds extra pupils. In addition Solihull's School Forum has approved growth criteria to identify additional revenue funding for those schools experiencing growth in pupil numbers.