

New Ash Grove Additional Provision Academy – Cabinet Minutes

Councillor Walmsley introduced the report seeking to progress the delivery of a new permanent facility for the Ash Grove Alternative Provision (AP) Academy on the proposed Milton Road site in Radcliffe. The proposal represents a significant investment in the borough's education infrastructure and forms a key element of the Council's commitment to improving outcomes for some of Bury's most vulnerable children and young people.

The Council has a statutory responsibility to ensure that appropriate educational provision is available for children who are unable to access mainstream education. In December 2024, the Council entered into a legal agreement with Oak Learning Partnership (OLP) to provide a permanent, single-site location for Ash Grove Alternative Provision Academy by September 2028. The proposed development will replace the current temporary arrangements across multiple sites, creating a modern, purpose-built facility capable of accommodating up to 136 pupils in an inclusive, supportive, and adaptable learning environment.

The development will support the delivery of the Council's Alternative Provision Strategy; address identified gaps in local educational provision and ensure compliance with statutory and contractual obligations. Importantly, it will provide a long-term, sustainable solution that improves educational opportunities, strengthens support for vulnerable learners, and reduces the Council's reliance on temporary accommodation and external provision arrangements.

The Council has a statutory duty under Section 19 of the Education Act 1996 to provide suitable education for children who cannot attend mainstream school due to exclusion, illness, or other reasons. Alternative Provision (AP) is therefore not discretionary; it is a legal requirement. Bury currently lacks a permanent site for its main AP. Following relocation from the former Spring Lane site, provision operates from temporary accommodation across two locations, creating operational inefficiencies, and limiting the development of a coherent local Alternative Provision offer for our children.

Councillor Birchmore queried why the cost per pupil is so much higher than star academy and whether we know how many permanent exclusions there were last year?

Councillor Walmsley confirmed that alternative provision costs more per pupil than general population schooling. She also confirmed there were 66 permanent exclusions last year.

Ben Dunne, Director, Education & Skills added that permanent exclusions across Bury are far too high compared to our Greater Manchester neighbours. The vast majority of our suspensions and permanent exclusions sit in secondary schools. This is also a national issue. An alternative provision academy that provides a genuine inclusion hub, outreach support, short term intervention places and provides a centre for excellence all hinge around a provision setting that can focus on those things. This is an opportunity to intervene earlier and support schools earlier so they don't find themselves in a situation where they have to permanently exclude children.

As we haven't had these options in Bury before, we have had to rely on expensive independent specialist placements, out of borough provision, high transport costs, crisis interventions, and high numbers of youngsters going into youth justice.

Alternative provision can be a turning point for young people. Perception that the new alternative provision is for a new group of youngsters who will come into the borough is not the case. There is already a group of children in provisions that aren't fit for purpose.

Councillor Birchmore commented that we need to address the fact we have a high number of exclusions.

Councillor Walmsley agreed with Councillor Birchmore's comments. There are ongoing discussions with head teachers, Multi Academy Trusts and there is a lot of work going on behind the scenes to reduce the number of suspensions and permanent exclusions.

Councillor Rydeheard acknowledged that not all schools are as big as others in the borough and therefore some schools will be able to do more than others. Councillor Rydeheard also queried youth justice and that as these children are already in Bury, is there a potential for savings on youth justice strategy and about the loans and whether these can be consolidated.

Councillor Walmsley advised that lots of these issues refer to secondary schools but right about capacity in schools. There will be savings in youth justice if this is done right, there are also potential savings in health, mental health, youth crime, policing, and all public services.

Councillor Thorpe advised that there is currently no provision in the budget due to the number of hurdles required to be completed to be able to get this moving and a live project. Hoping we can get some grant funding from the DfE and work is ongoing to look at that. May also be able to use already committed capital that we don't move forward with to mitigate impact.

Decision(s)

Cabinet:

- Approved the use of the Milton Road site (see appended site plan in Stage 3 Report) for the proposed new Ash Grove Alternative Provision (AP) Academy.
- Approved the current designs to be submitted for full Planning Approval.
- Approved the funding strategy detailed below for a budget of £17m and delegate spending authority to the Executive Director of Place in conjunction with Director of Law and Governance to oversee implementation of relevant contracts.
- Approved the Procurement strategy approach for the engagement of a suitable contractor/consultant team.

Reasons for decision(s)

- To ensure the Council complies with an academisation legal agreement entered into with the Oak Learning Partnership Trust by providing a permanent school facility by September 2028.
- Any delays in the proposed programme contained in the Stage 3 report could result in failure to deliver.
- It is possible that legal action may be taken if the Council does not meet its contracted legal obligations. OLP could also take actions to withdraw six-day provision and renegotiate any remaining placement costs. Ultimately, it would further compromise the lives of some of Bury's most vulnerable young people having had their previous Radcliffe sites relocated to the current temporary locations of New Kershaw and Whittaker Street.

- The additional cost in having to extend the rental agreements for the temporary modular buildings at Whittaker Street and New Kershaw to accommodate the Students at OLP Ash Grove beyond the agreed current two years could be at least £150,000.00 per annum.