

CONSULTATION OUTLINE: BRADSTOW PRE-PUBLICATION CONSULTATION PROPOSAL TO CLOSE (DISCONTINUE) A COMMUNITY SPECIAL SCHOOL AND CHILDREN'S HOMES

JANUARY 2025

Introduction

After careful consideration, Wandsworth Council has made the difficult decision to consult on a proposal to close Bradstow Community Special School and Children's Homes at the end of the 2024/2025 academic year. Bradstow is located in Broadstairs, Kent, with Wandsworth being one of 10 Local Authorities using the school, and Kent County Council the largest user of the provision.

Why are we proposing this change?

Wandsworth Council is committed to supporting children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) locally, keeping them educated and cared for within Wandsworth or as close to their homes as possible. This sits alongside the need to retain a sustainable school system that meets the needs of all our children.

The council has invested £41m in expanding SEND provision in Wandsworth creating over 271 places since 2021, of which £34m is on a purpose-built expansion of Paddock Secondary and Sixth Form School to improve our local provision for children with complex special educational needs linked to their diagnosis of Autism and severe learning disability. A primary aim for the development of Paddock School is to enable Wandsworth children to remain in their local community to enable them to successfully retain their close links to family and friends which can be lost if they are placed at a significant distance from home.

Bradstow School operates within a challenging financial landscape and the unwillingness of councils to pay the levels of fees needed to maintain the quality of education and financial viability of the school has forced Wandsworth council to look at other options.

Wandsworth Council has worked with Kent County Council since November 2021, following a meeting chaired by the Regional Schools Commissioner, to explore the potential for transferring the provision to Kent County Council. However, Kent County Council has recently decided not to proceed with a transfer. This, combined with the financial pressures facing the school, has left no other viable option at this time but to propose closure at the end of the academic year.

The decision to consult on the closure of the school was not taken lightly and has come as a last resort. This proposal is no reflection on the quality of teaching, skillset of staff and the current leadership of the school.

We are committed through this consultation, to prioritise transparency and inclusivity, giving families, staff and the wider community extensive opportunity to engage with the process and provide feedback. This will allow Wandsworth Council to carefully consider all views before a final decision is made. If the decision to close the school goes ahead it will work with school leaders to ensure responsible local authorities liaise with families to put in place suitable alternative provision and plan a smooth transition for each child.

School and LA details

Bradstow School

34 Dumpton Park Drive
Broadstairs
CT10 1BY

Wandsworth Local Authority

Children's Services
Executive Support Team
5th Floor
Wandsworth Town Hall Extension
Wandsworth High Street
London
SW18 2PU

Background

Bradstow is a community special school with children's homes maintained by the London Borough of Wandsworth.

The school is located in the coastal town of Broadstairs in Kent, providing education and accommodation to young people with severe learning disabilities who are on the autistic spectrum continuum. Wandsworth inherited responsibility for Bradstow School when the Inner London Education Authority (ILEA) was abolished in 1990.

Community special schools providing accommodation to young people for more than 295 days per year are required to register as children's homes. These are inspected under the 2015 Children's Homes Regulations. For this reason, Bradstow was registered as a children's home in 2014.

As a community special school, Bradstow currently provides accommodation within its children's homes for up to 30 children during term time and returning to their families and carers in school holidays.

Previously, the provision was made up of five 38-week homes, and two 52-week homes, each offering up to 8 bedrooms. At total capacity there were 62 placements, consisting of 40 x 38-week placements, 16 x 52-week placements and 6 x Day-Only placements.

The decision to reduce the provision to operate five smaller 38-week homes and cease the 52-week provision from September 24, was in response to significant safeguarding concerns across the care provision, specifically in relation to the management of medication, and the leadership response to allegations made by children. These themes formed part of the feedback provided by OFSTED following their inspection of our 38 week and Hawthorn Lodge provisions which were found to be inadequate. It was felt that in order to make and embed the required improvements and to sustain positive change, a smaller provision that only operated during term time was necessary. Since this change, the remaining children's home was recently graded good by OFSTED. The report clearly outlines the improvements that have been made by school staff to ensure children are kept safe and receive the support which enables them to progress.

Despite being located approximately 100 miles away from the Town Hall in Wandsworth, as a Wandsworth provision, the council holds the financial, operational and safeguarding responsibility for Bradstow School. Wandsworth also owns the land and buildings and is responsible for their maintenance and upkeep.

Pupil Numbers and forecasts

Historically approximately 40% of pupils placed at the school are Kent County Council pupils. From the October census data, 13 of the 32 children placed at Bradstow are from Kent. 4 of the children are from Wandsworth (1 of which is due to end their school journey in summer 2025).

There are 28 x 38-week placements at Bradstow with 4 day-only placements.

Table 2: Illustrates the councils and the numbers of pupils each has placed at Bradstow =School as at the October Census

Council	Numbers of Children
Kent	13
Surrey	4
Wandsworth	4
Medway	2
Newham	2
Havering	2
Essex	2
Kingston Upon Thames	1
Hillingdon	1
Barking and Dagenham	1
TOTAL	32

SEND forecasts

The total number of SEND pupils has been growing in real terms and proportionally amongst the school population, both in Wandsworth and nationally. 2630 pupils with EHCPs attend Wandsworth schools (6.2% of the overall school population, up from 5.3% in 2021), with 929 of these attending one of our 7 special schools, an increase from 887 in 2021. It is worth noting that 32% of the pupils at our special schools are residents outside of the Local Authority, compared to a national average of just 9%.

To realise Wandsworth's collective ambition to give children the best care and keep children local to their family, friends and community wherever possible, we have invested in and developed local maintained provision and expanded our local special schools in Wandsworth. This has meant that we have needed fewer and fewer placements at Bradstow over the years.

Financial Position

The school currently has a financial deficit of £1.7m and growing. Debt held with other councils is over £3m at any given time and rises to £8m+ at invoicing periods. Some debt is taking years to recover.

Wandsworth have met with the Department for Education (DfE) to understand the available courses of action to recover the debt. They articulated that because councils are the

commissioners and need to agree the charges, especially with regards to inflationary uplifts or changes in prices for existing placements, our ability to set prices is constrained.

Some councils, particularly Kent County Council that owes approximately £2m, are refusing to pay inflationary uplifts or are challenging charges for the additional 1:2:1 support required to sustain their placements safely and the overall provision. Legal processes for collecting this debt were initiated between February 2024 and in May 2024 but were paused to allow for Kent to complete their due diligence of the transfer proposal. Now that it is confirmed that Kent is not interested in taking transfer of the provision, the legal process will be progressed.

The high-risk financial liabilities associated with the school are therefore over £3.6m and growing, and any unrecoverable debt is a cost to Wandsworth Council.

Alternative options considered

A number of alternative options were considered before we decided to consult on the proposed closure of Bradstow Special School and Children's Home. These included:

Transfer of the provision to Kent County Council: As the majority of placements at Bradstow are from Kent County Council, we have been working on a proposal to transfer the schools as a maintained provision to Kent County Council for over 3 years. The transfer included the offer of the freehold of the property. Kent County Council notified us in writing on the 15 October 2024, that they are not interested in pursuing this option. Their reason for this is the financial investment required to make the building fit for purpose alongside the considerable resourcing and risk it would present to operationally sustain the provision. Further to communicating our intention to consult on closure, the leader of Wandsworth Council and lead member for Children wrote to their counterparts at Kent County Council to reopen a conversation to safeguard a future for the school. However, Kent County Council are clear that there are no plans to take over the running of Bradstow School and they are working to find alternative educational provision for the pupils currently attending the provision. Their focus will then concentrate on supporting pupils to integrate smoothly into their new setting.

Major Staffing Restructure: The school has been through significant staffing restructures in the past two years. It is recognised that, whilst necessary when there is a need to reduce costs, undertaking staffing restructures has an impact on staff engagement, wellbeing and morale. Following the last restructure, which took place within the financial year ending March 2024, it was not considered appropriate for a further restructure to be undertaken whilst negotiations with Kent County Council were ongoing regarding a transfer and the future size and designation of the provision.

At the point Kent County Council advised that they were not willing to proceed with a transfer, Wandsworth council had to reconsider its options for the future of Bradstow to maintain the quality of education and the safeguarding of pupils. Given the financial position of the school and refusal of councils to pay outstanding debts and year on year uplifts it is considered that a restructure would not be an option which can deliver sufficient placement fee reductions that would be acceptable to commissioning local authorities, whilst also maintaining the quality of provision.

Academisation: Wandsworth local authority have liaised with the DfE Regions Group to consider academisation. Due to the complexity of Bradstow school, both operationally and financially, it has so far been unable to identify a multi academy trust who would be willing to

take on the school given the challenges it faces. However, the decision to approve the recommendation to initiate the proposal to close the school will enable interested academy trusts to come forward with any expression of interest.

Transfer of the school to an independent school proprietor: the DfE have advised that formerly state-funded schools taken over by a new proprietor can seek to register as independent schools. They should allow six months for the registration process to be completed. This means that an application to register should be made by the new proprietor at least six months before the state-funded school is due to close, if the newly registered independent school is to provide continuity of education for current pupils. That said there are challenges to identification of a new proprietor to run the independent school and securing the assets from the local authority, alongside any transfer of staff, on which the new proprietor would need to obtain independent advice. They would also need to be able to develop and articulate a sustainable business plan. The DfE were unable to provide an example of where this has occurred in recent times.

No change: At present, Wandsworth continues to operate the provision while holding all the safeguarding, operational and financial risks. Given the pressures on council finances up and down the country, receiving fees by other councils will continue to be a challenge and the levels of unpaid debt would likely continue to grow further from the already large sums accumulated. This makes the school unviable on an ongoing basis.

Admissions

The greatest anxiety for parents and carers associated with this proposal is likely to be related to admissions, securing a suitable school place for their child or young person should Bradstow close, as well as the impact of any changes. In the event proposals are agreed we will work closely with the school community and other Local Authorities in a planned way, and we want to provide parents and carers reassurance that there is no need to act alone or immediately in response to the notification of this consultation.

Wandsworth Council would recommend that parents contact their Local Authority's SEND Team, or case worker, to discuss this proposal and to understand their options for their children in the event of Bradstow's closure.

SEND

Wandsworth is operating a complex provision, from a distance within a differing local system, while holding all the safeguarding, operational and financial risks. This is a significant challenge and impacts on the local support available to ensure the ongoing quality of education for children. Wandsworth have increased the range and capacity of SEND provision locally in recent years to ensure the needs of our children are met. This proposal will reaffirm Wandsworth's commitment to exploring options for children to be educated and cared for in Wandsworth, or as close to their home as possible, to help them to remain connected to their networks and provide more consistent support and resources right the way through to adulthood.

Displaced Pupils

Wandsworth has undertaken an exercise to match the needs of its 4 children placed at Bradstow with provision type, in order to progress placement consultations in line with parental preference if requested to do so, or if the need arises further to a decision being made on this

proposal. It has been the recommendation to all other placing local authorities by the Director of Children's Services of Wandsworth Council to undertake a similar exercise in order to parallel plan. Given the number of children placed at the provision by Kent County Council, the Head of SEND and Inclusion for Wandsworth Council has already made contact with the Director of Education and SEND in Kent to ascertain if any support is required from Wandsworth.

If the proposal is approved, responsible individuals in placing local authorities, will work closely with the school and parents/carers to find and consult with suitable alternative education providers in line with parental preferences and support pupils to integrate smoothly into their new setting.

Wandsworth's School and Community Psychology Service (SCPS) will work with the school's leadership to manage the impact of this proposal on staff, pupils and their families, and should this proposal progress, placing local authorities, and the SCPS alongside Kent County Council Educational Psychology Services will work in collaboration with the school leadership to ensure that children's transition to a new school is managed as effectively as possible. These conversations and this work will be carefully planned and managed sensitively in discussion with the head and senior leadership to ensure they best meet the needs of the school community as they emerge and if needed. We will together think about how we can take forward positive learning from this experience for children.

Impact on Staff

We recognise the incredible dedication and expertise that the staff community brings to Bradstow School. We know that staff will be anxious about the implications of any decision, and their wellbeing is important to us. We would like to offer our reassurance that council officers, governors and school leaders are here to support staff as we navigate this process together.

We anticipate that staff dismissals will potentially be significant. It will however be mitigated with several activities to reduce the number of necessary dismissals and redundancies. This includes exploring employment opportunities with relevant job centre contacts and other local education provisions, providing career transition resources, and offering individual support as we move through the consultation and transition phases.

The School and Community Psychology Service (SCPS) will work alongside the school's leadership team and help them to manage the impact of this proposal on staff. To supplement the support outlined above, all staff have access to the council's employee assistance programme. If this proposal is moved forward, we can assure staff that the school will remain open for the whole academic year 2024/25.

Impact on the community

An Equality Impact Assessment has been undertaken and has been shared as part of this consultation. This will be reviewed and updated following responses received to the initial pre-publication consultation.

Whilst we understand that this proposal will have some impact on the local community, it has been put forward in response to the need to manage risk for our most vulnerable SEND children, as well as the sustainability of the overall Wandsworth school system for all our children and families.

Travel

Transportation for children and young people with EHCPs is clearly outlined in Section 9.214 of the SEND Code of Practice (2015). If the decision is made to close Bradstow school and alternative educational provision is required, the local SEND Transport team would be able to identify if transport would be provided based on the Government guidance on eligibility. Wandsworth is committed to ensure children and young people for whom we are responsible are educated in their community, where possible, to avoid long travel journeys which can be very stressful for individuals.

Consultation and decision-making process

There is a defined statutory process in the School Organisation (Establishment and Discontinuance of Schools) Regulations 2013 which must be followed before making a decision on the closure of a maintained school. This is supplemented by further guidance on the process published by the Department for Education.

There are five stages to the statutory process:

Consultation: The publication of this consultation document marks a period of consultation during which the views of interested parties are sought and which will be considered by the local authority.

Publication: Dependent upon the outcome of the consultation, the local authority will decide whether or not to publish statutory notices regarding the proposed closure.

Representation: The representation period starts on the date of publication of the statutory notice and must last for a period of four weeks. During this period, any person or organisation can submit comments on the proposal to the local authority, to be taken into account before a final decision is taken

Decision: Within two months of the end of the representation period the local authority must make a decision on the proposal.

Implementation: If the proposal is approved, Bradstow Special School and Children's Home would close at the end of the academic year in 2024/25.

Equality Impact Assessment

The local authority is required to have 'due regard' to the duties set out in Section 149 of the Equality Act 2010 (the Public Sector Equality Duty, 'PSED') in determining these proposals. An Equality Impact Assessment has been undertaken as part of the consultation process to identify the equality implications of this proposal and any appropriate mitigation, which we are seeking views on as part of this consultation.

How to share your views

Wandsworth Council will begin consulting on Monday 6 January 2025 to get views on the outlined proposals. This will close on the Sunday 16 February 2025.

You can give your views via:

- Online survey: we would encourage you to complete the online survey as the most efficient and secure way to give your views at:

<https://haveyoursay.citizenspace.com/wandsworthcsd/bradstow>

- Hard copy - if you need to request a paper copy, a different language or format, or if you need any support to take part in the consultation, please call or text the Children's Services Executive Support team's dedicated Bradstow consultation mobile number at 07779 868995 or email consult@wandsworth.gov.uk (please put 'Bradstow Consultation' in the email heading').

- Attending the consultation event at Bradstow School on Wednesday 15 January 2025, from 5.30-7pm.

Upon concluding this consultation stage, all views will be considered in full and the Director of Children's Services in consultation with the Cabinet lead for children will decide whether to publish statutory proposals for these changes.

Who we will consult

The local authority is consulting with pupils, parents and carers, staff, the governing board, MPs, trade unions and parents of schools and other local authorities affected by the proposal. We are also consulting with other groups as well as the wider local community.

Proposed Consultation Timeline

Activity	Proposed Timeline
Overview and Scrutiny Committee Approval	3 December 2024
Executive: Decision require to begin pre-proposal consultations ('informal consultations')	9 December 2024
Pre-proposal consultations (6 weeks) Recommended consultation period of a minimum of 6 weeks	Monday 6 January 2025 to Sunday 16 February 2025
Review of consultation feedback and delegated decision for Director of Children's Services in consultation with the Cabinet lead for children to decide whether to publish statutory proposals for these changes.	Monday 17 February to Friday 7 March 2025
4-week statutory representations ('formal consultation'). Notice to be published in a local newspaper on first day of consultation.	Consultation period: Monday 10 March 2025 to Sunday 6 April 2025.
OSC and Executive – approving outcome of formal consultation. Note: Executive are required to make decision on the outcome within a 2-month period of closing date of statutory consultation.	Special committee likely required in Apr/May 2025. Date to be confirmed.
Notify OFSTED of intention to close residential homes if proposal approved (3 months' notice required)	Latest date of 31 May 2025 for 31 Aug 2025 closure