

Report to: Lead Member for Resources and Climate Change

Date of meeting: 25 September 2025

By: Chief Operating Officer

Title: Award a building contract for the provision of new secondary school accommodation at Acre Wood Academy, Crowborough.

Purpose: To seek approval for the award of a building contract for new secondary school accommodation at Acre Wood Academy, Crowborough.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

The Lead Member for Resources and Climate Change is recommended to:

- 1) Approve the award of a building contract to Willmott Dixon to construct new secondary school accommodation at Acre Wood Academy adjacent to the primary school accommodation; and
- 2) Delegate authority to the Chief Operating Officer to take all actions necessary to give effect to the recommendations in this report.

1 Background

1.1 Local authorities have a statutory duty to ensure there are sufficient good school places for all pupils, including for those with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND). The numbers of pupils with Education Health and Care Plans is on an upward trajectory, nationally and locally which places significant pressure on the High Needs Block Funding that the Council receives to meet the educational needs of these pupils.

1.2 In responding to this increased need for school places for children with SEND the Lead Member for Education and Inclusion, Special Educational Needs and Disability approved the relocation and expansion of the secondary phase of Acre Wood Academy (formerly Grove Park school) and the lowering of the age range of the school to 2 years, at his decision-making meeting on [25 March 2025](#). In addition, the Lead Member for Education and Inclusion, Special Educational Needs and Disability approved on [2 June 2025](#) a change of designation for the primary type of need that the school meets to also include Severe Learning Difficulties and Autistic Spectrum Disorder alongside Profound and Multiple Learning Difficulties to accurately reflect the needs of pupils attending the school.

1.3 Previously, Grove Park school, converted to an academy on 1 July 2025 with the London Southeast Academy Trust (LSEAT). LSEAT are a high performing academy trust and have been working collaboratively with the local authority on the capital project. The Council is responsible for delivery of the capital project, and the academy will be responsible for all running costs once the new building is handed over. This report sets out details of the award of a building contract to a national building contractor to construct new secondary school accommodation on the Acre Wood Academy, Church Road site.

1.4 The project is being funded largely through the High Needs Provision Capital Funding Allocation (HNPCA) that the Council receives from the Department for Education (DfE). The HNPCA is intended to support local authorities in their duty to provide suitable school placements for children and young people with SEND, or who require alternative provision (AP). The breakdown of the funding contributions is detailed in an exempt report later in the agenda.

2 Supporting information

2.1 An internal working group has been working over the last 2 years engaging with the school to design new secondary phase accommodation to be co-located on the primary school site at Church Road. The Council employed Playle & Partners to provide consultancy advice to work up a school project working with architects and other specialists. The design of the school was crucial to ensure a fit for purpose school was provided but taking into account a limited budget and the wider environmental factors of the site and the current primary school.

2.2 The Council has been working with Willmott Dixon and Playle & Partners as part of a pre-construction contract to ensure there was co-design of the school through the various Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) stages. This allowed the Council to take stock at each stage to understand the costs, design and risks of constructing the secondary phase accommodation. There were engagement sessions with residents and stakeholders before a planning application was submitted. The feedback from engagement sessions helped shape the final design of the school. A planning application was submitted in late 2024.

2.3 Planning permission was granted on 30 April 2025. There were planning conditions issued with the permission and it has taken time to progress with satisfying these conditions. A summer enabling works contract was instructed to take advantage of the school holiday period and complete some works to prepare the site for development (utility service diversions, site vegetation clearance, and ecology mitigation). All pre-commencement condition information has been submitted for review and planners were satisfied ahead of the commencement of the summer enabling works. In addition, the design is well progressed and fully coordinated with Playle & Partners and Willmott Dixon. The Council opted for a 'design and build' procurement approach to achieve faster project delivery, and to improve cost certainty, as well as foster enhanced collaboration between design and construction teams. This approach also simplifies communication by managing a single contract. Willmott Dixon is a reliable contractor once in the construction phase which is particularly important in this project due to the scale of the works and the proximity to the operational primary phase accommodation.

2.4 The timeline for the construction of the secondary phase accommodation is targeted to complete by end of December 2026, assuming the building contract is awarded by 2 October 2025. Education officers will work with LSEAT to plan for the first pupils to occupy the school in a phased manner with full occupation due in September 2027.

2.5 The internal project board have reviewed the final costs submitted by Willmott Dixon for the main construction works. The construction costs have been broken down to various building work packages. For each subcontract work package (e.g. groundworks, steelwork, carpentry, windows, doors), Willmott Dixon have sought 3 quotations to ensure there is value for money from their supply chain. Playle & Partners, as the Council's specialist, analysed the costs provided in late August 2025.

2.6 Council officers have reviewed the final cost plan and recommend that a final contract is awarded to Willmott Dixon for the secondary phase accommodation project. The Council will consider how the delivery of the nursery school places can be delivered as phase 2 of the project working with LSEAT.

2.7 A breakdown of the costs as well as the Council's approach to identifying risks and how they have been mitigated, reflecting the design and build contract are detailed in an exempt report later in the agenda.

3 Conclusion and reason for recommendations

3.1 The Acre Wood Academy capital project, Crowborough is an important part of the Council's SEND place planning strategy. The new secondary school accommodation will deliver additional specialist provision to meet the needs of children with SEND requirements.

3.2 The Lead Member is therefore recommended to approve the award of a building contract to Willmott Dixon to undertake the construction for the provision of new secondary school accommodation on the Acre Wood Academy Church Road site in Crowborough. It is also recommended to delegate authority to the Chief Operating Officer to take all actions necessary to give effect to the recommendations in this report.

ROS PARKER Chief Operating Officer

Contact Officer: Nigel Brown
Tel: 07394 410630
Email: nigel.brown@eastsussex.gov.uk

Contact Officer: Christian Williams
Tel: 07500 701718
Email: Christian.williams@eastsussex.gov.uk

LOCAL MEMBERS

Councillor Johanna Howell – Crowborough North and Jarvis Brook.
Councillor Philip Lunn – Crowborough South and St Johns

BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS

[ESCC Planning Committee – 30 April 2025](#)