Bearwood Primary School Relocation – Questions and Answers

This document answers the main questions about the proposed move of Bearwood Primary School. The questions came from two informal question-and-answer (Q&A) sessions and the council's online consultation. Similar questions have been grouped together. The answers reflect what was said during the informal consultation. Some issues still need more evidence, further consultation or a decision.

1. The plan and the reasons for it

Q1. What is the plan?

The proposal is to move Bearwood Primary School to a new school building in Spencer's Wood from September 2028. It would still have one class in each year group, with 210 primary places and a nursery. There would also be a new 14-place resource base. This is a specialist unit for children with education, health and care plans for autism and speech, language and communication needs.

Q2. Why is the move being proposed?

Birth numbers have fallen across much of the borough since their peak in 2012. This means more primary school places are empty. Birth numbers have also fallen across the UK and in other countries. But many new homes have been built in Shinfield Parish, where more school places are needed. Across the borough, fewer mainstream places are needed. At the same time, more children have high and complex special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). There are not enough specialist places for these children.

The council says it cannot open new school places to serve Shinfield without reducing places elsewhere in the borough. There are already too many empty places. Adding more without reducing places elsewhere would make the school system less efficient.

Pupil numbers at Bearwood Primary School have fallen over several years. Some classes have only a little over 20 pupils. The headteacher and governors said this would leave the school spending much more than its income. This gap would grow, and other steps would not be enough to prevent it.

School funding rules allow councils to help schools with falling pupil numbers for up to three years. By the end of that time, pupil numbers must be clearly expected to rise enough to pay for the staff supported by this funding.

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Q3. Why was Bearwood chosen?

The council asked schools and academy trusts to say if they were interested in moving to a new school site in Spencer's Wood, in Shinfield. After talks with trusts, it invited full proposals for three schools. Two full proposals were sent in.

A panel assessed them using rules agreed in advance. The panel included local councillors, local representatives, council staff involved in the project and someone from the trust that would run the planned special school at the old site. The panel looked at whether each school could run the new school and its SEND provision. It also looked at whether the old site could be used as a special school.

Bearwood has one class in each year group. This fits the approved new building in Spencer's Wood, which has 210 places. There is a direct route from Bearwood to the new site, so the journey is not seen as too long. The current staff team could stay together. The council also considers the old site suitable for a special school. This would need a separate approval process.

Q4. Does the school currently provide a good education?

Yes. Ofsted rated the school "Good" in 2024. The headteacher said the school provides a very strong education, with strong teaching. A recent council visit found no major areas that needed to improve. The proposed move is about falling pupil numbers and making the school affordable to run, not poor education.

Q5. What would the new school building offer?

The new building would be a much better place to teach and learn than the current school. It would have:

- Classrooms, small-group rooms and a hall with several uses. These would all be the right size for their purpose.
- Heating, lighting, fresh air and sound levels that meet today's school standards. This would help children hear teachers and see learning materials without tiring their eyes. It would help them stay alert, pay attention for longer and understand their lessons.
- Level access, lifts, rooms for personal care and specialist teaching spaces. These would support children and adults with disabilities.
- Outdoor areas for play, PE and sport. A multi-use games area would allow team games when the current small grass pitch would be too wet to use. There would also be staff parking and a parent drop-off area.

The building has planning permission. Detailed plans for building it are still being developed.

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Q6. What would happen to the old Bearwood site?

The council plans to use the current buildings for a new special school. This is not part of the consultation on moving Bearwood. It would need a separate approval process.

2. Travel and access

Q7. What free transport is planned?

The original proposal was to provide transport for three years after relocation. Following initial consultation this has now been amended.

The current plan is to provide free transport between the old Bearwood site and the new Spencer's Wood site. It would run at the start and end of the school day for five school years: 2028/29, 2029/30, 2030/31, 2031/32 and 2032/33. It would be provided for children on roll on the date the decision to move the school is confirmed. This is expected to be 27 January 2027.

Q8. Why is free transport not promised for three years?

This is no longer relevant.

Q9. Will transport cover breakfast clubs and after-school activities?

No final plan has been agreed. During the formal consultation, parents and carers will be asked if they would use transport and what times they would prefer. This will include trips for breakfast clubs and after-school activities. Their answers will help shape the service.

National policy supports breakfast clubs and after-school care. The government is rolling out funding for breakfast clubs, but there is no direct funding for after-school care. After-school services therefore need enough families to use them to make them possible to run. The council fully expects these services to be available for Bearwood children. It plans to provide transport so children moving with the school can use them, if there is enough demand to make this possible.

Q10. What travel help would children with SEND, health needs or disabilities get?

The transport promise discussed would cover all pupils moving with the school. If a child could not use the main service because of SEND, a disability, a medical need or difficulty moving around, the council would arrange transport to meet their needs. Each child's needs would be checked nearer the move. If a need such as anxiety had not been assessed by a health professional, the council would ask suitably trained staff to assess it. These checks would also identify any need for an adult helper or medical

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support on the journey. Families can also apply under the home-to-school transport policy if their child's needs mean they cannot walk to another school.

Q11. Has the effect of daily bus travel on young children been checked?

Officers reviewed the available evidence about the wellbeing of young children who regularly travel to school by bus. This was to help answer concerns raised in the consultation.

National policy favours walking and cycling to school. However, the review found no clear evidence that daily school bus or coach trips cause harm. One study stated "there appears to be no realistic educational disadvantage from any given travel mode". This means the study found no clear disadvantage to learning linked to the way children travel.

Q11A. What if a parent cannot drive but needs to go to the new school?

The council will arrange transport when needed, such as a taxi, for essential school visits by parents who cannot drive. Examples include collecting a sick child or going to school to give medicine or other necessary help to a child with a serious medical condition.

Q11B. How long would the journey take?

Official guidance recommends that primary-aged pupils should not travel for more than 45 minutes. The council expects this journey to be much shorter. Families would not be expected to walk or cycle between the old site and Spencer's Wood.

Q11C. How would children be kept safe on coaches?

Children's needs and any travel risks would be checked nearer the move. At least one adult, as well as the driver, would travel with the children. This could be a school staff member or a passenger assistant. It would depend on the final plans and the children's needs.

Q11D. Do primary school children use school buses or coaches elsewhere?

Yes. Examples include Long Sutton Church of England Primary School in Hampshire and Baildon Church of England Primary School in Bradford. School buses for primary-aged children are also common in countries such as the USA, Canada and Ireland.

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Q11E. How would the move affect contact between parents and the school?

The council accepts that parents who cannot drive may find it harder to have informal chats with teachers at the new site. This concern will need to be weighed alongside the planned school transport, help with essential journeys and the wider reasons for the move.

3. Places at other schools

Q12. Are places available at other local primary schools?

In September, council officers checked which local schools had empty places. They confirmed that places were available in the year groups needed.

Places vary by year group. A waiting list for one year group does not mean the whole school is full. Updated information is published here.

Q13. Are all other school places within walking distance?

The walking distances set by law are two miles for children under eight and three miles for children aged eight and over. Officers considered that places at other schools were available within these distances of the Bearwood site. Each family's situation and route would still need to be checked.

Q14. What if a family cannot get a suitable place within walking distance?

Parents were invited to talk to the admissions team, which deals with school places. If more families than expected needed local places, some children might not get a suitable place within walking distance. The council said it would then consider suitable home-to-school transport.

Q15. Could brothers and sisters end up at different schools?

Yes. Schools cannot create places or hold them for Bearwood pupils. The places available may change over the next two years. Families may need to think about when to apply or whether to move their children at different times. There is no promise that brothers and sisters could get places at the same school.

Q15A. Would Bearwood pupils get priority for places at other schools?

No. A child would not get extra priority just because they had attended Bearwood. Those who decide school admissions must use their published rules for ranking applications when there are too many applicants. The council said there should be enough places in

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the wider area for families who want another local primary school. But places vary by school and year group.

Q15B. How would priority for brothers and sisters work?

Bearwood's current rules give high priority to brothers and sisters of pupils on the school register when an application is made. This applies wherever they live. Other schools would use their own published rules for brothers and sisters. There would be no special priority for children who used to attend Bearwood.

Q15C. Who would get priority for a place at Bearwood after the move?

If more children applied than there were places, the school would use the admission rules that apply at the time. Distance would favour families living closer to the new Spencer's Wood site. Brothers and sisters of pupils expected to stay at the school could also get higher priority. Over time, a smaller share of applicants is expected to have a brother or sister already at Bearwood.

Q15D. Could the school's catchment area change?

From admissions for 2027/28, the council will no longer use set catchment areas for community schools. Instead, it will use its published rules to rank applications, including distance from the school. If the move is approved, distances for admissions from September 2028 would be measured from the Spencer's Wood site.

4. Impact on children

Q15E. How would children who find change hard be supported?

Some families are worried that the move could upset children, especially neurodivergent children, whose brains work differently, and children with anxiety. The council said the school would plan support for the move with families and the professionals involved. It expected any harmful effect to be short term for the great majority of children. Where needed, each child's transport and support needs would be checked separately.

Q15F. Could the move make it harder for children to keep local friends?

The council accepts that the distance may make it harder for some families to meet friends outside school. It did not think this would stop children getting a suitable education. It said families who feel keeping local friendships is their main concern could consider places at schools nearer home.

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5. Timing, money and other options

Q16. Why was the plan announced at the start of the school year?

Funding was approved in February 2026. The council then asked schools to express interest, send in bids and take part in an assessment process. Bearwood was chosen as the preferred school in mid-to-late July. Informal consultation began after the summer holiday so staff could be told when they were back at work. Officers accepted that this was a difficult time for families, especially those with children just starting Reception.

Q17. Why can the school not move one year group at a time?

Running both sites at once was seen as too costly, especially while the school is short of money. Moving one year group at a time would also delay work to turn the old site into urgently needed specialist provision.

Q18. Could classes with mixed year groups help the school stay at its current site?

Officers did not support a smaller Bearwood with about 15 new pupils each year and classes mixing year groups. They thought this would be hard to afford. It would probably mean fewer staff and would be harder to organise and run.

Q19. How would the school manage its money before the move?

The school and council will keep checking the budget. Officers said short-term funding might be needed if more pupils leave before 2028. This would help the school keep running until the move.

Q20. What happens if the move does not go ahead?

Officers said falling pupil numbers would still mean a wider discussion about closing schools in the area. Bearwood would be one of the schools considered. No decision to close it has been made or decided in advance.

6. Planning, safety and future pupil numbers

Q21. Has the Detailed Emergency Planning Zone been considered?

Yes. Officers said the site's location was checked during the planning process. It was also discussed with the Office for Nuclear Regulation and AWE Burghfield. The school must meet emergency planning rules. This includes being able to shelter on site for up to 48 hours. The council's health and safety team would make any further contacts needed.

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Q22. Have West Berkshire Council and other relevant bodies been contacted?

Officers said they had found no formal rule requiring a separate consultation with West Berkshire Council, the Office for Nuclear Regulation or AWE Burghfield at this stage. The council's health and safety team would lead any further talks needed with the relevant councils and safety bodies. These talks are already taking place.

Q23. Do future pupil forecasts include new homes?

Yes. Officers said their forecasts of future pupil numbers include planned new homes. They agreed to publish:

- The information used about how many homes would be built in future.
- How the council used this information to work out how many children would live in the new homes.

The full pupil forecast model cannot be published because it contains personal details about individual children.

The council has included new homes planned near Bearwood Primary School in its forecasts. These are in west Wokingham town, Winnersh and Loddon Valley Garden Village. The garden village is planned to have 4,000 new homes. It will follow the River Loddon between Sindlesham and Arborfield. Only part of it will be in Winnersh.

Evidence from new housing shows it will take five years for enough children to live in the new Winnersh homes to affect school place plans.

Something similar happened in Shinfield. Many new homes were built from 2014. But Alder Grove Primary School could not open until 2020. Before then, too few children lived in the new homes to justify opening it.

National rules allow the council to fund schools to keep one class for each year group for only three years. This is not long enough for enough children to move into the new homes to pay for current staff levels.

Q24. What schools are planned for Loddon Valley Garden Village?

Around 4,000 new homes would justify two primary schools. Each could have up to three classes in each year group. When they open would depend on when homes are built and how many school places are needed.

The homes are currently expected to be built over 20 years, starting in 2027/28.

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Q25. Why was a school not built at Hatchwood Mill?

Land was set aside for a school, but it would not have been ready when places were needed. School places were provided elsewhere instead. Part of the land was later used to reduce flood risk.

7. How the school is run, staff and decisions

Q26. Why were parents not told the school had sent in a bid?

The council and governors said the bidding process had to be kept private. Three schools had shown interest, but only one could be chosen. Telling people too early could have caused needless worry at schools that were not chosen. Governors said they bid because of Bearwood's financial position. Parents would have a chance to give their views in the consultation once Bearwood had been chosen.

Q27. Would becoming an academy have prevented this situation?

Governors said they had thought about becoming an academy more than once. They did not think it would bring enough benefits for funding or how the school was run. Falling pupil numbers would still have affected the school. Being an academy would not, on its own, have stopped a move or closure.

Q28. Will all staff move to the new site?

The school expects most staff, and possibly all staff, to move to the new site. But this cannot be promised yet. It will depend on each person's situation and decisions about their job.

Q29. Who will make the final decision?

Wokingham Borough Council's Executive would make the final decision in early 2027. The Executive is a group of elected councillors. The Executive Member for Children's Services is one member of the group and does not decide alone.

Q30. Can the consultation change or stop the plan?

No final decision has been made. Officers said people's views can lead to changes, especially on matters such as transport. But the consultation is not a vote. The Executive would look at responses alongside evidence about education, money and wider school plans. It could approve, change or reject the proposal.

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Q30A. Why were no governors at one of the meetings?

The headteacher said the Chair of Governors had planned to attend but could not. The Chair was expected to attend the next online meeting and future public meetings during the formal consultation.

Q30B. Will an Executive member attend future consultation meetings?

The Executive Member for Children's Services is expected to attend meetings during the statutory consultation. This is the formal consultation required by law.

Q30C. How was Bearwood chosen through the bidding process?

After funding for the new school building was agreed, the council asked schools and trusts working in Wokingham Borough if they were interested in moving to Spencer's Wood. A panel checked detailed bids against agreed rules. It included council representatives, staff with relevant roles, a local representative and other interested groups. Bearwood was judged the best fit. Its governors supported the bid because falling pupil numbers made it harder to afford one class for each year group.

Q30D. How can residents contact the people making the decision?

The council's Executive will make the final decision. Its current members and their contact details are listed on the council's website. Residents can also contact their ward councillors and give their views through the formal consultation.

Q31. How would the move affect Spencer's Wood and nearby schools?

Shinfield is the only area in the borough where almost all school places are full. This is linked to the new homes being built there. Many children still go to school outside the area. In September 2026, 49 children starting Reception were offered places outside the area, including 16 outside the borough. Only 75% of offers were for a family's first-choice school, compared with 88% across the borough. If Bearwood moves, more of its pupils are expected to come from Shinfield over time. The council therefore expects that no school in the Shinfield area would be harmed by the move.

The need for a school on this site was identified in the first housing plans for Shinfield. The area was then called the South of the M4 Strategic Development Location. The need was confirmed in the Local Plan adopted in 2010.

Outline planning permission O/2013/0346, granted in 2014, set out the school site and nearby routes. The site is next to a bus, walking and cycling link to Shinfield West. It is also beside a planned road and bus route through the new Spencer's Wood development.

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Children moving with the school are expected to travel from Sindlesham in coaches or other shared vehicles. The council is therefore very confident that local roads can cope with the extra traffic. Its design team will check whether the plans need any further changes.

The council will keep checking current and forecast pupil numbers. It will seek agreement on any changes needed as circumstances change.

Q32. How would the move affect the environment, walking and cycling?

The council accepts that the move would harm the environment and reduce walking and cycling in the short term. Fewer children from Winnersh would attend each year from 2028, so this effect would reduce.

These effects must be weighed against benefits now and in the future. More Shinfield children would be able to get a school place within walking distance of home. This would bring an immediate and growing benefit. It would also mean a lasting fall in carbon emissions from long school car journeys starting in Shinfield.

From 2028, the new building would also help the environment. It would be well insulated and use only electricity. This would reduce the school's carbon footprint compared with the current building.

Q33. What would the whole plan cost, and would it offer value for money?

The main cost is £14 million for the new Spencer's Wood Primary School.

Transport is estimated to cost up to about £360,000 in the first year, then less in later years.

The plans have been checked at several stages. In June 2025, the council's children's services overview and scrutiny committee looked at five options for the new Spencer's Wood school. These were: do nothing; open a new school; open a second site for a school; move an existing school; or make an existing school bigger.

Each had benefits and drawbacks. Members decided that only a new school, a second site or a move should be considered further. Of these, only moving an existing school was judged to offer value for money at a later date by council officers. It would allow a new special school to open, provide a school in Spencer's Wood with extra SEND facilities and avoid adding empty places across the borough.

The Department for Education (DfE) had first planned to build the special school. It later stepped back from that plan. Instead, it provided enough money for one new school and repairs and changes to an existing school.

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A new special school would reduce the need for costly independent special-school places outside the borough. These savings would outweigh the cost of coach travel to school.

The value-for-money judgement also considers effects on the wider community. These may matter even when they do not directly change the council's costs.

Q34. How would the plan affect equality?

The council will develop an Equality Impact Assessment as the project develops. This is a check of how the plans may affect different groups of people.

The council currently sees transport as the main area where extra help may be needed so people are not put at a disadvantage. It will offer three years of free transport from 2028. Near the end of that time, it will review people's needs and the money and support available. The council has provided school transport for the borough's most vulnerable children since it began. Based on this experience, it is confident that it can provide any specialist transport needed.

The new buildings would be easier for people with different needs to use. Together with the planned specialist base, they would benefit some groups protected by equality law, including groups defined by age and disability.

Q35. What would change for staff and the way the school is run?

Mainstream classes

The move would allow the school to keep one class of 30 for each year group, with suitable management and support staff. Bearwood made the changes needed to admit 30 pupils each year. But fewer children have joined in recent years, so younger year groups have far fewer than 30 pupils. The school cannot afford its current staffing plan. To balance its budget, it would need further changes, probably including classes with more than one year group.

The specialist base

The specialist base would let children with high levels of SEND learn in both dedicated classrooms and alongside other pupils. At least at first, children are expected to spend more than half their time in the base. The council's funding model allows it to have its own staff team. The numbers of qualified teachers and support assistants would match the children's needs. Each child's education, health and care plan would set out the level and type of support they need.

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Q36. What if the special school at the old site is delayed or not approved?

The current consultation does not cover plans to reuse the old site. These would go through a separate process. Bearwood is a community school. Any new school would be an academy, with different decision-makers and different laws applying to it. If work to change the site were delayed, the council would still need to use costly places outside the borough for these children.

Q37. How would disruption from building work and the move be managed?

The council's development management team oversees building work. Contractors must make plans to limit harm or disruption to nearby communities. The original planning permission has several rules about building the school. Rules 24 and 25 cover "Construction Management". Rule 24 requires a Construction Environmental Management Plan covering 18 set topics. This plan must be approved before work starts. Rule 25 limits work to 07:30 to 18:00 from Monday to Friday and 08:00 to 13:00 on Saturdays. No work is allowed on Sundays or public holidays. You can read the full details here: Microsoft Word - O-2013-0346.doc.

The new school is expected to be finished in good time for the move during the summer holiday in 2028. The school is not expected to need temporary classrooms elsewhere.

Q38. How would the plans be checked after the move?

After the move, the usual checks that apply to all schools would cover the school and its transport arrangements. There would be one extra check: transport arrangements would be reviewed near the end of the three-year period.

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