

Introduction

Essex County Council (ECC) has a statutory duty to ensure that there is a sufficient supply of school places for every child in Essex who requires one. Whilst there is no requirement to have special schools or specialist provision for children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND), the majority of local authorities do have special schools and specialist provisions.

The following pressures have driven the requirement for significant investment in new places in Essex, both through the development of new schools and through the expansion of existing schools:

- A consistently high number of pupils with SEND cannot have their needs met in Essex schools and are subsequently educated in independent schools at high cost to both the High Needs Block of the Essex Dedicated Schools Grant and ECC budgets.
- The number of children and young people in Essex special schools have grown consistently since the SEND reforms of 2015 and have placed severe pressure on capacity as a consequence.
- Mainstream schools in Essex do educate a higher percentage of pupils with an Education Health Care Plan but many pupils with higher needs are currently being kept in provision which is not appropriate to their needs.
- The requirement to place pupils and parents/carers at the heart of planning and provision for SEND.

Essex County Council want to know your views on a proposal to on our plans to expand Harlow Fields Special School from 175 pupil places to 238 pupil places in the 2025/26 academic year in order to improve capacity for children and young people from 3-19 years with severe learning difficulties and profound and multiple learning difficulties in the locality.

I invite you to let me have your views on this proposal. All the views expressed will be taken into account by the Cabinet Member for Education Excellence, Lifelong Learning and Employability when he decides whether to publish a statutory notice about the expansion.



Clare Kershaw
Director, Education

BACKGROUND

These proposals have been developed in partnership between Essex County Council and Harlow Fields School in order to support the need for additional places for children and young people with severe learning difficulties and to provide them with the facilities that will enable them to thrive. There is an increasing need for additional spaces in West Essex, especially with the increase in new housing for Harlow and Gilston Garden Town. This has created a rising need for places at the school over the years, due to population growth and a rise in the number of children and young people who require a special school place, putting pressure on the school's infrastructure. Pupil numbers at the school have been increasing steadily and at the same time the school has accommodated a wider range of SEN needs including updates to their college facility onsite. Whilst classroom capacity has expanded the specialist spaces required to meet both increased numbers and a wider range of needs is not sufficient and needs to be addressed.

Harlow Fields is a special needs school for 175 pupils ages 3-19 with a range of complex, severe and profound learning needs. The school was rated as requires improvement by Ofsted in its last inspection. The school's website can be found here: [Harlow Fields School and College](https://www.harlowfields.org.uk/).

How Can You Make Your Views Known?

ECC is seeking the views of all interested persons about the proposal to expand Harlow Fields. At this stage no decision has been made on the expansion proposal and all the views received will be considered prior to a decision being taken as to whether to go ahead with the proposal.

This consultation is about whether you think that an expansion at Harlow Fields is needed, given the predicted increase in the number of local children needing specialist provision.

If the expansion is approved additional accommodation will be needed at the school. To ensure that the local community understands the new building's potential implications, the County Council will undertake a pre-application exhibition at the school once design work on the new accommodation is sufficiently advanced. Parents and members of the local community will be given the opportunity to review the latest draft proposals and to provide feedback prior to submission to the County Planning Authority as a full planning application, should the expansion go ahead.

The proposed provision and decision process is outlined below.

You are invited to respond to this consultation using the following electronic survey form:

<https://consultations.essex.gov.uk/school-organisation/harlowfields>

You may also send feedback and comments to:

SEND Strategy and Innovation

senstrategy@essex.gov.uk

County Hall

Market Road

Chelmsford CM1 1QH

All comments received through these mechanisms or made directly to council officers or members will be collected and included in the analysis of feedback received.

If you have any questions or would like further information about the consultation process or the expansion proposal you email Ralph Holloway, Head of SEND Strategy and Innovation at senstrategy@essex.gov.uk . Alternatively you may contact the chair of governors of the school, via the school office.

School Expansion Proposal

This consultation seeks views from stakeholders on a proposal to expand Harlow Fields by 63 places. The proposal will create additional capacity via the creation of a new build, two new external classrooms and internal remodelling of existing buildings. If this proposal is agreed the additional capacity will be available from the spring term of 2026.

Admissions

The admissions criteria for the school would not change as a result of the proposed expansion.

Transport Arrangements

Transport arrangements would remain in line with the home to school transport policies of Essex County Council. The school will review and update its existing Travel Plan and will work to encourage sustainable methods of travel to school.

Building Work

The school has limited capacity onsite due to extensions of the buildings throughout the years. The option to add an additional double modular classroom outside is key, without losing green space for the pupils. An internal remodel has been highlighted to adapt and change the rooms which are not as used and can accommodate additional classrooms and sensory break-out areas.

There have been extensive works to the school over the last couple of years, including moving sixth form students to a new building on Abbotsweld Road. The move meant additional rooms were upgraded for the current students as the school was over capacity, this also included extensive upgrades to the outside areas for all students. The future changes would be to accommodate additional students at the school.

The proposed alteration to the existing classrooms considers the existing learning patterns of the students, with IT and Science being hybrid rather than exclusive classroom based (i.e. utilising library spaces and group room-based learning). Furthermore, alternations to existing WC and changing areas will accommodate additional much needed hygiene areas for students.

Completing a programme of internal refurbishment works at Harlow Fields School will ensure that the school is fit for purpose and can provide suitable teaching spaces to take a much-needed increased number of pupils as well as improve facilities for existing children and young people.

Site surveys, and detailed design work, are being undertaken which will lead to a proposed design for the additional accommodation. Once the design for the new accommodation is sufficiently advanced, ECC propose to undertake a pre-application exhibition at the school. Parents and members of the local community will be given the opportunity to review the latest draft proposals and to provide feedback. ECC will consider all comments received prior to submitting a detailed planning application to the County Planning Authority. A summary of the pre-application consultation responses will also accompany the submitted planning application.

Funding

The County Council has made provision in its Capital Programme for the proposed additional resourced provision. The Council publishes its capital programme at www.essex.gov.uk.

What happens next?

At the end of this consultation period the Cabinet Member for Education Excellence, Lifelong Learning and Employability will consider all feedback and views expressed by interested parties during the consultation and will make a decision on whether to proceed with the school expansion proposal. The governing body of the school will also consider the feedback from this consultation and decide if it still wishes to support the proposal.

Timeline

The consultation period will run from 16th June 2025 to 14th July 2025. Below is the expected timeline for the decision process:

16 th June 2025	Consultation commence
	Meetings for parents, staff and the local community to be held at the school on 10 th July between 4 and 6 pm.
14 th July 2025	End of consultation period
August 2025	Decision by ECC on whether to publish a Statutory Notice
September 2025	Publication of Statutory Notice (if decision above is to proceed with the expansion process)
October 2025	End of four week period for representations
November 2025	Decision taken by Essex County Council on expansion proposal
* 1 January 2026	Harlow Fields expands to become a 238 place school.

* This stage will apply only if the proposal is approved by the County Council.

All written comments should be received by ECC by 14th July 2025. ECC handles information in accordance with the Freedom of Information Act 2000 and the Data

Protection Act 1998 and is the data controller for the purposes of the Data Protection Act 1998. Your responses to this consultation will only be used to assess the community's view of the proposed amalgamation and not for any other purpose. We will not give information about you to anyone outside the County Council.

The information contained in this leaflet can be made available in alternative formats: large print, Braille, audio tape or disk. Please email senstrategy@essex.gov.uk

Published June 2025