



# Building for all

An inclusive approach to schools for children with special educational needs



**WILLMOTT DIXON**

**SINCE 1852**

# Foreword

For many years, school provision for children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) has been sorely lacking, with it often siloed by specialist need and thus spread thinly across a wide geographical area. Stories of pupils travelling more than an hour each way to a suitable school have been commonplace, putting huge amounts of pressure on both the children and their parents, in addition to financial strain on the local authority to cover the travel costs.



**Nick Gibb**

*Deputy Managing Director  
Willmott Dixon – Midlands*

This can be incredibly damaging, not only in terms of the toll taken on the child by additional travel, but also the knock-on effect of the child not being as involved in their local community, and having local friendship groups as they would have if they attended a more local school.

Alongside this, the pent-up demand for suitable school spaces for SEND children is putting additional pressure on an already creaking system. Improvements in the early diagnosis of additional needs mean that more children require specialist spaces within a local school.

These challenges have been recognised in government, with local authorities challenged to review their provision to ensure that they have enough suitable school places across their region\*.

This white paper will explore some of the ways in which local authorities have tackled this challenge, with an increasing focus on an 'all-needs, all-through' approach, as we are seeing in practice with our work with Lincolnshire County Council.

The benefits of this are numerous; it minimises transitions so that the pupil becomes more engaged with their community, parents don't feel the pressure of sending their child to another area for their education, and local authorities are able to reduce transportation costs at a time when councils across the country are feeling the squeeze. Pupils are also able to mix with other children with different needs, which provides a wider perspective to learning and additional friendship groups.

There are challenges with this which we will also explore, but by taking a collaborative approach with the right partner, these can be mitigated against.

We're proud to have recently been reappointed to the Department of Education's national construction framework, and alongside this we've developed a strong portfolio of SEND schools.

In this white paper, we will detail the how, when and why of collaboration with insights from our expert team, as well as contributions from local authorities and schools about the benefits of working together.



\*HM Government. [SEND Review. Right support, Right place, Right time](#)



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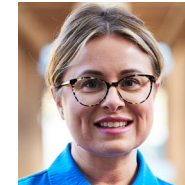


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# Perspectives



**Sue Owen**

*Head of Education Programme and LEA Officer*

**Sharon Townsend**

*Place Planning Officer*



As with all local authorities, Leicestershire's SEND provision has had to evolve to meet the changing needs of pupils, and we have built several schools over the last decade that have enabled us to better serve the needs of SEND.

"Equity of provision across the region is very important to us, and we have found that the best way of achieving this is by having a consistent design team across multiple projects, as has been the case with Willmott Dixon across the SEND schools delivered at Forest Way Ashmount and Birkett House.

"Having a strong, ongoing relationship with the design team is critical, as it means that all parties – the local authority, the school, the contractor and the end users – can engage together at the earliest possible stage in the process, which leads to collaborative decision making and helps get things right first time.

"It also means that you are able to learn lessons from previous projects and standardise design where possible, leading to quicker project delivery and the ultimate goal of equal provision across the whole of Leicestershire. 🌀"

Read more about  
Birkett House School  
or click [here](#)





# It takes a village

Many SEND school development projects have the same goal – increasing capacity to ensure that pupils' needs are met closer to their homes. However, it is only through close collaboration throughout the whole process that this can be fully achieved. Senior Preconstruction Manager, Stephen Moore, is in charge of pulling together the multi-disciplinary team that is working on Lincolnshire County Council's £86 million SEND school programme.



**Stephen Moore**  
Senior Preconstruction  
Manager



One part of the picture which has changed over the past decade or so is the prevalence of academy trusts. It is now more often that the school that is being extended to improve the SEND provision is part of an academy trust, meaning that the dynamic between the trust and the customer - the local authority - is an additional hurdle to manage.

"Typically – and understandably – the customer will be reticent to take on any legacy issues with the existing building, so this takes careful management on the contractor side to ensure that a considered and collaborative approach is taken to managing the project, especially with the refurbishment elements that inevitably form part of work at SEND schools.

"The programme of work across the most recent schools we have delivered in Lincolnshire follow a fairly standard approach – there is usually a large element of new build work, with a small percentage of refurbishment and remodelling. All have their individual intricacies, but the key theme across all of them is that they take place in operational schools.

"An additional challenge comes from the ways in which schools organically grow over time. An example of where this was a particular challenge for us was at a school in Louth, which was a highly complex project because of the way the site had developed over the years and took a huge amount of work with the school to ensure we could deliver the best impact with the minimum of disruption.

"This is where the collaborative working element is at its most critical. The amount of work that goes into refining not just the design proposals, but how we are going to build it, can't be understated, and it's only through a collaborative approach with all parties that it can work.

"This has been an overarching theme throughout the projects in Lincolnshire, and for me, it has been the biggest success. Projects of this size and nature can't be done in isolation, and it's only through proper collaboration between us as the contractor, the designers, the schools and the local authority that things get done to the best possible standard.

"There is a huge element of honesty which binds this all together. Using Lincolnshire as an example, Willmott Dixon has built a great relationship with the local authority based on the trust between both parties. We will often have to tell them something they don't like to hear – particularly when it comes to the extent of refurbishment at some schools and the associated costs of the unknowns – but by having an open and honest relationship with them, they are able to trust that we mean what we say and that will be reflected in the project delivery.

"The 'all-needs, all-through' approach now being taken by many local authorities means that bigger and better facilities for SEND students are now needed, and these new facilities need to be replicated across a region to ensure that one locality isn't falling behind another in terms of provision.



"The results the staff at SEND schools achieve – often with limited resources – are incredible, and to see people's eyes light up when they see investment in their facilities and the positive change it can bring is incredibly rewarding.

"We're highly attuned to the disruption that can be caused in a SEND setting when there is significant construction work being undertaken, and the schools are no doubt happy to see the back of us, but what is left behind is hopefully something that can deliver a brighter future for the children that use it. 🌀🌀



### The customer engagement meeting process – how Willmott Dixon collaborates on education projects

- A series of six fortnightly meetings underpinned where required by specific breakout workshops i.e. ICT, structured to streamline collaboration ahead of planning applications
- Based on the approach defined in the Department for Education framework
- Used to establish everything the team needs to know about the school
- Involvement from headteachers and principals, support workers and estates team members
- Provides a regular, strategic waypoint for design teams to work towards
- Later sessions focus on logistics of the build programme
- Results in a rigorous, detailed approach for how the project moves forwards created by a collaborative one team approach



# Perspectives



## Eileen McMorrow

SEND Programme Manager – Children’s Services

## Tina Shaw

Project Manager – Corporate Property



In a county the size of Lincolnshire, one of our key challenges with SEND provision is that special schools which cater for designated needs, such as physical disabilities and profound and multiple learning disabilities, have historically been dispersed across a wide geographical area.

“Children have been expected to travel significant distances – sometimes up to three hours per day – to attend a school which can meet their specific needs. In Lincolnshire, as is the case nationally, we have also faced significant capacity issues with an ever-growing demand on special school places.

“In collaboration with special school leaders and the Lincolnshire Parent Carer Forum, the council developed a strategy to address these challenges. The Building Communities of Specialist Provision Strategy sets out the need for special schools which can cater for all needs, ensuring children and young people with SEND can access the right health, care and education, in the right place, at the right time, as close to home as possible.



Eresby School  
in Spilsby

Willoughby Academy  
in Lincolnshire



“Key to delivering this is having a team on our side that understands and shares our vision. For us, a collaborative approach from the earliest point possible is critical as we needed contractors who could come on the journey with us.

“With an ‘all-needs, all-through’ approach, equity of provision is absolutely essential as children and families have the right to expect high-quality facilities in which to complete their education if they are to get the best possible start in life.

“This is where consistency is incredibly important, and through working with our contractors, we have been able to access the same design teams and the same consultants, leading to a consistent end result of schools that deliver the best possible learning experience for their pupils. ☺☺



☺☺ The Lincolnshire SEND schools we’re working on are all live sites, where children are working alongside our development works. The key things for us revolve around logistics – how do we get in and out, how do the pupils get in and out, how do we ensure that these things aren’t happening at the same time and, ultimately, how do we create these much-needed new learning environments without impacting the children’s school day.


“There are a lot of intricacies in SEND schools that vary depending on the school’s individual needs, and it’s about listening and being adaptable to that because what works in one setting may be completely the wrong option for another. ☺☺

**Ian Phillips**, Operations Manager, Willmott Dixon





**Andy Hardy**  
Managing Director


 For architects, the early involvement of a contractor can sometimes be viewed negatively, but for many types of project, the design and build approach is absolutely the right one to take. Having worked with Willmott Dixon on three SEND schools since 2010, it is clear that they understand the importance of being on the journey from the start, and that is a huge positive.

“Part of this is the understanding that listening to the client is critical. From a design perspective for SEND schools, the best scenario is when the end user, the local authority, contractor, and design team are involved together from the earliest possible point.

“What this leads to is a joined-up approach where there is no separation between the building, the landscape, and its interior, creating something that is a whole site and highly focused on delivering the needs of the end users.

“This early engagement also means that you can gain a full understanding of the connection between the pupils, their parents and carers, and the staff at the school. Typically, staff in SEND schools are long-tenured and have been having to make the best of a situation with their existing facility that isn't ideal, so the opportunity for them to work alongside the design team to create something that is inclusive and provides the best opportunities for everyone shouldn't be ignored.

“From personal experience, I know that SEND schools are hugely positive and inspiring places, but it's important from a design perspective to make sure that everything counts. Good architecture is about making everything count and designing a building that meets the needs of the end users, and this is never more important than when it comes to SEND schools.

“With something as critical as this, there can't be architecture for architecture's sake – it's about providing a service that delivers on a need. 

## Inclusive design for SEND schools – Seven tips from Andy Hardy, A+G Architects –

### Understanding the range of ages and disabilities catered for is critical.

Many SEND schools cover all needs, and ages from four to 19, so be creative about how you can create segregation that represents progression from one age bracket to another.

**Really consider equipment storage.** Depending on a child's disabilities, they could potentially need three or four pieces of equipment to help them get around, so creative storage solutions are required.

**Small things make a huge difference.** Ensuring that classrooms have low-level windows and underfloor heating for children that spend time laying down, or having corridors that provide vistas that create a journey through the building, can have a big impact.

**Finding a balance is key.** While some pupils with SEND need lots of visual stimulation, the opposite can also be the case. Make sure you are considering calming spaces or rooms that are proximate to all classrooms to give pupils the opportunity for a less stimulating environment.

**Don't think inside the box.** Make the absolute maximum of your outside space and ensure it covers all needs as much as possible, whether that be raised flower beds to allow wheelchairs under, or accessible water features for children with sensory issues.

**Make sure transportation is central to your plans.** It's important offloading areas have sheltered spaces and are as accessible as possible from the school itself.


**The staff are amazing.** Looking after the staff of the school within the design is as important as looking after the pupils. Their role is intensive, so they need to have spaces – both indoor and outdoor – where they can take time away from the classroom.

# Building for the end user

All projects need to work with end users in mind, but this is particularly critical with SEND schools. Les Henson has been leading school construction projects within Leicestershire for over 20 years, including three SEND schools – all of which have been design and build turnkey projects.



**Les Henson**  
Senior Operations Manager

 Early engagement with the key figures at the schools is absolutely essential. For each of our projects in Leicestershire, our first port of call is always the head teacher and the business manager of each school to establish what their greatest need is in terms of catering for their pupils.

“Once these essentials are established, we look to wider engagement. In the case of these schools, we undertook several study tours alongside Leicestershire County Council to look at SEND provision of similar size to the proposals in different areas of the country. What this provides is actionable insight, as it gives both the contractor and the customer the opportunity to speak to people that have gone through the process themselves and identify what learnings there are to be gained.

“While most design and build processes will have some element of this early engagement, what is essential particularly with SEND schools is that this continues throughout the process. The lead teachers from the school need to be fully integrated in the meetings when we discuss design so that they can act as a conduit for input from the wider school community, but it is equally as important to engage with the pupils themselves as well.

“This also applies to the supply chain and consultants, as they need to have a view of how the children are taught and the problems they face daily to give them a true appreciation of what they are designing for.

“While every school has its own challenges, there is an element of commonality across SEND schools that means we can apply lessons from previous projects to future ones. With the huge amount of equipment required to serve the



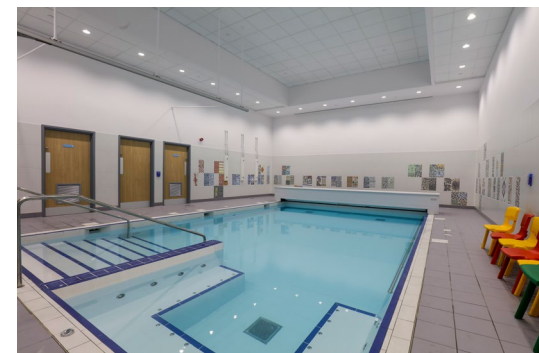
## SEND schools delivered by Willmott Dixon in Leicestershire



**Forest Way School**  
125-place school in the National Forest  
*Winner of The Times 'Best New Build Primary School' Award*



**Ashmount School**  
125-place school with full range of needs



**Birkett House**  
130-place 'all-needs, all-through' school



varied needs of the pupils, storage is a major issue for SEND settings and is something we try and address as early in the process as possible to ensure we are delivering a result that is fit for purpose.

"Transportation is another recurring issue for SEND projects. Because of the need for one-to-one support, the staff-to-pupil ratio is significantly higher than in mainstream schools, so this has a significant impact on parking provision. Similarly, many pupils will be dropped off and picked up from the school with specially adapted vehicles, so the approach to traffic flow needs to be more rigorous than it may be at a school where the majority of pupils arrive by public transport.

"For all the technical and practical necessities, one key message that has shone through across the projects in Leicestershire is that there is a need to move away from the more clinical feel that SEND schools have had in the past. A lot of the pupils have spent significant amounts of their lives in hospitals, and the last thing they want is to be reminded of that when they are at school.

"It boils down to investing time at the start of the process into speaking to the end users – in this case, the teachers and the pupils. The more you do this, the more likely you are to get it right first time. 🌀



Bader Academy  
in Doncaster



# Creating six all-needs, all-through SEND schools in Lincolnshire

## CASE STUDY

As part of Lincolnshire County Council's £86 million investment into special needs education, Willmott Dixon's team is responsible for multiple school projects. All schools are being extended to be 'all-needs, all-through' and will improve support for local children by reducing travel time, enhancing provisions and increasing school places.



### St Bernard's School in Louth

- The creation of a new teaching block and library
- A dedicated hygiene suite and laundry area
- Improved kitchen and dining space
- Renovations to medical professional areas and increased office and break out spaces and additional car parking
- Profound and multiple learning disabilities support to expand the school's offering – including a dedicated therapy area, main hall with combined dining and PE space, art space, new life skills and recreation spaces



or click [here](#)



### The Priory Academy in Spalding

- Creation of nine new classrooms
- New social recreation space, life skills room
- Increased WC provision of suitable need, meeting space and ancillary staff facilities
- Minor refurbishment of existing school building



or click [here](#)



### Eresby School in Spilsby

- New modular building
- Additional classroom space
- New hall for rebound therapy
- Hygiene suite facilities
- Dedicated IT suite and science lab suitable for all needs
- Calm rooms, physio space and improved staff facilities
- Car park extension and designated drop-off area
- Reprovision of a cycle track and sensory and horticultural zones



or click [here](#)



### Willoughby School in Bourne

- New modular building
- Additional classrooms and hygiene suites
- Dining hall, nurse and physio spaces
- Car park extension
- Remodelling of grass play area
- Additional space for Profound and Multiple Learning Disability classrooms and specialist spaces for food technology, science, and design and technology



or click [here](#)

Other schools include St Lawrence schools in Louth and Horncastle.



# Embedding sustainability to create a school that's fit for the future

CASE STUDY

## St Lawrence SEND School



### Project highlights:

- Replacing an end-of-life building to provide better value-for-money
- Incorporating sustainable features
- Providing the infrastructure to make future upgrades quicker and easier



Read more about St Lawrence SEND School or click [here](#)

Our Midlands team is currently building a new special education needs and disabilities (SEND) school for Lincolnshire County Council. This is the fifth SEND school project we have worked on for the council, with all of the schools forming part of the council's investment to improve SEND support for local children and young people.

Extra precautions are being taken to ensure minimal disruption for students and staff. The new school is being built on a live site, next to the old building which will remain operational during the works.

### Facilities

The new school will include a huge range of facilities designed for accessibility and inclusivity.

Spaces include:

- A health hub offering physiotherapy
- Soft play and sensory areas
- A full education suite including science labs, design and technology, and art classrooms
- Essential life and social skills areas

- Hall spaces with changing and hygiene suites
- State-of-the-art profound and multiple learning disability (PMLD) suites
- Covered external play spaces
- 65 parking spaces, with accessible, enlarged and minibuses spaces
- Capacity for 28 minibuses for a managed pick-up/drop-off system

### Embedding sustainability

The new school is taking a fabric-first approach to deliver an improved U-value that surpasses the standard found in most schools. This approach will help to ensure the building is more energy efficient.

The building will also incorporate other sustainable solutions such as air source heat pumps and electric vehicle charging points.

### Future-proofing the school

As well as embedding some sustainable measures into the current build, we are also helping to future-proof the building.

With future Governmental targets requiring buildings to be net-zero by 2050, we have also incorporated the infrastructure for future upgrades to the building. Including these in the build will help to reduce the cost of future upgrades as well as making them quicker and easier, reducing the disruption to students and staff in the future.

### Giving back to the community

As this will be a live site, engaging the students at the school will be a key focus for our team. We have set up a number of site tours for the students, as well as a specific viewing area where students can stand at a safe distance and observe the progress being made on their new school.

We will also be offering site tours, work experience and careers guidance to other educational institutions in the area such as Boston College and a local grammar school.

# Creating a net-zero carbon school for 350 pupils with SEND requirements

CASE STUDY

## Silverwood net-zero SEND school



### Project highlights:

- 350 SEND school places for early years, primary, secondary and post 16
- Leaving a biodiversity net gain of 14%
- Maximising natural daylighting and ventilation to create an airy feel
- Creating a 'school within a school'
- Costing £29m



Read more about Silverwood net-zero SEND School or click [here](#)

Willmott Dixon is well underway to delivering a net-zero carbon school – Silverwood School – which will create 350 SEND school places for early years, primary, secondary and post-16.

The project will create a 'school within a school', with a community of small teaching clusters that will provide a range of specialist teaching spaces, therapeutic support, and quiet dining. Each cluster will be designed to offer plenty of space to move around while maximising natural daylighting and ventilation to create an airy feel.

Also planned is a hydrotherapy pool, a new all-weather sport pitch, new playing fields, landscaping, and ecological enhancements resulting in a biodiversity net gain of 14%.

To achieve net-zero carbon in operation, the buildings will utilise biomass boilers and incorporate a large array of photovoltaic (PV)

solar panels that harness renewable energy. The school will also use Willmott Dixon's Energy Synergy™ service, which models energy performance target data against actual 'in-use' performance for three years, ensuring energy use targets set out at design stage are met when operational.

Extensive ecological enhancements will be delivered, including improved natural grassland to increase the foraging resource for bats and other species, while hedgerows will be increased by more than 200% as part of an overall biodiversity net gain of 14%.



# A defined purpose

Senior Social Value Manager, Marie Wilkes, leads on delivering social value across Willmott Dixon's education projects in the Midlands. She shares how her personal experiences as a parent of a child with SEND has shaped her approach.



**Marie Wilkes**  
Senior Social Value Manager



The role and importance of social value has changed dramatically in my time working with Willmott Dixon. Where it was once a one-liner in tenders about what we would do for the local community, some bids now have social value accounting for as much as 30% of the total score, so it's vitally important that we have a defined purpose and direction for its delivery.

"This is particularly the case when it comes to SEND schools. As the parent of a child with SEND, I have experience first-hand how things have been previously. When my daughter was at school, careers education – something that every student should have access to regardless of ability or disability – wasn't really promoted to her. Thankfully, this is no longer the case, and our approach to social value when working in SEND settings reflects this.

"Especially with projects like these, there isn't a one-size-fits-all approach. As Ian Phillips alluded to earlier in this paper when talking about the operational delivery, what is right for one school isn't necessarily right for another, and this is also the case with social value, so there can't be a cookie cutter approach.

"For some SEND students, having a construction site at their school is an incredibly daunting thing. Live sites can be, by their very nature, loud, heavily populated and naturally disruptive, so it is essential that our approach to social value in these settings takes that into account.

"St Bernard's School in Louth is a great example of how this can be done – our team there has created "book sacks" for the pupils, which include books and materials on how a construction site works, as well as activities to help them get a better understanding of what is happening there so they can be more relaxed about what is going on.



"For the older pupils, work experience is particularly important as they look to build upon the skills they need for adult life. These young people are often the furthest from the job market and it's vital they get the support they need, so we're very proud to offer work experience placements both on our sites and our regional offices.

"Everybody has a skill and everyone is good at something – you sometimes just have to think a bit differently about how you unlock it. The overall approach to SEND education now is vastly improved from when my daughter went to school, and the quality of careers education is something we're very proud to contribute to on each of our sites.

"The schools that we're building now would have made my daughter's studies much easier, and if you're a parent, that's all you really want. 🙏🙏

# Summary

When you speak to parents, teachers and local authorities, there is no question that the 'all-needs, all-through' approach to SEND education is the one that delivers the best results for all involved.



**Nick Gibb**

*Deputy Managing Director  
Willmott Dixon – Midlands*



Doing this well, however, can prove a challenge if you don't approach the project with an open mind for collaboration and working hand-in-glove with all elements of the supply chain.

“What has proven key from Willmott Dixon's experience is that the earlier this engagement and collaboration happens, the better the chance of delivering a successful scheme that give the desired outcomes for the customer.

“The most successful SEND development projects we have been involved in have been ones where we've worked together with the customer and the architect from RIBA Stage 1. By being involved from the start of the journey, contractors are able to contribute their knowledge to the design process, meaning that budgets can be much better controlled than when they become involved at RIBA Stage 3 and have to value engineer their way back to making the project cost efficient.

“The financial question is going to remain one that is tricky to address. The harsh reality is that the economic equation of cost per pupil is significantly higher for SEND schools and that isn't likely to change any time soon, so the key is delivering true value for money in terms of addressing the need in a region and ensuring that the end users are getting the best possible facility for the local authority's outlay.

“The government is recognising these changing times and recently launched its 'right support, right place, right time' open consultation on SEND schools, a link to which can be found through the QR code on the back page of this white paper.

“What is critical is the passion for getting it right first time. When we see some of the difficulties that some of the children in SEND schools live with, and the challenges that are posed to the staff in delivering the best education possible, it provides a real sense of purpose to our approach to the projects, and we are incredibly proud of our achievements in the sector.

“We'd love to talk with you in more detail about our approach to SEND schools, so if you'd like to know more, please don't hesitate to get in touch with any of us on the contact details overleaf. 🌀



# Get in touch...

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**WILLMOTT DIXON**

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