



Department
for Education

Worcestershire Special Free School

**Contextual information for applicant
groups applying to open a new
Special Free School**

Worcestershire County Council

May 2023

OVERVIEW

The Department for Education is inviting applications from proposer groups to open a new special free school in Worcestershire.

Applicant groups can access the key school specification information, along with the full 'How to Apply' guidance, on [GOV.UK](https://www.gov.uk). You should read these documents carefully before completing mandatory pre-registration.

The school specification document sets out the key factual details about the proposed school, including the proposed size, SEND designation, age range, suggested top-up funding, and proposed site.

This document provides applicant groups with additional contextual information provided by Worcestershire County Council, which includes:

- The rationale, context and need for the school;
- Details on the commissioning of places, including the involvement of any other LAs commissioning places;
- A brief description of the existing provision in the area;
- Future expected growth in pupil numbers; and
- How the LA expects places within the school to be filled.

RATIONALE, CONTEXT AND NEED FOR THE SCHOOL, INCLUDING PROPOSED COMMISSIONING ARRANGEMENTS

In Worcestershire we want all children and young people with special educational needs and / or disabilities to be truly seen and respected as individuals and to be the best they can be.

The Local Area Partnership SEND Strategy (2022 – 25) priorities include: Priority 2: There is sufficient and effective SEND provision; and Priority 5: Children and Young People with autism achieve positive outcomes & the support required to enable this to be in place.

The proposal for a 120 ASD Special Free School for 5 – 19-year-olds (Reception to Year 14) will better meet the needs of a cohort of children and young people who have the potential to be high achievers and currently receive their education at high cost independent or non-maintained special schools in or out of county.

In January 2022 (Census), there were 83 Worcestershire children and young people with EHCPs and a primary need of ASD who fit within the above cohort of pupils. These 83 children and young people who were accessing their education provision in Independent, Non-Maintained Special schools in or out of county, cost on average £58k per place, a total of £4.8m per annum. The new special free school will reduce the average cost of a place to £25k (dependant on level of need) an annual saving of £2.7m. This will support the reduction in spend needed to reduce the current High Needs deficit.

The Local Area SEND Re-Visit Inspection in November 2021 found that the concern about lack of suitable specialist provision remained a concern with “too many children being placed in settings outside of Worcestershire and independent settings ... and too many children without a school place”. We have developed our plan for specialist provision continuum as part of the Local Offer including the development of provision for autism in mainstream settings. We have 4 workstreams to respond to the Accelerated Progress Plan (DFE). Taking coordinated action to forecast and develop our specialist provision is one workstream of this plan. This new free school represents a sustainable mid to long term plan for addressing this particular need.

EXISTING PROVISION, EXPECTED FUTURE GROWTH IN PUPIL NUMBERS, AND HOW PLACES IN THE NEW SCHOOL WILL BE FILLED

Worcestershire has no specific special school that caters for the needs of pupils with Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Our current state-funded provision includes 9 special schools and 14 mainstream schools with resource bases designated as mainstream autism bases (MABs). The new Special Free school for pupils with ASD will fill a gap in provision. The MABs have limited capacity and are catering for pupils with an increased level of need. All special schools within Worcestershire have a large cohort of pupils with ASD and associated difficulties, however they also have limited capacity to provide support for the increased number of children with ASD and MLD.

In February 2022 there were 472 children and young people in our special schools with a diagnosis of ASD as well as a further 83 in independent special, non-maintained special or out of county provision. There are 149 pupils placed in Mainstream Autism Bases. There is very little capacity within our current specialist provisions to provide the additional places required to meet the needs of pupils with ASD and MLD.

There had been a year-on-year growth since 2014 of pupils requiring an Education, Health, and Care Plan (EHCP) in schools - an additional 2354 pupils since 2014. In line with the trend experienced in the mainstream sector, we expect this figure to continue to rise with the growth of the general school population. There has also been an increase in children with EHCP's being diagnosed with ASD, with a further 954 children awaiting diagnosis. We know and there is evidence that a growing number of children and young people are being diagnosed with autism. We also know that a growing number of children and young people find school environments overwhelming. Worcestershire continues to take steps to ensure inclusivity in our mainstream schools but also recognise the importance of the right school provision being available and for some this will require a provision specifically for children with autism.

Primarily the places will be filled from the population that would currently be placed in out of county specialist schools, which will enable the Local Authority to reduce the use of out-of-borough placements over time, our special schools and MABs. This will relieve current pressures on special schools as places will become available for children with other complex needs. It will also relieve pressures on schools with MABs as the more complex students with ASD + MLD could be accommodated in special schools.

This proposal will support the local authority to meet its statutory responsibilities with regard to the provision of special school places across Worcestershire. It will positively impact on children and young people up to the age of 19 years with an EHCP with Autism, by providing choice of provision within the local area. It will also release some capacity within the boroughs other specialist settings to meet the different needs of other children and young people with an EHC plan.