

Proposed new designated free special school West Northamptonshire

New school specification

Section A: introduction

1 Under section 6A of the Education and Inspections Act, 2006 (the ‘free school presumption’) where a local authority identifies the need to establish a new school it must, in the first instance, seek proposals to establish an academy. West Northamptonshire council (WNC) has identified the need to establish a new special school with places for pupils on the autistic spectrum continuum (ASC), with speech, language and communication needs (SLCN) and severe learning difficulties (SLD), to open in September 2024.

2 From the vesting day of the council (1 April 2021), it was evident that there were insufficient places for pupils with high levels of special educational needs (SEN) – that is, pupils with an education, health and care plan (EHCP). This has resulted in an urgent need to create new specialist educational provision within resourced units at a mainstream school, and through the creation of a new special school.

3 The consultation that preceded this proposal (attached as annex 1) showed that all our special schools except one (where there were five places at the time of writing) were over capacity. The capacity of our special schools is 940, which is exceeded by 120 (13 per cent). Since all resourced provisions are also at capacity, this has resulted in a significant dependence on independent providers.

4 This has two adverse effects: first, most independent school places are located away from the homes of pupils, who need to travel long distances. Second, the places are much more expensive – on average £57,000 – which equates to an overall annual cost of £11,200,000 to the high needs block. This does not include the annual cost of transport (£3,400,000), which falls to the council’s general fund.

5 The cost to the council, through both the high needs block and the general fund, is unsustainable. The former is forecast to overspend by £5,000,000 by the end of the current financial year. As this deficit is structural and was £2,500,000 at the end of the 2021/22 financial year, it will increase by £2,500,000 each year unless action is taken to reduce expenditure. While increasing specialist places in the state system will not avoid cost to the extent needed to achieve a balanced budget, it will be around 80 per cent of the savings and cost avoidance required.

6 In November 2021, the council’s chief executive asked for a report that demonstrated the need for a new special school. This was drafted and finalised for the executive leadership team’s meeting on 15 December 2021.

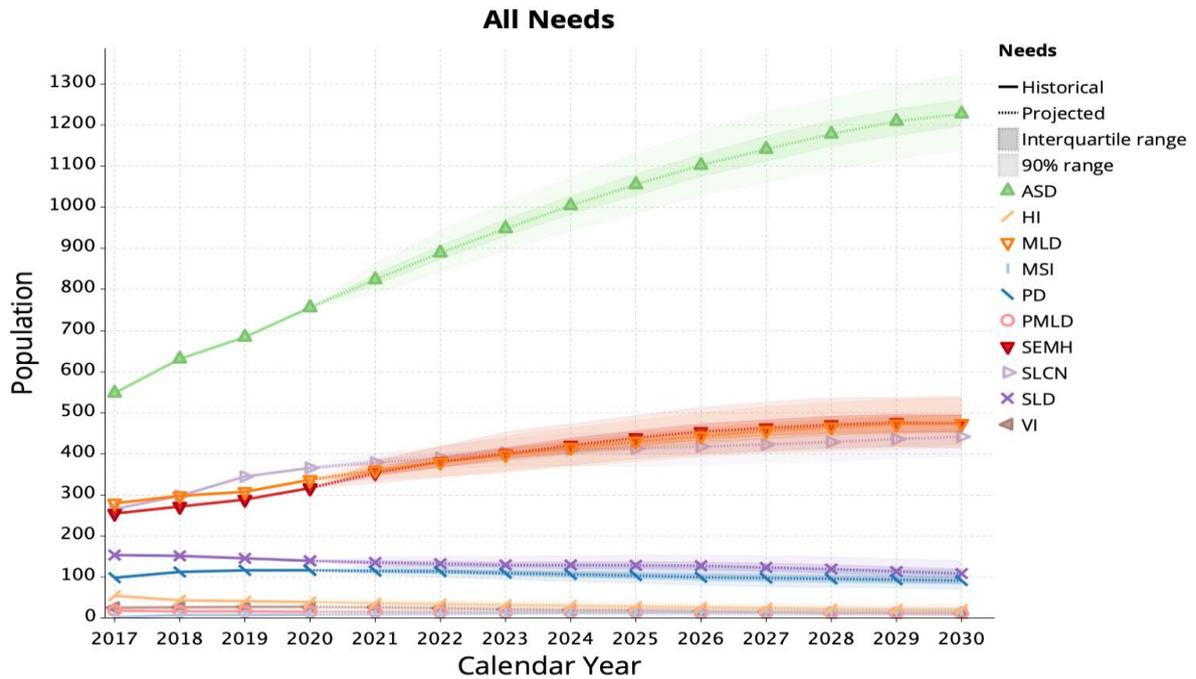
Needs analysis

7 The report is attached to this specification as annex 1. For ease of reference, the key forecasting data are summarised here:

- the total number of pupils who had an education, health and care plan (EHCP) was 2,938 in January 2021 (or 22);
- **ASC** as the primary need is forecast to increase from 756 pupils in 2020 to 1,055 pupils in the period ending 2025, an increase of **299** pupils or **40 per cent**;
- **SLCN** as the primary need is forecast to increase from 337 pupils in 2020 to 430 pupils in the period ending 2025, an increase of **47** pupils or **13 per cent**;
- the ratio of boys to girls is 3:1 for pupils with ASC; 3:1 for SCLN and 2:1 for SLD;
- the total number of pupils requiring a place at an independent provider increased from 105 pupils in January 2020 to 193 pupils in September 2021, an increase of **69** pupils or **66 per cent**;
- the average cost per place commissioned by WNC in an independent provision is **£56,788** - the total cost of all WNC pupils placed in an independent provision represents a cost to the HNB of the dedicated schools grant (DSG) of **£11,200,000** annually; and

- The table below (reproduced from the consultation) shows that the highest projection in terms of both numbers and percentage growth is for children on the autistic spectrum, but that SEMH and SLCN pupils numbers are also projected to increase significantly between 2022 and 2030.

Mastodon projection to 2030 – all SEN types



Application process

The indicative timeline for the project is:

- 15 June 2022: the full free special school specification is published for prospective sponsors;
- 29 July 2022: application window closes;
- 15 August 2022: council ‘preferred bidder’ decision communicated to DfE;
- September 2022: DfE confirmation of the appointment of a sponsor;
- September 2022: planning starts;
- 2023: building work starts
- September 2024: school part-opens.

Assessing proposals

8 WNC and the Department for Education (DfE) will use the model criteria from the [free school presumption guidance](#) when assessing proposals in line with the published school specification.

Scoring

Each section of the application form will be assessed and scored against the following criteria:

- 0 = the evidence and argument contained in the application is ‘inadequate’;
- 1 = the evidence and argument contained in the application is ‘adequate’;
- 2 = the evidence and argument contained in the application is ‘good’;
- 3 = the evidence and argument contained in the application is ‘excellent’.

9 An assessment panel, observed by the DfE, chaired by an independent subject matter expert, supported by senior managers from WNC’s education service, a local special school head teacher and a representative of parents will assess all proposals received. This process will include face to face interviews with short-listed applicants.

Panel Member Name	Role
SME (Subject Matter Expertise)	Panel chair
Chris Kiernan	Interim director of children services
Shazia Umer	Head of place planning and admissions
Anthony Giles	Head of SEN assessment
Katie Morlidge	Head of school effectiveness
TBA	Special school
TBA	Parent representative
TBA	DfE regional office

10 After this process has been completed, the local authority will put forward a recommendation to the Department for Education that provides evidence that the new special free school will raise the overall standard of special educational provision, reduce social disadvantage and add high quality specialist school places to West Northamptonshire’s specialist educational estate.

11 The regional director for the East Midlands, on behalf of the secretary of state for education, will consider the local authority and his department’s recommendations before confirming the proposer that will run the new school. The regional director will inform the local authority and the successful proposer of its decision, and the local authority will inform any unsuccessful proposers.

12 To discuss your application before submission, please contact chris.kiernan@westnorthants.gov.uk

The application process

13 Applicants must ensure that they are on the DfE’s approved sponsor list. Any applicants submitting bids that are not on the approved list must contact the DfE before submitting a bid to West Northamptonshire council. Information about sponsorship is [here](#).

14 Applications must be received by **11pm on Friday 29 July 2022** and must use the free school presumption application form ([xx link to the form needed here](#)) to be considered for evaluation.

15 Please submit your application form as a PDF and return it to alice.o’rourke@westnorthants.gov.uk **marked for the attention of Chris Kiernan.**

Section B: the school

Site location, type of school, pupil capacity and planned opening date

16 The school will be a co-educational special free school catering for pupils, aged between 4 and 18, with ASC, SCLN and for a small number of pupils who have SLD. Pupils will follow several educational pathways, including entry level 1 to level 2 functional skills qualifications and / or GCSEs, and vocational qualifications. The plan is for the school to open to its first intake, initially across years reception to 11, of up to 125 pupils in September 2024. Post-16 provision will be offered in subsequent years.

17 The council has identified land on St. John's Road, Tiffield (near Towcester - see [here](#) – the map - and [here](#) – the satellite image). The land is owned by Tiffield St. John's charitable trust: the trustee has agreed to lease this land to the successful proposer. The proposed buildings will be subject to planning approval. Public consultation will be carried out in line with statutory planning consultation and judicial review periods for land and property developments.

18 The site is located just over eight miles to the south-west of Northampton, just off the A43 – the main road from Northampton to Towcester. Silverstone and Brackley are both nearby with good transport links serving the area.

19 There is an existing special school on the same site - Gateway School and Technology College (see [here](#)). This is a mixed secondary special school that caters for 63 pupils aged 11-16 years with social, emotional and mental health (SEMH) needs, all pupils have an education, health and care plan (EHCP). It is maintained by the local authority and had its outstanding judgement confirmed after a short inspection in May 2019. The school is in the process of joining a multi academy trust (the Creating Tomorrow MAT).

Education phases and admission arrangements

20 The school will provide education for pupils from reception through to year 13. There will be between 15 and 20 pupils per cohort, with sixth-form provision for up to 30 pupils (xx check).

21 Admissions to the school will be restricted to children between 4 and 18 years old who have an EHCP. The local authority will consider parents' requests for their child to be placed on roll at the school, and will then consult the governing body, principal or proprietor of the school. LA officers will consider the trust's comments very carefully before deciding whether to name it in the pupil's EHC plan, consistent with the requirements of the SEN code of practice (see [here](#), pp 172-4).

Transport arrangements

22 The Education Act, 1996 contains the law on school transport. The government has also issued statutory guidance called [Home-to-school travel and transport 2014](#). Local authorities must have regard to this when carrying out their duties on home to school travel and transport and sustainable travel.

23 The government has issued non-statutory guidance on [home to school travel for pupils requiring special arrangements 2004](#), which details best practice in providing transport for children with SEN. This sets out some key principles. Moreover, the SEN and disability code of practice, 2015 sets out the considerations for a child with an EHCP.

24 Given the proposed location of the school, it is likely that many of the pupils will be provided with bus transport to school, with a minority of parents using personal transport. A small number of pupils are likely to arrive by taxi. Appropriate arrangements for the arrival and departure of buses and cars at the beginning and end of the school day will form part of the planning process.

Community use and possible shared facilities

25 The new buildings will contain facilities, including a sports hall and various other facilities for which there will be a demand for community use. The trust operating the school will be expected to provide the facilities for local communities at the agreed local rates.

26 The trust will also be expected to share the use of its activities with other settings, where use can be accommodated after considering the academy's own curriculum needs.

The character and ethos of the school

27 The new school's proprietor should take account of West Northamptonshire council's draft SEND (Special Educational Needs and Disabilities) strategy. This is a co-produced strategy, involving all statutory partners, parents of children with SEND and children with SEND. The six key priorities are based on our self-assessment, summarised as:

- priority one: working closely in partnership with parents and their children – in too many cases, parents feel and have felt a lack of engagement with service providers;
- priority two: improving integrated working between the key agencies – schools, the education service, social care, the NPCF and the information and advice service;
- priority three: the recognition of additional needs at the earliest possible stage, and swift intervention to meet identified needs – in too many cases, this has not been achieved, leading to progress and attainment at lower levels than could have been the case for some children;
- priority four: ensuring local provision is responsive to needs and improves outcomes, especially but not solely strengthening inclusion in mainstream settings and schools: this is a key and significant challenge, especially in the secondary phase of education, with too many parents of children with SEN unable to access a mainstream place, and increasing demand for specialist places;
- priority five: ensuring sufficiency of good quality specialist state school places: this is a key and central priority as the self-assessment shows that this is an area of significant challenge; and
- priority six: the fair and efficient allocation of resources – the present funding system is unfair and, in some cases, results in insufficient resources. At the same time, the high needs block (HNB) has a structural overspend, which must be eradicated within the planning period.

28 Proposers should also reference the council's vision, which, as a new unitary council, is a great place to live, work, visit and thrive, a place where:

- there is opportunity for all – where children are given the best start in life and vulnerable children are supported and protected: a place where all children grow up qualified and inspired to succeed;
- people are proud to live, with strong sustainable communities, decent homes, a fulfilling job, and stress-free travel through well connected places;
- people are supported to live independent, self-sufficient lives and where everyone has the best life chances;
- services are joined up and if you need a helping hand you will get it;
- there is a thriving and prosperous economy that draws in investment, visitors, and talent;
- we have modern towns but where rural character is cherished; and
- we are at the forefront of action on climate change with clean air, sustainable growth and a flourishing natural environment.

29 The full vision and strategy is [here](#).

Section C: vision

30 This is your opportunity to tell us in your own words about the overarching vision for your school – which should be consistent with the other sections of your application – and how it informs your education plan. You will need to demonstrate in later sections that the vision is both deliverable and affordable within the available funding. Applications should evidence all the relevant criteria in [Annex C](#) of the free school presumption guidance.

31 Please also ensure you include the following:

- clear evidence of how your school will align with West Northamptonshire’s SEND draft strategy – in particular, you should show how your trust would improve the lives of local children with ASD, SCLN and SLD, focusing on opportunities that allow pupils to achieve their full potential, build strong independence skills, live healthy and fulfilling lives, feel supported, and valued, and where their contributions to their local communities are welcomed;
- a strong educational vision and how this informs your education plan, based on high standards of attainment for pupils on roll following different educational pathways at each key stage with reference to learning pathways that offer vocational as well as academic study;
- a pupil-centred development strategy that underpins the educational vision and nurtures the abilities of all the school’s pupils to promote identity, emotional understanding and overall well-being, ensuring that all pupils at the special school are healthy, safe, engaged, supported, and challenged within a positive school climate;
- the support you will provide to meet of all pupils’ needs, including looked after and previously looked after children, child carers, children living in poverty, at risk of exclusion, with attendance or issues and Gypsy, Roma and Travellers, asylum seekers, refugees, and new migrants;
- your commitment to excellent outcomes and high quality of teaching and learning that enables all pupils to be successful, self-aware, proud, happy, independent, and able to pursue a variety of careers.

32 If you have more than one school in your Trust, explain the overarching vision for your chain of schools and your planned expansion strategy (how many schools you have in total, phase and timescales).

33 In addition, applicants are encouraged to provide the following detail:

- a brief explanation of autism specialism, particular ethos, distinctive pedagogy, or educational philosophy, including specific differing approaches to managing a coeducational offer;
- how your school will bring innovation to the local wider system and collaborate effectively with existing mainstream and special schools within West Northamptonshire; and
- how you will manage and develop your workforce to create local expertise and a sustainable work-life balance for all staff.

34 If the proposed school is in a different area from your existing academy or academies, please explain how you will ensure that the new school will be well supported, and specifically:

- how your proposed school would achieve the expectation set out in paragraph 1.37 of the [Special Educational Needs and Disability Code of Practice, 2015](#) and meet pupils’ identified needs;
- your plans for appropriate engagement with the local community, local schools, parents, and autism-specific voluntary and charitable organisations during the pre-opening period; and
- how you plan to engage with those commissioning places at your proposed school, local partners and providers across Education, Health and Care, local parent carer forums and children.

Section D: education plan

35 Your education plan must explain how your school will achieve its education vision, set out in the previous section. There are four elements:

- 1 the curriculum;
- 2 measuring pupil performance;
- 3 the staffing structure; and
- 4 ensuring inclusivity

36 Applications should evidence all the relevant criteria in [Annex C](#) of the free school presumption guidance. Please ensure you include the following:

- an ambitious, broad and balanced, deliverable curriculum plan, which is consistent with the vision and pupil intake, including a curriculum table and how you would manage to open the school with pupils in differing statutory school age year groups;
- strategies for measuring pupil performance effectively and setting challenging targets, demonstrating a clear understanding of the expected pupil intake and their needs;
- a staffing structure that will deliver the planned curriculum within the expected income levels; with a focus on outstanding teaching (including strategies for effective performance management) and developing pupils' independence from the outset, including a staff build up chart;
- the way in which your trust will ensure that the needs of all pupils are fully provided for and how the school will be fully inclusive, with details of how you plan to support pupils with co-occurring conditions, including mental health and neurodevelopmental conditions, such as mild to moderate learning difficulties and / or specific learning difficulties;
- details of enrichment and extended services, for example, breakfast clubs, sports clubs, homework clubs, after school clubs and music and art clubs and opportunities for community engagement;
- the school's approach to: PHSE; the Prevent duty; safeguarding and welfare; and promoting fundamental British values (democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty, mutual respect, and tolerance of those with different faiths and beliefs); and
- relationships and sex education (RSE) that enables all pupils to develop the skills to make safe and sensible life choices, and to form positive beliefs, values and attitudes to the choices made by others and including how the school will develop a positive culture on sexuality and relationships.

37 In addition, applicants should provide the following detail:

- a list of subjects and qualifications you trust will offer;
- the number of hours spent per week on the subject (you do not need to provide sample timetables);
- the curriculum that your trust is proposing to teach, explaining how it meets the needs of the expected intake of pupils and their special educational needs;
- the length of the school day, including any enrichment time, making a distinction between compulsory and voluntary activities;
- how you will use resources from an existing school or other organisations to help deliver the curriculum/a subject or improve teaching capability;
- how you intend to develop literacy, numeracy, and science skills;
- an understanding of the expected pupil intake and their needs, e.g. levels of pupils with English as an additional language (EAL) and free school meals (FSM);

- details of a strategy to assess and meet the needs of all pupils including: looked after children, children requiring reading recovery and / or intervention (including pupils with EAL); with differing degrees of special educational needs and/ or disability and pupils who attract the pupil premium;
- describe how you will establish a baseline of pupils' current level of attainment (including external validation of this);
- describe how you will assess and monitor pupil performance and progress, ensuring this relates to the outcomes in an individual's EHC plan (please include preparation for adulthood outcomes for pupils in year 9 and beyond);
- the strategies you will put in place to support pupils to be successful when they enter and leave your school to transition to their next phase of education or future employment – this needs to include your approach to careers education, information, and advice so that pupils become happy, healthy, empowered, and included adults, who participate in, and contribute towards society;
- set out what success looks like for pupil performance, behaviour, and attendance – this needs to reflect high aspirations for emotional well-being and personal development and achievement, as well as academic achievement;
- explain how you will use success measures to improve the school's performance, including non-academic targets for students' skills and outcomes in independence, employability, healthy living, and participation in society; and
- describe your approach to developing pupils' social learning and understanding, promoting independence as well as mental, emotional, and physical well-being.

38 Prospective sponsors will also be assessed on how they plan to:

- use assessment data to inform teaching and increase progression and attainment for all pupils with EHCPs;
- measure the quality of teaching in the classroom;
- involve parents and report progress to them against EHCP outcomes; and
- involve pupils and their families in decisions about their support, ambitions, and progress.

Section E: capacity and capability

39 Your trust will need to demonstrate that it has the capacity and capability to set up and run the proposed school and that it has access to appropriate educational, financial, and other expertise, either within your group or externally. Please evidence all the relevant criteria in [Annex C](#) of the free school presumption guidance.

40 As a minimum please ensure you include the following:

- who will be in charge during pre-opening and provide a copy of their CV;
- the resources your trust can draw upon and deploy to support the development of the new free school by the opening date;
- clear evidence that you have the range of skills and abilities necessary to set up and then run a school effectively, including managing school finances; leadership, project management, marketing, human resources, safeguarding and health and safety;
- how the school would be organised and what the governance arrangements would look like, including a diagram of the proposed structures;
- details of your trust's expansion strategy including any other significant changes planned;
- a demonstration of commitment to West Northamptonshire's SEND partnership strategy and the way in which you would take account of it in the trust's development of the school; and
- how your trust would help set high aspirations and evidence achievement of ambitious outcomes for its pupils.

Section F: funding and costs

41 The proposal to create an all-through phase special school in West Northamptonshire has been discussed with the council's cabinet members for children's and finance and the executive director of finance. They have agreed capital funding subject to the final business case being accepted by the capital approvals board (CAB), followed by formal agreement by the cabinet and full council. The site will be provided by the Tiffield St. John's charitable trust on a standard 125-year lease arrangement.

42 In terms of revenue funding, places will be funded in line with proposed high needs funding arrangements. This means that each pupil will attract base funding of £10,000 from the Education and Skills Funding Agency plus a top-up figure based on the needs of the pupils through West Northamptonshire council's banding system. The proposed relevant top-up funding levels are as follows:

Key Stage	Band 6	Band 7	Band 8	Band 9	Band 10
Primary	£5,007	£7,854	£11,192	£14,923	18,359
Secondary	£7,364	£10,210	£13,548	£17,181	£20,715
Post-16	£8,370	£11,216	£14,554	£18,187	£21,721

43 Additional revenue funding to support start-up costs will be agreed once the successful sponsor has been confirmed. With regard to the top-up, in the business case presented to WN council's capital approvals board, the average of bands 8, 9 and 10 across all the age ranges has been used - £26,709.

Section G: impact and equalities assessments

As prescribed by [Section 9 Academies Act 2010](#) and [Section 149 Equality Act 2010](#), the local authority must assess the potential impact of any new school on existing educational provision in the area. The local authority must also consider whether the new school would impact on any groups with protected characteristics.

Whilst the school will be responsible for its own compliance with equalities legislation and the formation and lawful implementation of policy in this area, it is not considered that the establishment of this new school will impact particularly on people with protected characteristics.

Some of the children who will attend the school will fall within the definition of disabled as set out in the Equality Act, 2010. The impact on the autistic pupils and pupils with severe learning difficulties who require a special school placement will be a positive one. The opening of the new special school will enable eligible pupils to have their educational needs met closer to home, without the need to travel often long distances out of area as is currently the case.