

# **Oxfordshire County Council New Special School**

**Seeking proposals to establish a  
new Special School to serve  
south-east Oxfordshire**

**September 2024**



**OXFORDSHIRE  
COUNTY COUNCIL**

## SECTION A: INTRODUCTION AND PROCESS

Oxfordshire's Special Educational Needs & Disabilities (SEND) Sufficiency Delivery Strategy identifies the need for two new special schools in the south-east of Oxfordshire, one for children with Social, Emotional & Mental Health and/or Autism Spectrum Disorder (SEMH/ASD) needs, and one for children with Profound & Multiple Learning Difficulties (PMLD) or Severe Learning Difficulties (SLD), and other associated needs.

The new schools are required to:

- reduce travel distances and time for children in the Didcot and south-east Oxfordshire area who currently have no nearby special school suitable for their needs;
- as a result, improve education and welfare outcomes for local children;
- meet local population growth both in the immediate areas and surrounding communities, by releasing capacity at existing special schools; and
- better manage the county's expenditure on Independent and Non-Maintained Special School (INMSS) provision and special school transport.

This specification covers the new SEMH/ASD special school, which is planned to open in 2027, subject to progress with construction. The opening date for the school focused on other categories of need is not yet confirmed, and a new school process will follow in due course.

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.

**The authority is therefore seeking proposals from appropriate providers to sponsor this new school. This new school would be deemed a free school.**

To inform the selection of a sponsor, Oxfordshire County Council conducted a public consultation on this educational specification for the new school from February to March 2024. The consultation resulted in 32 responses. The consultation has informed this specification, which was approved by the Oxfordshire County Council Cabinet Member responsible for Education in July 2024.

This specification guides applicants in the information that should be included in proposals from interested academy sponsors, and should be read in conjunction with the relevant application forms.

### Key Dates (subject to change):

Date	Action
Spring 2024	Consultation on school specification.
Autumn 2024	Launch of competition for a Trust to run the proposed school.
Winter 2024	Proposer groups will submit their applications.
Spring 2025	Assessment of applications received, with reference to how well they meet the specification for the school. Interviews and presentations by shortlisted bidders.  Local authority will make recommendations to DfE, who will make a final decision on which application to approve.
Summer 2025	Indicative date by when DfE decision on academy sponsor may be announced.
2025/26	Sponsor, LA and DfE work together on pre-opening planning, resulting in a signed Supplementary Funding Agreement.
2027	Target date for opening of school – exact date tbc

Please note, these dates will be updated and published on the OCC website; they are subject to change and may be updated as the process progresses.

The Regional Director (RD) for South East, on behalf of the Secretary of State, will consider the local authority assessments and recommendations before deciding which proposer is in the best position to take forward 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.

It is essential that by the time of presentation, proposers have achieved DfE approved sponsor status. Without this, their application cannot be considered.

Information about this process is available from [www.gov.uk/government/collections/academy-sponsorship](http://www.gov.uk/government/collections/academy-sponsorship) .

The New School Proposal Form and this Specification Document are available to download from <https://www2.oxfordshire.gov.uk/cms/content/new-schools-oxfordshire>

### Contact details and further information

Further information is available from, and applications should be sent to:

[school.planning@oxfordshire.gov.uk](mailto:school.planning@oxfordshire.gov.uk)

## SECTION B: OXFORDSHIRE'S CONTEXT

### B1: Special Educational Needs in Oxfordshire

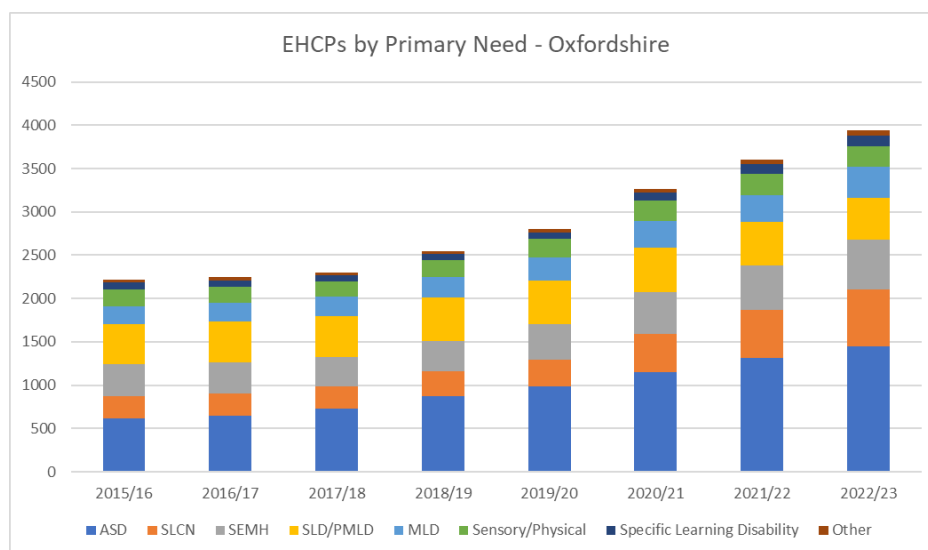
Oxfordshire's ambition is for all children and young people with SEND to have the right support and opportunities at the right time, so that they go on to live rich and fulfilling lives at the heart of their communities. In 2022, an updated Oxfordshire Local Area SEND Strategy for Children and Young People aged 0 to 25 with SEND was published at [www.oxfordshire.gov.uk/sendstrategy](http://www.oxfordshire.gov.uk/sendstrategy). The strategy was co-produced by the SEND Strategy Development Group, with representatives from Oxfordshire County Council (education and social care), NHS Oxfordshire Clinical Commissioning Group, education settings and Oxfordshire Parent Carers Forum and provides the following strategic objectives:

1. Improving outcomes for children with SEND
2. Developing a continuum of local provision to meet the requirements of children and young people with SEND
3. Good physical and mental health and wellbeing
4. Improving post-16 education, learning, employment and training
5. Positive move into adulthood for young people with SEND

The associated sufficiency strategy, published at [www.oxfordshire.gov.uk/sendsufficiency](http://www.oxfordshire.gov.uk/sendsufficiency) particularly seeks to deliver the second objective of good, local provision. This planned new school is a major element in delivering the necessary provision.

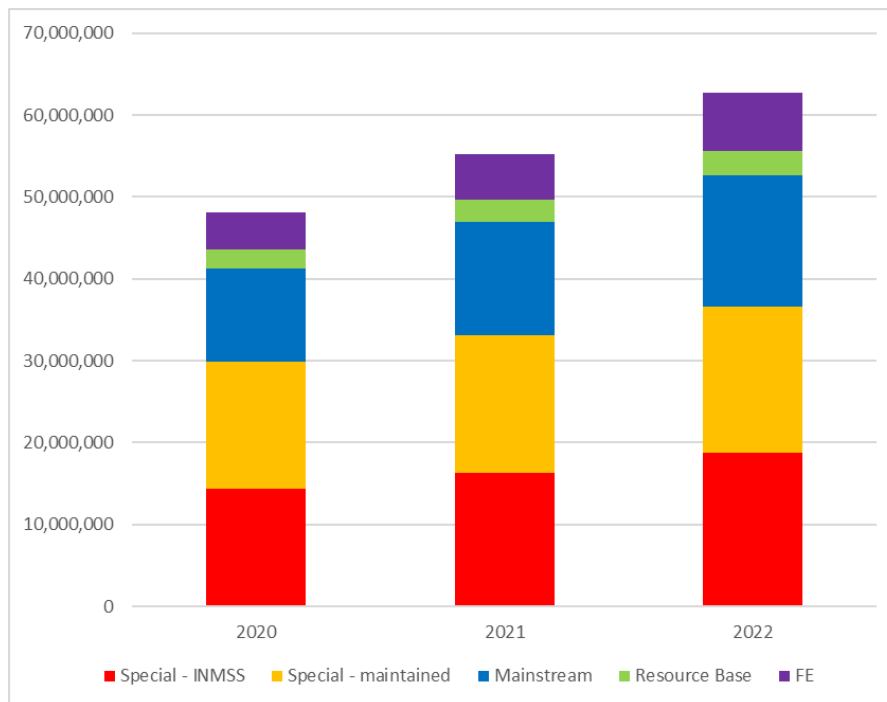
Numbers of Oxfordshire EHCPs have risen rapidly since 2016 (as published through SEN2 returns).

Figure 1: Numbers of EHCPs by primary need



The proportion of Oxfordshire children with an EHCP attending specialist provision in Independent and Non-maintained Special School (INMSS) placements is 16% of all those in specialist placements compared to national figures of 11%. This is creating an unsustainable pressure on SEND funding in the county.

**Figure 2: Total expenditure on SEND provision, 2020-2022**



## B2: Current SEND Provision in Oxfordshire

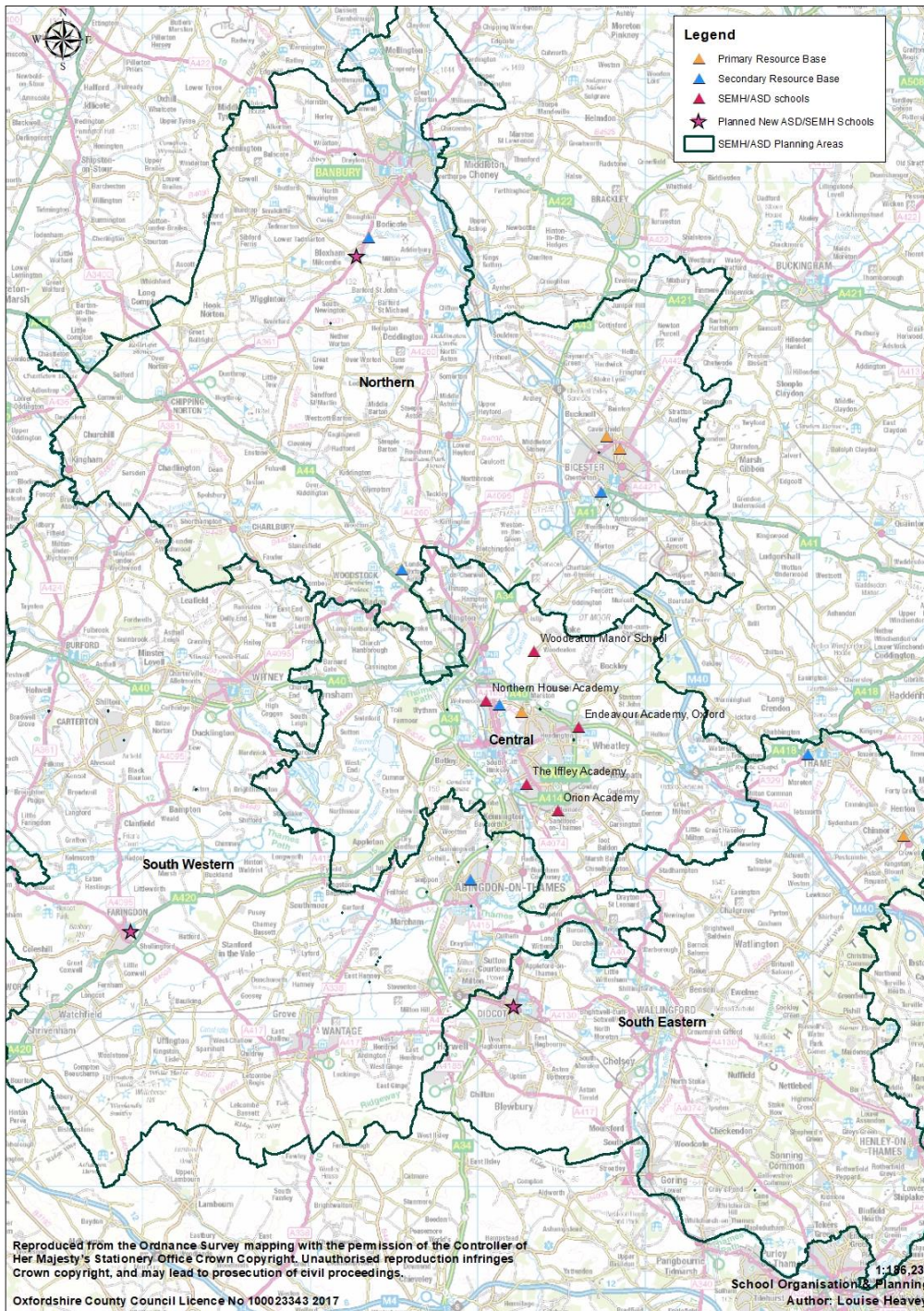
Oxfordshire currently has 14 maintained special schools, 10 of which are academies. Six of these are primarily for pupils with SEMH / ASD needs, and eight are primarily for children with SLD/PMLD and associated needs. There is also one Hospital School, and an Alternative Provision school. Of the schools with current inspection ratings, 3 are Outstanding and 6 are Good. One school was rated Inadequate in January 2024; three other schools have been converted to academies since receiving Inadequate Ofsted ratings, and have not yet been inspected as academies. One new school for pupils with SEMH / ASD needs opened in January 2024 and has not yet been inspected. Another school (in Faringdon) for pupils with SEMH / ASD needs is working through the planning permission process, and is due to open for 2026/27.

This specification is for a new special school serving the south-east Oxfordshire area, meeting the needs of children and young people in the 7-19 age range with severe SEMH and associated needs.

Oxfordshire’s current SEND provisions are located as shown on the maps below.

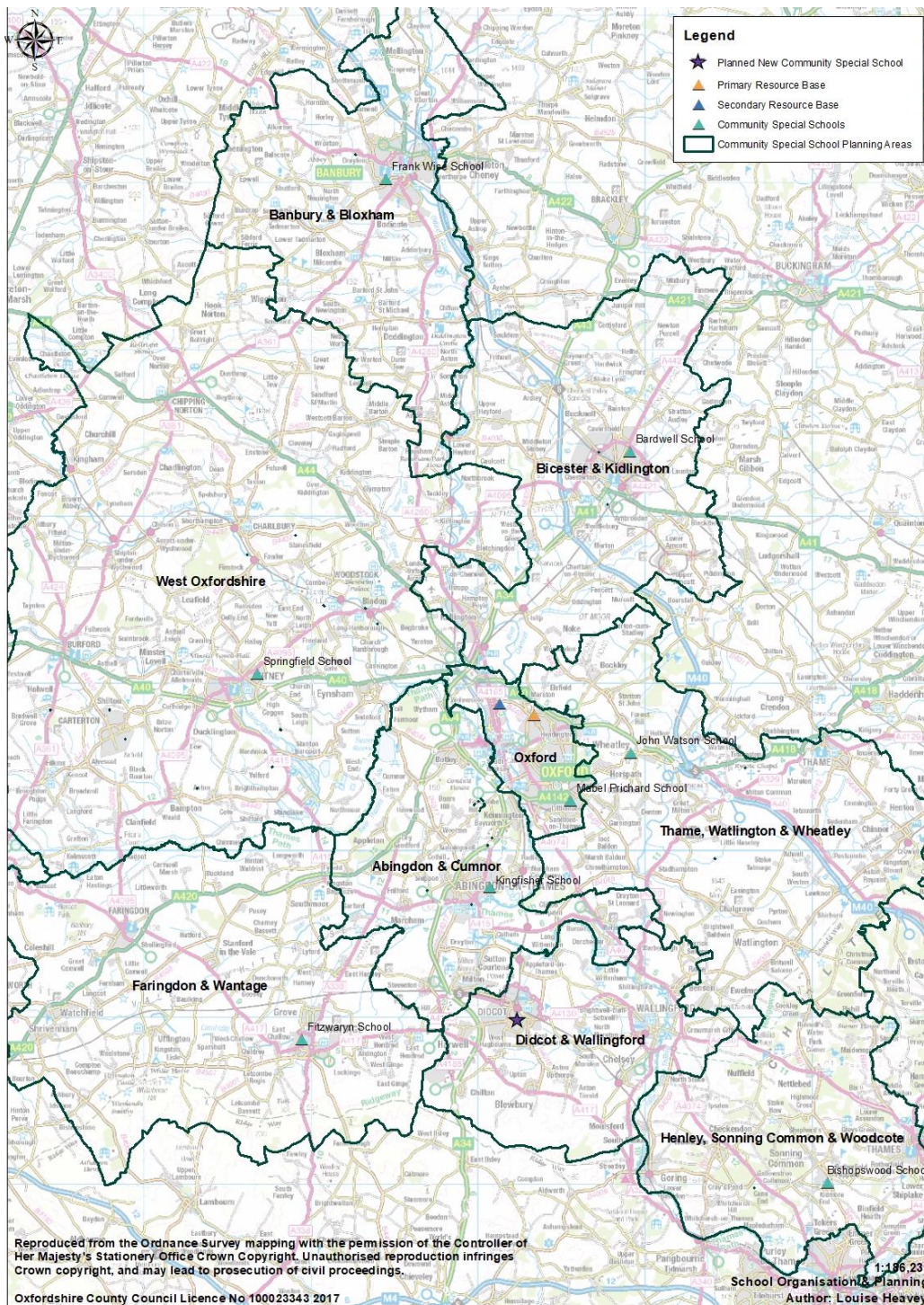
Map 1: current and planned maintained specialist provision for SEMH / ASD

The map below divides the county into four areas for the purpose of strategic planning of specialist provision for SEMH / ASD. These areas are envelopes of the smaller planning areas used for planning mainstream school capacity, reflecting the much larger areas served by special schools. Oxfordshire's SEND Sufficiency Delivery Strategy 2022/23-2026/27 sets an aspiration for a specialist ASD/SEMH special school in each of the areas.



**Map 2: current maintained specialist provision for needs other than SEMH / ASD**

The map below divides the county into nine areas for the purpose of strategic planning of specialist provision primarily for needs other than SEMH / ASD. These areas are envelopes of the smaller planning areas used for planning mainstream school capacity, and broadly reflect the areas from which each of the county's existing maintained community special schools draws its pupils. The exception is the Didcot/Wallingford area, which currently has no community special school.



Oxfordshire County Council provides places for children with SEMH/ASD/C&I needs in:

- Eleven resourced provisions in mainstream schools (5 primary, 6 secondary)
- Six county-wide schools focused chiefly on providing for children with SEMH needs and/or ASD. These schools, although offering places to children who live throughout the county, are all located in or near to Oxford City, with the exception of the school opened in 2024 in Bloxham.
- The new school opening in the south-west of the county will also be for children with SEMH/ASD needs.

OCC, working in partnership with academy trusts and the DfE, has provided significant additional specialist places in recent years:

- A rolling programme of special school expansions over the last ten years has added over 270 places, including through the rebuilding of two Oxford schools. Further projects are in the feasibility stage.
- A new ASD school (aged 9 – 19) for the most complex needs, providing 32 places, was opened in 2014.
- Two further new schools have been secured through the DfE Free School programme, one of which opened in January 2024 and the other due to open in 2026/27:
  - Bloxham Grove Bloxham, SEMH/ASD, 118 places, January 2024
  - A new special school in Faringdon, SEMH/ASD, 118 places, 2026/27.

Despite this, the demand for special school placements is still growing faster than the supply in maintained schools, and the use of the INMSS sector continues to rise. The two new schools open/underway will significantly improve the distribution of provision for children and young people with severe SEMH/ASD needs, which until now has been concentrated in and around Oxford, but there remains a gap in the south-east of the county. Oxfordshire County Council is therefore running this competition to identify an academy sponsor for a new SEMH/ASD special school as a key component in meeting the needs of the local population.

Pupils living in the south-east of Oxfordshire who attend maintained special schools specialising in SEMH/ASD needs currently need to travel into or beyond Oxford, resulting in lengthy journeys, prone to traffic congestion.

The proposed new school will significantly improve access to special education provision for the growing population in south-east Oxfordshire. This will speed up the processing of placing children with severe SEMH/ASD needs in a suitable special school and reduce travel times and distances. There will also be an indirect benefit of releasing pressure on existing schools and freeing up capacity to meet other areas of population growth.



In addition to the school covered by this specification, Oxfordshire intends to open a community special school in Didcot, for children and young people with needs primarily other than SEMH/ASD. A site for this school has been secured through a Section 106 agreement with a large housing development, and the timescale for opening that school depends on the progress of the associated development. It is currently hoped that this will open in 2028.

## SECTION C: THE SCHOOL

This specification is to establish a school in the south-east of the county. This would improve the geographic coverage of SEMH/ASD schools to ensure provision within a reasonable distance of all communities. The tables below list key details of the school proposed. Proposer group applications must be for a school that has these key characteristics.

<b>Type of school</b>	Special																																				
<b>Area of SEN</b>	SEMH & ASD																																				
<b>Per-pupil revenue funding the local authority would expect to pay</b>	<p>Funding will be as determined by the special schools funding formula, agreed annually by Schools' Forum. For 2024/25 the formula is set out below:</p> <table border="1"> <thead> <tr> <th>Item</th> <th>Rate</th> <th>Basis</th> <th>Set By</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>Place Funding</td> <td>£10,000.00</td> <td>Per place</td> <td>DfE/ESFA</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Teacher Pay &amp; Pension Funding</td> <td>£660.00</td> <td>Per place</td> <td>DfE/ESFA</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Core Top Up</td> <td>£8,224.87</td> <td>Per OCC pupil</td> <td>LA – +0.5% from 2023/24</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Bonus Top Up</td> <td>£1,321.00</td> <td>Per OCC pupil</td> <td>LA – no change from 2023/24</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Additional Uplift Top Up</td> <td>£1,293.06</td> <td>Per OCC pupil</td> <td>LA – no change from 2023/24</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Other Top Up Factors</td> <td>Variable</td> <td>School specific</td> <td>LA – no change from 2023/24</td> </tr> <tr> <td>MFG</td> <td>4.3%</td> <td>Protection/Uplift</td> <td>LA – DfE/ESFA guidance</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Additional Funding</td> <td>Variable</td> <td>Per place</td> <td>DfE/ESFA</td> </tr> </tbody> </table> <p>During the 2024/25 financial year Oxfordshire County Council intends to review the top-up methodology and formulas used across all SEND services to understand the options available to allocate the resource to deliver the outcomes desired, which may result in a new special school formula.</p>	Item	Rate	Basis	Set By	Place Funding	£10,000.00	Per place	DfE/ESFA	Teacher Pay & Pension Funding	£660.00	Per place	DfE/ESFA	Core Top Up	£8,224.87	Per OCC pupil	LA – +0.5% from 2023/24	Bonus Top Up	£1,321.00	Per OCC pupil	LA – no change from 2023/24	Additional Uplift Top Up	£1,293.06	Per OCC pupil	LA – no change from 2023/24	Other Top Up Factors	Variable	School specific	LA – no change from 2023/24	MFG	4.3%	Protection/Uplift	LA – DfE/ESFA guidance	Additional Funding	Variable	Per place	DfE/ESFA
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<b>Age range</b>	Age 7-19																																				
<b>Gender</b>	Co-educational																																				
<b>Capacity</b>	The eventual full capacity of the school is expected to be 120 pupils, including sixth form. It is recognised that class sizes may vary from year to year depending on the needs of each cohort.																																				
<b>Type of placements</b>	Full time																																				
<b>Number of nursery places</b>	n/a																																				
<b>Number of 16-19 places</b>	12. This will be subject to review once the school is established and operating in all year groups.																																				
<b>Any planned outreach, training and/or reintegration support</b>	Oxfordshire's approach to outreach is under development, and the new school would be expected to take an active part in the relevant initiatives.																																				

## **C1: Location and site**

Proposed location: Candytuft Way, Harwell, Didcot, OX11 6FF

The county council is in discussions about a potential site for the new school on the western edge of Didcot, on land which is currently part of the Aureus (secondary) School site, between the secondary school and the UTC.

The school will be accommodated in a new, purpose-built building, the design of which will be based on DfE Building Bulletin 104 Guidelines. It will include 12 Key Stage 2-4 classrooms, and 2 sixth form classrooms. Further details will be available as the design work progresses.

## **C2: Indicative opening schedule**

In order to minimise travel distances, pupils living in the area who are already at special school will be offered the opportunity to transfer to the new school, where this is compatible with the effective operation of the school.

Because of the shortage of appropriate special school provision for SEMH needs in this area, many children are placed in high-cost Independent and Non-Maintained Special Schools, which places unsustainable pressure on SEND funding in Oxfordshire. The council will work with parents to manage moves to the new school at appropriate transition points, where this is in the best interests of the pupil.

In addition, some children with severe SEMH needs are remaining in their mainstream school awaiting a more suitable special school place becoming available. This would be a further immediate intake to the new school.

To reflect these circumstances, the council will work with the successful sponsor to plan the most appropriate schedule of growth for the new school, based on data held once a provisional opening date for the school is confirmed, and agree an annual number of commissioned places.

The table below details an indicative number of places that the local authority proposes for each year group at the point of opening until the school is full, subject to review in the pre-opening period. The numbers per year group will need to be flexible based on the needs of each cohort, and will be kept under annual review.

	Year of opening 2027 tbc	+1	+2	+3	+4	+5	+6
Nursery	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Reception	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Key stage 1 (Y1-2)	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Key stage 2 (Y3-6)	16	18	18	18	18	18	18
Key stage 3 (Y7-9)	24	34	44	54	54	54	54
Key stage 4 (Y10-11)	0	8	18	18	27	36	36
Key Stage 5 (age 16-19)	0	0	0	4	8	10	12
Totals	40	60	80	94	107	118	120

## **SECTION D: REQUIRED OUTCOMES OF THE NEW SCHOOL**

*Applicants will be required to fully explain and evidence in Section D of the proposal form how the school will achieve its educational vision under the following headings. Applicants should take account of the relevant criteria in Annex C of the free school presumption guidance, available at [www.gov.uk/government/publications/establishing-a-new-school-free-school-presumption](http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/establishing-a-new-school-free-school-presumption), which provides more detail on the evidence which should be provided.*

### **D1 – Curriculum & Education**

*Applicants will need to demonstrate an ambitious and deliverable curriculum plan which is consistent with the vision and pupil intake.*

The school should:

- Provide sustainably good or outstanding education with an exciting and inspiring, broad and balanced curriculum across the age range which is flexible enough to meet the individual needs of all pupils, and deliverable with the resources which will be available.
- Have a clear rationale for the proposed curriculum, demonstrating understanding of the needs of the expected intake, and an ambitious approach to meeting those needs.
- Have strategies in place to support pupils to be successful when they enter and leave the school, with a strong focus on preparation for adulthood, including life and social skills.
- Work collaboratively with FE providers and health and social care agencies to ensure appropriate onward destinations post school at either 16+ or 19+.
- Form partnerships with other educators, employment services, businesses, housing agencies, disability organisations and arts and sports groups.
- Seek out and share best practice within and beyond the school, promoting innovation and creativity in learning and teaching.
- Work effectively with mainstream schools to maximise appropriate integration and development opportunities, sharing skills and expertise.

### **D2 – Measuring Performance**

*Applicants will need to demonstrate their approach to measuring school and pupil performance effectively and setting challenging targets.*

The school should:

- Set and meet ambitious but realistic aspirations for all pupils, determined through timely and comprehensive assessment.

- Instil rigorous processes of school self-evaluation and continual improvement, including recognising the importance of pupil and parent input in these processes.
- Identify baseline measures of pupils' attainment and put in place an assessment and data tracking system that will allow pupil progress to be monitored and continuously improved.
- Review success measures and targets regularly to improve the school's performance. This could include benchmarking assessment data with other relevant schools.
- Use appropriate data to inform teaching and drive progression and attainment for all pupils.
- Implement strategies to ensure that attendance of children matches the attendance rates of the highest performing authorities.
- Engage parents/carers in supporting and encouraging their children's learning, including through regular reporting.

### **D3 – Staffing & Management**

*Applicants will need to set out 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).*

The school should:

- Have an appropriate balance of roles, experience and expertise.
- Maintain outstanding and dynamic leadership, management and governance.
- Attract, retain and develop the highest quality teachers and support staff to ensure good or better teaching and learning, and effective and motivated workforces.
- Plan the growth of staffing within the funding available, until the school is at full capacity in line with planned pupil numbers, and have credible contingency plans to adapt the staffing structure and still deliver a sufficient curriculum if income were less than expected.

### **D4 – Ensuring inclusivity, safeguarding and strong communities**

*Applicants will need to set out clear and robust policies and procedures for inclusion, safeguarding and community links.*

The school should:

- Work in partnership with pupils and parents to support the development of every child.

- Develop a strong moral and caring ethos, ensuring care and support for the whole child.
- Ensure safeguarding and well-being responsibilities are met.
- Be welcoming to pupils of all faiths/world views and none. Encourage pupils from different communities, faiths and backgrounds to work together, learn about each other's customs, beliefs and ideas and respect each other's views.
- Prepare children for life in modern Britain including through the teaching of spiritual, moral, social and cultural (SMSC) education. Consideration must be given to relevant issues, for example how the school will teach PHSE, adhere to the Prevent Duty
- Promote fundamental British values of democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty, and mutual respect and tolerance of those with different faiths and beliefs.
- Meet the needs of its pupils and local community through enrichment and extended services, for example, breakfast clubs, sports clubs, homework clubs and music/art clubs.
- Explore the range of opportunities the community offers to keep well, keep learning and stay involved.
- Work in close partnership with the existing network of special schools in Oxfordshire and Oxfordshire's SEND team.
- Work in partnership with the county council and other educational providers to contribute towards meeting the collective responsibility to secure the best for all Oxfordshire's learners, including participating in school-to-school support, and supporting the strategic responsibilities of the county council to ensure sufficiency of high quality school places and improved educational outcomes through agreed sharing of data and information.
- Work in partnership with wider services such as social care services, health and police to keep children safe, support families and build stronger communities.
- Be outward facing, playing a key role within its immediate community and the wider local economy, for example through opening up facilities to the community, and participating in community activities.
- Develop strategic alliances, partnerships and networks to better meet the needs of children and families.

## **SECTION E: CAPACITY AND CAPABILITY**

*Applicants will be required to demonstrate that they have the capacity and capability to set up and run the new school, and that they have access to appropriate educational, financial and other expertise.*

As a minimum, this must include the following:

- The resources they would draw on and/or deploy to support the development of the new school by the opening date.
- Clear evidence that they 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.

### **E1 – Experience and credentials**

*Applicants will need to demonstrate:*

- Appropriate roles, responsibilities and relevant experience to support the pre-opening and post-opening phases of the school's opening.
- A clear understanding of missing skills and experience (if any) of the team and a strategy to fill these gaps.
- Strong, relevant special education expertise, for example strong special school improvement experience, or substantial experience of delivering high quality special education relevant to this specification.

### **E2 – Governance**

*Applicants will need to demonstrate:*

- A governance structure, and roles and responsibilities, that will ensure accountability and effective decision-making, and drive improvement in the new school.
- An understanding of what changes, if any, they would need to make to the existing governance structure.
- An assessment of any conflicts of interest and how they will be managed, including any financial transactions that are likely to take place between any member/trustee and the academy.
- A strategy for securing independent challenge to members and trustees.
- A plan to recruit and train high quality individuals to fill any gaps.



## SECTION F: FUNDING AND COSTS

Funding for the new school has been identified in Oxfordshire County Council's capital programme, with an indicative budget of £14.4m. Funding sources include DfE capital grants (High Needs Provision Capital Allocation 2021/22 – 2023/24) and “Section 106” funding secured by the council that supports SEND provision.

The local authority is required by the Department for Education to provide revenue funding towards pre-opening and post-opening costs of new schools.

In addition to the pupil-led revenue funding, the new school will qualify for the following financial support from the local authority:

- A pre-opening grant of £97,500.
- A loose furniture and equipment budget of £250 per primary pupil and £540 per secondary pupil.
- A post-opening grant of £170,000

The Department for Education will also provide a one-off grant payment of £25,000 to the successful sponsor to cover the legal costs incurred in establishing the new free school.

*Applicants will be required to submit a robust financial plan for the school, covering the period until the school is operating at full capacity. They should detail their contingency planning should pupil intakes grow slower than expected. This plan could be in the form of the DfE's School Financial Template, or similar tool.*

## SECTION G: IMPACT AND EQUALITIES ASSESSMENT

As prescribed by section 9 of the Academies Act 2010 and section 149 of the 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.

A new special school in this location would have positive equality and inclusion implications, by improving access to a suitable school place for children with SEMH and ASD needs. Sufficiency of SEND provision has important equalities impacts. National data shows that pupils with EHCPs are more likely to be:

- Male – 73% of EHCPs nationally are for boys.
- Eligible for free school meals – 40% of pupils with EHCPs are eligible compared to 23% of all pupils in schools.
- Speakers of English as their first language – 84% of pupils with EHCPs compared to 80% of all pupils in schools
- Looked after by a local authority – 29% have an EHCP.

Special Educational Needs are most prevalent in the Traveller of Irish heritage ethnic group – in 2022, 5.7% of pupils with this stated ethnicity had an EHCP. Other significantly higher than average rates of EHCPs are seen for pupils of Black Caribbean and Other Black backgrounds.

Other important equality and inclusion impacts include:

- more local places allow vulnerable children to be educated in their local community;
- more local places reduce travel distance and time for children and enables them arriving at school more willing and able to learn;
- shorter journeys reduce unit costs (cost per pupil) measures in the Home to School Transport budget;
- this new school will complete the map of SEMH/ASD provision for Oxfordshire and create potential to reduce the use of expensive Independent and Non-Maintained Special Schools placements, releasing financial resources.

The school is not expected to have a negative impact on other maintained schools, due to the existing shortage of special education provision within Oxfordshire.