

Oxfordshire County Council New Special School

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

May 2025



**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 PMLD/SLD special school, which is planned to open in 2028, subject to progress with construction. The specification for the SEMH/ASD school was approved summer 2024, and it is intended that the academy sponsor selection processes for the two schools will run in parallel.

The authority is seeking proposals from appropriate providers to sponsor this new school. Interested academy trusts are invited to submit applications for one or both new special schools, based on their expertise and experience.

To inform the selection of a sponsor, Oxfordshire County Council conducted a public consultation on this educational specification for the new school in June/July 2025. The consultation resulted in 14 responses. The consultation has informed this specification, which was approved by the Oxfordshire County Council Cabinet Member responsible for Education in 2025.

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 form and DfE guidance.

Key Dates (subject to change):

Date	Action
Summer 2025	Consultation on school specification.
Autumn 2025	Launch of competition for a Trust to run the proposed school.
Winter 2025	Proposer groups will submit their applications.
Spring 2026	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 2026	Indicative date by when DfE decision on academy sponsor may be announced.
2027-2028	Sponsor, LA and DfE work together on pre-opening planning, resulting in a signed Supplementary Funding Agreement.
2028	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 .

The New School Proposal Form and this Specification Document are available to download from <https://www2.oxfordshire.gov.uk/cms/content/new-schools-oxfordshire> [not available until bidding opens]

Contact details and further information

Further information is available from, and applications should be sent to: school.planning@oxfordshire.gov.uk

SECTION B: OXFORDSHIRE'S CONTEXT

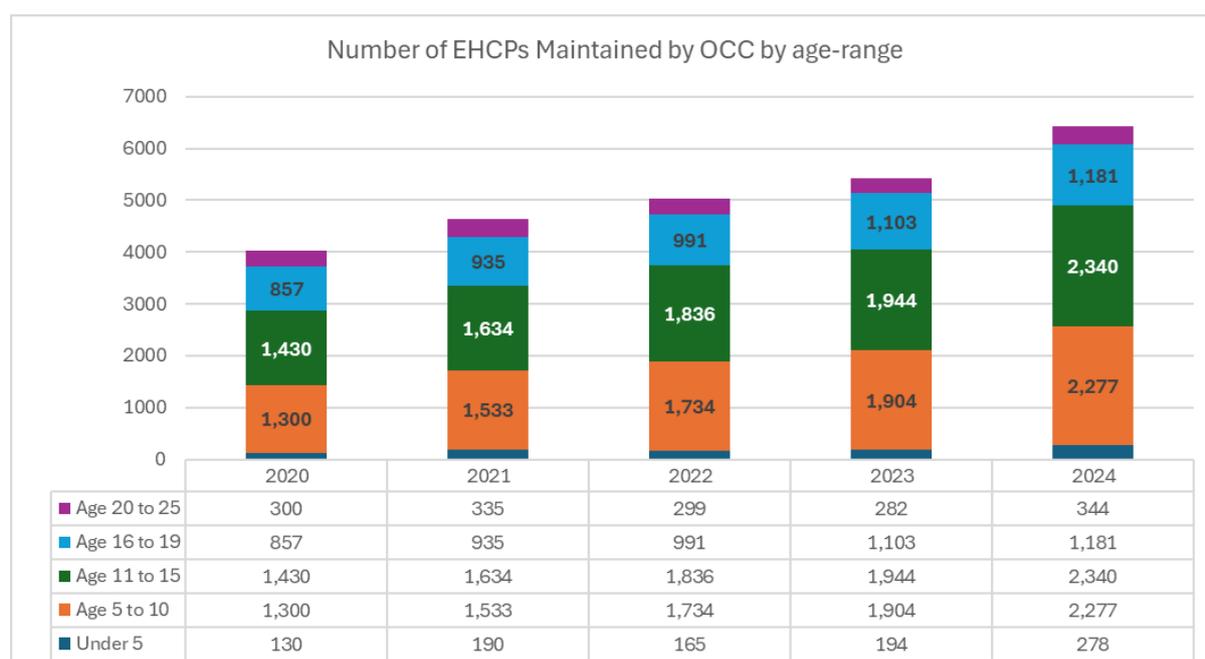
B1: Special Educational Needs in Oxfordshire

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. 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:

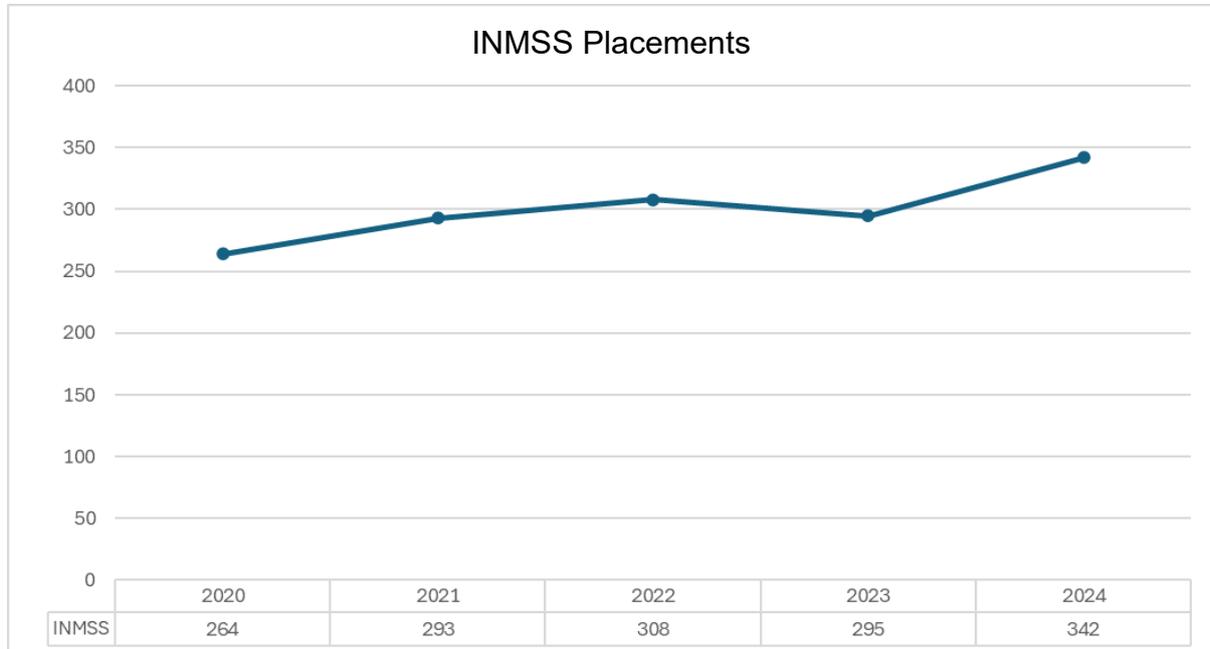
1. Improving outcomes for children with SEND
2. Developing a continuum of local provision to meet the requirements of children and young people with SEND
3. Good physical and mental health and wellbeing
4. Improving post-16 education, learning, employment and training
5. Positive move into adulthood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

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

The number of Oxfordshire EHCPs has increased by 60% over the last five years, accelerating to an 18% increase between 2023 and 2024 alone.



Because the need for special school places has grown faster than the Oxfordshire has been able to expand the capacity of maintained special schools, the use of independent and non-maintained special schools (INMSS) has increased by 30% over the last five years. As these places have higher fees than maintained special schools, this is placing an unsustainable pressure on funding for children with SEND.



B2: Current SEND Provision in Oxfordshire

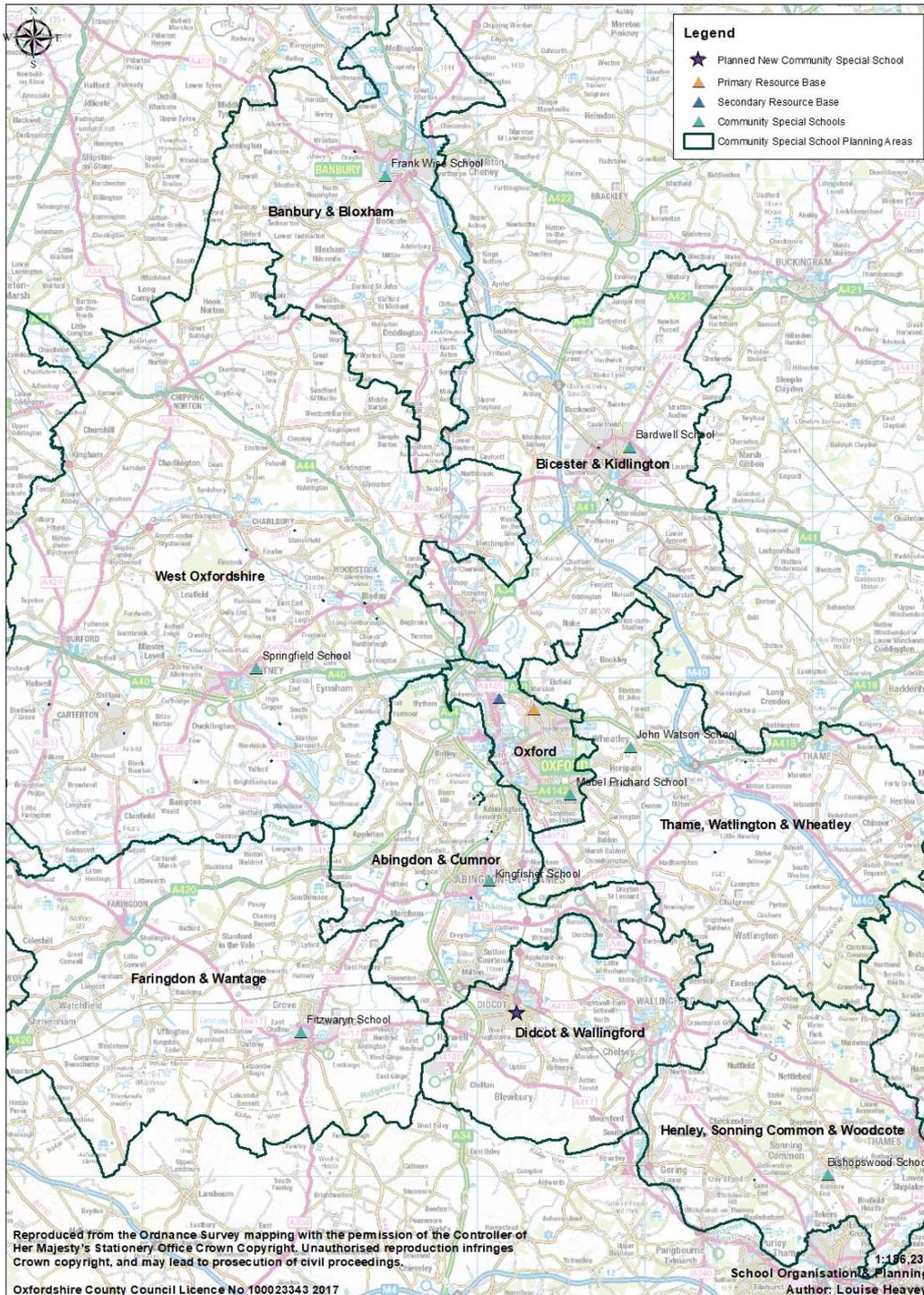
Oxfordshire currently has 14 maintained special schools, 10 of which are academies. Six of these are primarily for pupils with SEMH / ASD needs, and eight are primarily for children with SLD/PMLD and associated needs. There is also one Hospital School, and an Alternative Provision school. The most recent Ofsted reports for these schools (in some cases prior to academy conversion) assess five as Outstanding and seven as Good. One school has a rating of “Requires Improvement” and two were judged Inadequate prior to academy conversion 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 2-19 age range, primarily with PMLD and SLD needs.

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

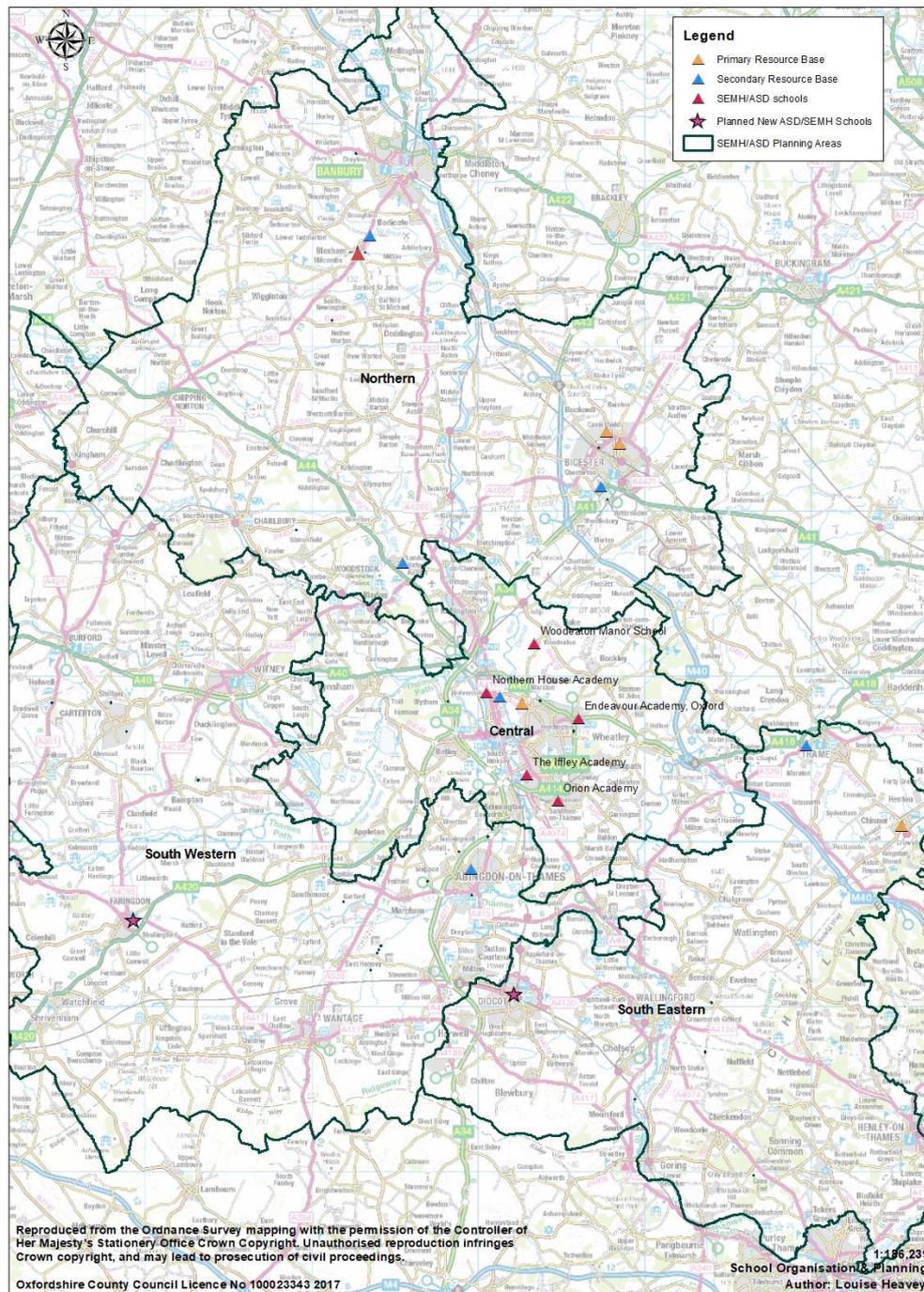
Map 1: current maintained specialist provision for needs other than SEMH / ASD

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.



Map 2: 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 also envelopes of the smaller planning areas used for planning mainstream school capacity and reflect the much larger areas served by SEMH/ASD 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. This will be achieved once the planned new schools at Faringdon and Didcot open. Given the growth in need, further new schools/expansion may become necessary.



OCC, working in partnership with academy trusts and the DfE, is delivering significant additional special education provision. Since 2022/23, the current programme of additional capacity, including the school covered by this specification, is expected to increase state-maintained special school capacity in Oxfordshire by over 600 places, an increase of nearly 50%, by 2032. This includes the new school which opened in Bloxham in 2024, the one due to open in Faringdon in 2026/27, and the two new schools planned for Didcot, as well as planned expansions of existing schools.

This proposed new school in Didcot will significantly improve access to special education provision for the growing population in south-east Oxfordshire. This will speed up the process of placing children with SEND 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 another special school in Didcot, for children and young people primarily with SEMH/ASD needs. It is currently hoped that this will open in 2027/28.

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 special 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.

Type of school	Special			
Area of SEN	PMLD / SLD			
Per-pupil revenue funding the local authority would expect to pay	Funding will be as determined by the special schools funding formula, agreed annually by Schools' Forum. For 2025/26 the formula is set out below:			
	Formula Factor	Rate	Allocation	Rate Set By and Notes
	Place Funding	£10,000.00	Per place	DfE
	Teachers Pay & Pension	£660.00	Per place	DfE
	Additional Funding	Varies	Per place	DfE – 2023/24 rates
	Supplementary Funding	Varies	Fixed	LA – set at 2022/23 values
	Core Top Up	£12,985.13	Per OCC Pupil	LA - +2.88% inflationary increase
	Other Top Up Factors	Varies	Per OCC Pupil	LA - +2.88% inflationary increase
	MFG	Varies	Protection	Set at 0.0% protection
	During the 2025/26 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.			
Age range	Age 2-19			
Gender	Co-educational			
Capacity	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.			
Type of placements	Full time			
Number of nursery places	4			
Number of 16-19 places	20 - subject to review once the school is established and operating in all year groups.			
Any planned outreach, training and/or reintegration support	The new school would be expected to take an active part in relevant initiatives, including to work collaboratively with other schools and trusts delivering SEND provision, and support mainstream schools.			

C1: Location and site

Proposed location: Valley Park development, Didcot, OX11 6DU (approx)

A 1.7ha site has been secured through a Section 106 agreement with the Valley Park development.

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 2 Early Years rooms, 11 Key Stage 1-4 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 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 pupils.

In addition, some children with severe needs are remaining in their mainstream school awaiting a more suitable special school place becoming available. This would be a further immediate intake into 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 2028 tbc	+1	+2	+3	+4	+5	+6
Nursery	2	3	4	4	4	4	4
Reception	2	3	4	4	4	4	4
Key stage 1 (Y1-2)	8	9	10	13	14	14	16
Key stage 2 (Y3-6)	16	20	24	27	31	32	32
Key stage 3 (Y7-9)	10	21	24	25	26	27	28
Key stage 4 (Y10-11)	0	0	8	17	18	18	18
Key Stage 5 (age 16-19)	0	0	0	0	8	17	18
Totals	38	56	74	90	105	116	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, 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 £23.3m. Funding sources include DfE capital grants (High Needs Provision Capital Allocation) 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. Applicants are recommended to use 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 SEND. 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. 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 fill a gap in the special school map 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.