

Bristol Special Free School

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

Bristol City Council

May 2023

OVERVIEW

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

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 Bristol City 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

Bristol City Council view the new school as a necessary step in delivering on The Bristol Local Area Written Statement of Action WSoA and the Bristol Belonging Together Strategy. The WSoA highlights inclusion, independence, belonging and involvement as values underpinning our work across the city. The WSoA aims to address the underachievement and lack of inclusion of young people with SEND in Bristol. The Bristol Belonging Strategy supports this commitment to developing and implementing a system-wide, trauma-informed approach. Both our WSoA and Belonging Strategy are committed to providing young people with SEND with networks promoting access to support tailored to their needs. There are a number of issues these strategies seek to address such as

- High suspension rates/multiple suspension rates
- High levels of students NEET
- Lack of specialist support for young people with higher needs
- High proportion of students placed in independent provision

Currently, the averages of students being suspended at least once in Bristol have remained 43% higher than the national average of 2.17 for the past 3 years, also standing 17% above our statistical neighbours. The average number of students in Bristol suspended multiple times has been consistently higher than both the national average and our statistical neighbours for the last 3 years, with this rate currently 34% higher than the national average. These considerably high rates are reflected in both primary and secondary provisions, spiked by many challenging behaviours triggered by unmet needs. The rates in Bristol suggest there is a severe need for a new school in the area to cater for students whose needs require more specialised support. It is critical that children in the area are provided with an alternative to prevent exclusions and avoid a long-lasting impact on future opportunities for individuals within Bristol's cohort. In 2021 the number of NEET students in Bristol was 590, accounting for 7% of 16-17-year-olds. This is higher than the national average, and highlights challenges the council has been facing in supporting individuals with SEND in transitioning into adulthood.

Currently 0.7% of our children are being home-educated. Further to this, there has been a 22% increase in EHCP assessment requests between January 2022 and May 2022 compared to the same period in 2021. In addition, for the academic year of 2021/2022, Bristol has a total of 192 pupils in independent non-maintained settings and independent specialist provisions, at a huge cost to the council. A significant proportion of this cost is made up from commissioning therapeutic aids/specialists to support pupils who benefit from this. The therapeutic offer is not currently accessible within the Bristol provision, meaning that outsourcing is required for children who need access to occupational therapy, speech and language therapy, art therapy, hydrotherapy and specialist therapeutic communities. Commissioning young student in these places also incurs enormous cost to the council in terms of transport, 43% higher than the national average.

This new free school proposal will provide specialist support to students whose needs are not currently being met in mainstream settings, reducing the number of suspensions and students NEET and reducing the enormous cost incurred through placing and transporting students to independent settings.

We have worked collaboratively with nearby local authorities, including Bath & Northeast Somerset and South Gloucestershire in the development of this new free school proposal in order to confirm their support for our proposed new school, and align our local strategies. We agreed both LAs will be commissioning several places to provide for children from their areas. We will continue to engage with both B&NES and South Gloucestershire through the opening of the new school and beyond to ensure greater access to high quality, specialist education for young people with SEND needs in Bristol and surrounding Local Authorities.

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

Bristol currently has 11 special schools, all of which are full with limited spaces available in any new academic year. Since the 1st September 2021, the average wait time for a pre-14 specialist placement is 82 days and 52 days for post-14. This has led to an increase of pupils with complex needs being placed in mainstream schools and resource bases and an increase in permanent exclusions, as well as pupils being placed in out of authority non-maintained settings.

SEND data and trends in Bristol demonstrate the rapid and continuing growth of students with an EHCP. Between the academic year 2015/16 and 2021/22, there was a 52% increase in EHCPs. Alongside the increase in students with EHCPs, Bristol has also seen a substantial increase in SEMH needs. Between 2015/16 and 2021/22, there was an increase of 212 students, equivalent to a 62% uptrend. On a more recent comparative scale, between January and May 2022, there was a 22% increase in pupils with an EHCP request in comparison to the same period in 2021. Following the rise in requests for EHCPs, there has been a 52% increase in these plans being finalised within the first 5 months of 2022 compared to 2021, with 299 EHCPs finalised, contrasting to just 197 in 2021. In addition to this, Bristol has seen a considerable increase in pupils with ASD. Since 2015/16, there has been a growth of 397 students identified with ASD - a rise of 96%. This alarming increase reflects the growing need for a new special provision in Bristol.

We have been working alongside North Star 82° Academy, an SEMH school for primary-age pupils in North Bristol, who have historically had vacant places within their provision. They have welcomed a growing cohort of ASC pupils. However, this cohort is not suited to a mainstream environment, and they currently have no option in the area for secondary provision, as they are unable to transition to North Star 240° - which solely caters for 11-16 years old children with SEMH needs. Therefore, this free school would provide secondary education for pupils in North Bristol who would otherwise have to travel out of county or across the city.

We anticipate that these trends will continue to rise, with a higher proportion of children in Bristol having EHCPs. The increasing number of children requiring

specialist education support will continue to grow, therefore a new special school will be increasingly essential to cater to this demand for specialist provisions.