



Department
for Education

Blackpool Special Free School

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

Blackpool Council

May 2023

OVERVIEW

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

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 Blackpool 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

Blackpool is a Priority Education Investment Area and was previously an Opportunity Area. Our 2020-2030 education strategy focuses upon the need to improve school performance, improve literacy (including digital literacy), promote inclusive practices, and create sustained employment for Blackpool's children and young adults. These priorities were co-produced with DfE colleagues and are owned by the whole education partnership in Blackpool. They are driven by the Blackpool Education Improvement Board and our SEND partnership board. Our SEND strategy is aligned to our SEND Written Statement of Action, produced in response to our Local Area Send Inspection of 2022, and our DfE Safety-Valve programme. It was co-produced with all partner agencies and with parent and pupil representative groups through a formal co-production process. The strategy is designed to reduce our Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) deficit, increase the proportion of pupils with an EHCP in mainstream settings and to reduce our over-reliance upon expensive independent special school placements. Additionally, we are constantly seeking to improve the quality of support for pupils with SEND and the quality of the work of school SENDCOs and all staff who work directly with children with SEND. Key metrics within our SEND strategy and WSOA are related to the percentage of children with an EHCP in mainstream schools, assessment timeliness, and measures related to preparation for adulthood. We also measure waiting times for therapies, expecting to see a rapid improvement. This proposed new school will allow us to make significant progress on all these measures and to co-locate essential services.

Blackpool has a high number of children and young adults with SEND. Our expenditure through the High Needs Block of the DSG in relation to SEND placements and funding is unsustainable and has historically not delivered quality support to meet the needs of children and young people with complex SEND needs. We have committed to reducing the expenditure while improving the quality of support. This will be achieved by making SEND everyone's business and increasing the awareness, expertise and quality of SEND support within the mainstream sector. This will be achieved through much more robust analysis of need, training in the graduated response and a new methodology for the distribution of funding, working with children much earlier than when they would normally apply for an EHCP. Our collective ambition is that pupils can have their needs met without needing an EHCP, in the vast majority of cases. Where additional funding or support is essential, the mainstream offer and entitlement can then be developed to continue to address the individual's needs at their local mainstream school or setting, whenever possible.

Our existing special school offer is based around four special schools and three Resourced Provisions in the Primary phase. We also have a pupil referral unit that provides first day and sixth day provision for excluded pupils and hospital / medical

education for children who cannot access suitable education because of ill-health. Most admissions to the medical provision are due to issues related to mental health and anxiety about attending school. All our existing special schools are Ofsted good or outstanding, with the exception of Lotus which is on a rapid improvement journey following its inadequate judgement. Our PRU is rated as good. Our special schools are designated as GLD, PMLD, SLD /MLD and SEMH.

Our Special Schools are currently at or over capacity. Our analysis shows that Highfurlong School and Woodlands school are already educating more pupils than is appropriate (against their net capacity surveys). Even when our inclusive practices improve further, the numbers of pupils educated out of borough, along with the current demand for places in these excellent settings, will not have the capacity to provide high-quality places for all Blackpool pupils with SEND in-borough. The highest demand for out of borough specialist placements is for children and young adults with SEMH needs and the costliest placements are for children and young adults with complex autism and / or complex care / residential needs.

As part of our SEND strategy, we have created additional capacity within Blackpool by opening Lotus school (an SEMH Free School for 48 pupils), expanded the provision at Park Community Academy with the addition of a temporary two classroom block and opened a sixth-form provision for Park Community Academy at The Oracle building. We have also received planning permission for an expansion of Highfurlong School and created Resourced Provisions at three Primary Schools, with two in negotiation at Blackpool Secondary Schools to provide mainstream SEND provision. We know that when we do not have sufficient capacity within the local area, we experience delays in placing children, whether or not looked after, in suitable school placements. This adds to their existing trauma and creates placement instability. Blackpool has a significantly higher than national average ratio of children in care per 10,000 population, higher than any other area nationally. It also has some of the worst health outcomes and the lowest life expectancy.

A new SEMH school would stabilise the education and home placements for a cohort of children that do not always have the best life-chances in Blackpool, being frequent school movers and frequently suspended or excluded, often becoming NEET. We know from current initiatives that this will have a significant impact, as alongside other programmes of work, the opening of Lotus school in September 2020 has seen the number of pupils in independent/non-maintained special schools fall from 115 in January 2020 to 87 in January 2022. We are confident that a second SEMH school in the town could contribute to the reduction over time of this number to a predicted 28, which would represent only 2.2% of EHC plans. Our data shows that we have a very significant cohort of pupils with SEMH needs, with a significant proportion educated out of borough. Blackpool also has a significant number of pupils from out of borough who are educated in our special schools. We currently

have 59 children and young people from Year 3 to Year 13 with SEMH as a primary need who are educated in out of borough independent provisions. This represents 62% of all children and young people in independent out of borough provisions, where placements can cost up to £98,000. The new school will educate 56 children aged between 7 and 16. The school will be co-educational and will not provide a residential offer. The pupil cohort will consist of pupils already in out of borough placements during phase transfer or review, new pupil placements and pupils from existing special schools where their needs are not adequately met. The children will be Blackpool residents and Lancashire residents, including looked after children from other areas of the country, who are placed in Blackpool.

This provision will be funded from savings due to not placing children in very expensive out of borough SEMH provision. The savings will benefit the DSG and the High Needs Block but will also allow Council core funding that is spent on expensive residential provision to be used more effectively in preventing children coming into care, through expanding our current early help offer, that will wrap around all our schools. It will replace very expensive (typically at least £35k) out of borough places with less expensive Blackpool places (c£23k p.a.), leading to a potential minimum annual saving of £668k when the new school fills to capacity.

We know that children with an EHCP for their SEMH needs thrive in smaller environments and that is why we would not wish to simply expand our current SEMH Free School. We have experience of the significant issues that can be caused when one setting is asked to educate a very large group of pupils with SEMH needs and complex family circumstances. An additional significant factor is that for many years pupils with SEMH were often educated in the Pupil Referral Unit or some parents chose an elective home education route. Our PRU was the only provision in Blackpool for many years and over a period of time many pupils with EHCPs, who were Looked After, were permanently excluded, or required medical / hospital provision, were educated on one site. This is an unacceptable offer. In 2015-16 school year over 400 pupils were registered with the PRU. We now have less than 100 pupils at the PRU. Improving our SEND offer will also further reduce this reliance upon alternative provision for pupils with SEND and their life chances will subsequently be greatly improved.

Improving SEND provision in Blackpool also will reduce the numbers of pupils who are Electively Home Educated, but in doing so may mean that we do not have sufficient capacity in the mainstream secondary phase to accommodate what would be close to a 3% increase in secondary school pupil numbers if most pupils returned over their school years. We have significant plans to mitigate this risk through the use of our allocated basic needs funding and by drawing down S106 developer funding. Although we will increase the mainstream capacity, as we strongly believe that pupils are better educated in a mainstream setting, we also acknowledge that

we require high-quality specialist routes for a number of pupils who cannot have their needs met in mainstream. Broadening our provision will allow us to educate more pupils effectively, by educating them in a high-quality provision in their hometown. Many children and young people travel significant distances to their specialist provisions. Seven students attend a school that is over 30 miles away from Blackpool. Twenty-two students attend schools over 15 miles away from Blackpool. During heavy traffic this can mean journeys lasting up to and over an hour each way.

The extension of our diverse SEND offer will ensure that more pupils with EHCPs are educated in mainstream schools and less pupils will need to be educated out of borough. However, demographic forecasts indicate that on its own this will not entirely remove the need to place pupils outside of the Blackpool boundary. Without additional specific capacity we will not be able to move our aspirations and strategy forward. By ensuring that the trust who takes on this school has its values firmly focused upon high-quality education, mainstream inclusion for SEND learners and effective outreach / support for other Blackpool schools, we will achieve a unified and continuous approach to education in Blackpool. Without this we are at risk of creating a multi-tiered system where some student groups are being educated in isolation from their peers.

We have worked hard to reduce the numbers of children who are suspended or permanently excluded from Blackpool schools. These numbers have historically been very high and our focus upon inclusion support in mainstream schools has been a significant factor in reducing these numbers, as has a focus upon SEND practice and the opening of Lotus school, our existing SEMH School. Elective Home Education numbers have risen from a high starting point over the last three years, and we now have 348 pupils (on 12th October 2022) who are being home educated. A good proportion of these pupils have been unable to cope in a mainstream environment and this is often due to SEMH needs.

Alongside our focus on improving the quality of SEND practice, our partnership has successfully reduced the use of unregistered Alternative Provision settings. We now only commission places in registered independent school settings or at settings that seek to provide vocational training opportunities for one or two days per week and we have quality assured these placements through our Alternative Provision Quality Assurance panel. We also invite all proprietors or leaders to our AP network events, held every four weeks. Although we have good communication with these providers and can assure ourselves of the quality, these pupil places are very expensive and add to the pressures upon school and local authority budgets.

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

Our children and young people deserve to have the best educational providers and the highest quality educational provision available. Our strategic plan for SEND is ambitious and inclusive. We believe that children and young adults should benefit from the right placement at the right time, but we do not have sufficient breadth in the system to be able to meet the needs of all children and young adults in Blackpool. Too often we have had to use what is available rather than what is right. An example of this is placing a child with SEMH (primary need) in a provision for autism or in our PRU. For too long pupils with very high levels of need have been taught in buildings that are not fit for purpose. A good example is that our PRU was located in buildings that were not purpose built. A new special school for SEMH will allow our current specialist provisions to support children appropriately. For example, there are a significant number of students in our GLD/SLD specialist provision with a primary need of SEMH. The school diversifying to this level dilutes the support the students with GLD/SLD receive, as well as not meeting the needs of those with SEMH. 269 (20%) pupils with an EHCP in Blackpool have an SEMH need. While the highest recorded needs are Autism (23%) and SLCN (22%), SEMH placements represent 62% of out of borough independent placements. Pupils with SEMH needs, especially those with very complex needs, have often been the group that have not benefited from such provision.

The proposed school will fit well within the local strategy for high needs provision and our local education offer. Over the last seven years we have worked hard to broaden the educational offer in Blackpool and to strengthen existing providers and bring new, strong providers into the area. We have successfully reduced the size of our Pupil Referral Unit from over 400 pupils to less than 100. As part of this strategy, we have successfully improved In Year Fair Access processes by strengthening the panel decision making, increasing the numbers of pupils who can quickly and easily access a mainstream placement rather than an AP placement. The majority of pupils now progress quickly into mainstream settings. Additionally, to provide much needed capacity within these mainstream settings, we have also introduced new Primary Resourced Provisions in three primary schools, increasing rates of integration of pupils with an EHCP in mainstream schools while meeting needs effectively. Embedding the graduated approach to SEND and applying an evidenced based approach to statutory requests for assessment has improved the dynamic in relation to special school placements, with a renewed focus upon mainstream. In addition, we have developed stronger mechanisms for working with parents and made a greater commitment to SENDIASS.

Our aspiration is for all children with SEND to be educated in a good school with facilities that match the quality of the teaching. It is also important for children to access local provision reducing the need for long distance travel. Where children require a therapeutic environment, it is best met within a school that is custom-built and well planned to ensure that needs can be met. Choices of provision that are made because they are the only thing that is available, is not acceptable to our children and families. There are only two maintained special schools for students with

SEMH within twenty miles of Blackpool. Both schools offer co-educational placements for students aged between eleven and sixteen. This new school fits with our aspirations to provide high quality, bespoke education. The school would provide full-time long-term placements. When appropriate, temporary short term or dual registered placements would be considered for pupils who can transition into a mainstream setting.

As a Safety Valve authority, Blackpool has been refining its DSG Management Plan, and the creation of a new SEMH school complements the mitigations to help arrive at a sustainable in-year balance within the next five years. Savings estimates have been based on costs within Lotus school compared to the minimum typical cost of a place in independent schools, arriving at a minimum annual saving of £668k to the High Needs block when the school is running at steady state. Forecasts assume that the school would require an element of underwriting in the first two years until all places have been fully commissioned.