



Department  
for Education

# **Wokingham Special Free School (MLD/SLD)**

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

**Wokingham Borough Council**

**May 2023**

## OVERVIEW

The Department for Education is inviting applications from proposer groups to open a new special free school (MLD/SLD) in Wokingham.

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 Wokingham Borough 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**

Wokingham Borough Council is forced to send far too many pupils to out of area, high-cost provision due to the lack of suitable, high-quality settings in the Borough. This has contributed to a significant High Needs Block budget deficit which, in turn has led to Wokingham being invited to be included in the DfE's Safety Valve programme.

The new special school will make a significant contribution towards the goals in the local SEND strategy to strengthen local provision (PRIORITY 1 of the Strategy), and ensure that we use our resources wisely, enhance the sufficiency of local provision and address pressures on the High Needs Block (all falling within PRIORITY 4 of the Strategy).

### Priority 1: Strengthen local provision and improve practice to better meet local needs.

- Sufficiency and consistency of local SEND provision
- Defining consistent universal offer and "ordinarily available" provision
- Future direction and strategy for inclusion and support offer in mainstream settings
- Improving the value for money (effectiveness and cost) of resource base provision
- Define the future direction and strategy for in-borough special provision
- Focus on gaps / issues of concern to parents, carers, children, and young people: e.g., mental health and transport services

### Priority 4: Enabled through intelligence & strategic commissioning.

- Strengthen quality and use of evidence-led planning
- Develop a single shared view of local needs across the area
- Drive strategic joint commissioning and build sufficiency of local provision
- Early intervention and prevention central to commissioning
- Strengthen the focus on outcomes / impact on people's lives in performance management, and management of implementation of the SEND Strategy

Wokingham is experiencing rapid growth in the number of children with high levels of Special Education Needs (measured by Education Health and Care Plans (EHCPs)). Recent projections point to the number of EHCPs increasing from just under 1,500 EHCPs this year to nearly 2,300 EHCPs by 2025, nearly 60% growth.

In terms of primary SEN needs featured in EHCPs, the greatest areas of need show consistently across various data sets as being for Autistic Spectrum Condition (ASC), Social Emotional and Mental Health (SEMH) difficulties, Speech Language and Communication (SLCN) and Moderate Learning Difficulties (MLD). In recent years, there have been significant proportionate increases in ASD and SEMH in KS2 and KS3 particularly. This also has potentially significant implications for demand for

services and support as these children age through the education system. The projections for SEMH, SLD and SLCN requires a significant programme of development to meet demand.

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

Specialist provision in Wokingham is limited. There is one maintained special school (Addington) in the area, catering for pupils with profound learning needs. Currently there are 32 pupils identified as suitable for Addington Special School with no capacity to place them – the next nearest suitable option is The Avenue School in Reading, but there is no capacity there either. It should be noted that at the most recent panel meeting for Addington there were also 40 suitable referrals from other local authority areas, none of which could be offered places. Added to this there will be the need for 34 places for pupils with MLD /PMLD /SLD and MSI where there is currently insufficient provision. This demand is projected to continue growing beyond 2026.

Without this free school, our projections demonstrate that Wokingham would need to continue to place too many pupils out of area with independent specialist providers; data shows that in January 2022 we have 83 school-aged pupils placed in INMSS schools; by 2026 without additional provision this figure is projected to reach 303 school-aged pupils; the vast majority of this growth is projected to be for pupils with ASC and SEMH needs. These projections factor in the development of Wokingham and Reading's new special free school Oak Tree, which caters for cognitively able pupils with ASD and is due to open in 2023 but will still leave gaps for pupils with lower cognitive ability and those with SEMH.