



BEDFORD
BOROUGH COUNCIL



Department
for Education

Proposal to establish a New Free Special School for Pupils with Social, Emotional & Mental Health (SEMH) Needs

June 2026

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Information for Academy Proposers

Bedford Borough Council is inviting expressions of interest from academy proposers interested in sponsoring and self-delivering a new 80 place school for pupils with social, emotional and mental health (SEMH) needs.

The special free school will open on the site of an existing school following refurbishment. The opening date is subject to confirmation with the Department for Education.

This document provides the background and specification for the new school, how it will be funded, the expected timescales for its opening, information regarding how you can express an interest for its operation and how we will assess the strength of your application.

The closing date for expressions of interest is **23:59 on 23rd August 2026**.

Introduction

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. Bedford Borough Council has identified the need to establish a new special school for children and young people with social, emotional, and mental health (SEMH) difficulties. The SEMH special school will serve pupils in years 5 to 11 (aged 9 to 16 years old). It will open on a phased basis, providing 80 places over time. It is proposed that this school, located in Queens Park, close to Bedford town centre, will open during the spring term of 2027, should all necessary works be completed on schedule.

The new school is required to meet the needs of children in the Borough who have an education, health and care plan (EHCP) where social, emotional and mental health (SEMH) is identified as the primary need.

Evidence of Need

Bedford Borough has seen a significant increase in the number of children and young people (CYP) with special education needs who have SEMH identified as their primary need and who require specialist placements. There is currently a cohort of 2418 children who have education, health and care plans (EHCPs) in Bedford Borough; 409 (17%) have SEMH designated as their primary need. Of these young people 32 have EHCPs which currently name out-of-borough locations as their placement.

Between 2015/16 and 2024/25 the Department for Education reported a 133% increase in the number of CYP in Bedford with EHCPs whose primary need is SEMH and a 73% increase for those receiving SEND support (no EHCP) for SEMH challenges.

The further anticipated growth will place an unprecedented demand on our available budgets. We therefore need to ensure that we take action now to ensure that we use the funds available to us wisely and, more importantly, ensure that every child has access to appropriate education provision to meet their needs.

Bedford Borough recognises the increasing demand for SEMH special education provision from a specialist provider. The opening of a new special SEMH free school in Bedford Borough will help improve local choice for parents/carers and pupils and will enable pupils to be educated in their community. This may also bring added benefits to families, for example, reducing the need for lengthy journeys to and from school.

Profile of the Area

- In Bedford Borough, 22.8% of pupils are eligible for free school meals, lower than the national average of 26.5%.
- 39.8% of pupils are from black and/or minority ethnic groups.
- 5.6% of pupils have EHCPs and 12.8% of pupils have SEN support.
- 26.3% of all Looked After Children have an EHCP.
- In 2025 nationally, well over half of all KS2 pupils (62%) reached the expected standard in reading, writing and mathematics (up on 61% in 2024) and 8% reached a high standard (remaining unchanged since 2023). In Bedford Borough in reading, writing and maths 56% reached the expected standard (up from 55% in 2024) and 3% met the higher standard (down 1% compared to 2024).
- At KS4, the national average Attainment 8 score per pupil was 46.0 compared with 44.4 for Bedford Borough pupils. 64.6% of pupils in Bedford Borough achieved grades 9-4 in English and maths GCSEs, in line with 64.8% across England.

Further analysis of the cohort of pupils who are currently receiving their specialist provision within an SEMH provision indicate the following profile:

- 69% of the cohort are male; 30% are female; 1% are transgender or non-binary.
- 29% are primary school pupils and 41% are secondary pupils. Of the 409 CYP with SEMH designated as their primary need, 209 (51%) are in year 5 to year 11.
- 60% are identified as “White: English, Welsh, Scottish, Northern Irish or British” (this data is affected where ethnicity is recorded as unknown/not recorded).

A detailed cohort description will be provided to the approved provider. There will be strategic support from a range of Bedford Borough Council Children’s Services to ensure that the right multi-agency pathways are in place to meet the needs of the cohort.

The urban area of Bedford has a strong commitment to education. The proposed site was formerly a primary school and is located in an area near to three further mainstream primaries and a secondary school. The new SEMH free special school will significantly improve our local capacity to support children and young people with SEMH and will have a meaningful impact on education across Bedford Borough. The free school presumption should consider the social value it can bring to the community it is based within and the wider social impact it can have across Bedford.

Bedford is committed to an ethos of inclusion across all its schools. The new SEMH special school will be in a unique position to develop a centre of excellence that meets the needs of children with complex and sometimes challenging behaviours. We would like to work with a school partner who will have a key role in the wider system, providing leadership and sharing expertise and good practice.

The authority is therefore seeking proposals from appropriate academy trusts to self-deliver the necessary capital works and open this new school. This school would be deemed a free school.

Application Process and Assessment Criteria

Bedford Borough Council will consider the evidence provided and proposals will be assessed on the following criteria:

- Evidence of the trust having successfully managed self-delivered capital projects.
- Evidence of successful delivery of an existing SEMH special school, including evidence of education outcomes and attendance within existing provisions.
- Evidence of multi-agency partnership working to support children, young people, and their families.
- Evidence of working in partnership with schools, key health services and CAMHS to support systemic positive outcomes for children and young people with SEMH needs.
- Evidence of high standards of leadership, management, and governance, including a commitment to staff welfare, training, and development.
- Evidence of offering a broad and balanced educational curriculum that enhances education outcomes for this cohort of students inclusive of vocational pathways to support post 16 pathways in key stage 4.
- Evidence of a genuine commitment and desire to work in partnership with Bedford Borough Council to meet the needs of children and young people with SEMH needs in the Borough.

Proposers should complete the Free School Presumption application form and return it to schools via email to consultation@bedford.gov.uk by **23rd August 2026**.

Proposed Timeline

The table below sets out a provisional timeline for the assessment, approval and implementation.

Action	Timescale
Invitations for expressions of interest published	June 2026
Deadline for receipt of proposals	23rd August 2026
Shortlisting of applications	24th August – 4th September 2026
Visits to academies	7th – 11th September 2026
Interviews and presentations	14th – 17th September 2026
Decision taken by LA on preferred academy proposer	18th – 20th September 2026
Submission of recommendation to the Regional Director for a decision	18th – 20th September 2026
Secretary of State decision and successful applicant announced	September / October 2026
Unsuccessful proposers informed	To be confirmed
Statutory consultation (required under Section 10 of the Academies Act 2010)	To be confirmed
Successful trust enters into a funding agreement with the Secretary of State	To be confirmed
Capital works and pre-opening phase of the new SEMH special school	To be confirmed
New SEMH special school opens	Spring term 2027

The timescales for this project are ambitious and reflect Bedford Borough Council's desire to make appropriate provision for children and young people in a timely manner.

The above timescales are subject to confirmation and change as specific dates are in the control of the DfE and not Bedford Borough Council.

The Regional Director (RD) for East of England, 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.

NB: the local authority led free school presumption route is a different route to the DfE's central free school programme. Further information about the DfE's central free school programme can be found at <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/opening-a-free-school>.

Applicant Requirements

Proposers must be DfE approved sponsors. If you are not already an approved sponsor you will need to separately apply via the formal sponsor approval process.

You should contact the DfE about becoming a sponsor before submitting a proposal and you can find out more information at <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/sponsor-an-academy>.

Contact Details and Further Information

If you would like further information or wish to discuss your application, please contact:

Chris Morris, Service Director for Education, SEND and School Infrastructure

Email: chris.morris@bedford.gov.uk

Phone: 01234 718430

For general enquiries please contact charlotte.cotter@bedford.gov.uk.

The School

Location

The location of the new SEMH special school will be on the site of the former St Joseph's Lower School on Chester Road, Queens Park, Bedford, Bedfordshire, MK40 4HN.



Pupil capacity and expected rate of growth

The SEMH special school will open on a phased basis, providing 80 places over time.

The anticipated occupation rates are as follows:

- 2026/27 (spring term) – 20 pupils
- 2027/28 – 60 pupils
- 2028/29 – 80 pupils

There is adequate site area for potential expansion of the school in the future.

Age Range and Gender

The SEMH special school will serve pupils in years 5 to 11 (aged 9 to 16 years old).

The school will be a mixed school for boys and girls.

Proposed admissions arrangements

Admissions will be via Bedford Borough's EHCP panel and follow the statutory placement consultation process as per legislation set out in the SEND Code of Practice.

Bedford Borough Council, as commissioner of the places, will be in agreement of all children who take up the 80 places in the new SEMH special school. Any pupil admitted from outside of Bedford Borough, without prior agreement of Bedford Borough Council, will be deemed to be in addition to the 80 places and will not count towards the place funding that the school receives.

The initial cohort will likely be pupils who reside in Bedford Borough and who currently attend independent SEMH special provision, particularly those in out-of-borough placements.

Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) provision

The school will be a designated provision for children and young people with complex social, emotional and mental health difficulties. There may be comorbidities such as autism spectrum condition, however, SEMH must be the prevailing need.

In line with the 0-25 SEND Code of Practice (2014), schools must ensure all children and young people have access to a broad, balanced and appropriate curriculum that is inclusive of those with SEND. Additionally, as part of The Equality Act (2010) any reasonable adjustments to support children and young people with disabilities (whether of a physical, educational or mental health nature) to access the same provision as others should be made.

Ownership and lease arrangements

The former St Joseph's school building is under the ownership of Bedford Borough Council. On a date to be agreed with the approved academy sponsor prior to the opening of the SEMH special school, the site and building will be transferred on a 125-year lease arrangement.

Community use / shared facilities

Use of the SEMH school for SEND holiday club provision is desirable.

Transport arrangements

Access to the school will be along safe walking and cycling routes, therefore, the Council will expect the academy sponsor to encourage safe and sustainable travel where possible. Children and young people who attend this school will live in different parts of the Borough and many children who attend this provision will be eligible for home to school transport assistance as per Bedford Borough Council's policy at <https://www.bedford.gov.uk/schools-education-and-childcare/schools-and-colleges/school-transport/send-school-transport>.

Character of the school

The school's character should be shaped by the needs of the children it serves. Many will have experienced trauma, instability, loss or significant adversity. Many will have had damaging experiences of education before arriving. The sponsor must demonstrate a deep understanding of what this means for how the school operates: not as a theoretical position but as a lived practice embedded in every interaction and every professional conversation.

Bedford Borough Council expect the school's character to reflect the following commitments.

Relationships as the foundation of everything.

For children with SEMH needs, the quality of the relationship between adult and child is not ancillary to learning; it is the prerequisite for it. The school's culture should be built around consistent, boundaried, warm and predictable adult relationships that allow children to feel safe enough to take the risks that learning requires. Staff should understand co-regulation before self-regulation, and the school's approach to all behaviour should flow from that understanding.

High expectations, never lowered.

A therapeutic approach must never become a reason to expect less of children academically or personally. Bedford Borough Council expects the sponsor to demonstrate that SEMH specialist provision and high educational ambition are not in tension. Children here will be challenged, encouraged and supported to achieve at the highest level their potential allows. Literacy, numeracy and knowledge are not luxuries to be pursued once behaviour is settled: they are themselves enabling, giving children the tools to navigate the world with agency and confidence.

Trauma awareness without trauma determinism.

The school's response to difficulty should be understood as a response to communication, not defiance, and met with curiosity rather than punishment. At the same time, children should be supported to develop agency and accountability. A child's history is the context for understanding their behaviour, not a permanent explanation for it. The goal is to build the understanding, skills and self-belief that allow children to make different choices.

A school that is part of Bedford's SEND system, not separate from it.

This school should be an active contributor to Bedford's wider SEND infrastructure: sharing expertise with mainstream colleagues, supporting smooth transitions into and where appropriate out of specialist provision, contributing to the professional development of the broader workforce, and working alongside the local authority, health partners and families as a genuine partner. The sponsor should articulate how the school will add value to the whole system.

Ethos of the school

The ethos of the school should be experienced before it is described. It should be evident in the physical environment: calm, ordered, welcoming and purposeful, with spaces designed around the sensory and emotional needs of pupils rather than the convenience of the institution. It should be evident in the interactions between adults: respectful, reflective and professionally curious. It should be evident in how the school speaks about its pupils, with warmth, precision and hope.

Bedford Borough Council expects the ethos to be grounded in the following principles.

Belonging.

Every child who attends this school should experience a genuine sense of belonging: to a community that knows them, values them and is committed to their success. Many of the pupils who come here will have experienced exclusion, rejection or invisibility in previous settings. This school should be the place where that changes.

Safety, physical, emotional and relational.

Children cannot learn in environments where they do not feel safe. The school should create safety through consistency of routine and environment, through the quality of adult relationships, through explicit teaching of emotional regulation skills, and through an approach to risk that is proportionate, transparent and focused on enabling rather than restricting.

Dignity.

Children should be treated at all times with dignity, regardless of the behaviour being displayed. The school's approach to behaviour should be therapeutic and relational rather than punitive and should be understood by all staff as a non-negotiable expression of the school's values. The sponsor should demonstrate how this is embedded in policy, in practice and in how behaviour is discussed at every level of the organisation.

Aspiration.

This school should be a place where children discover what they are capable of, often for the first time. The sponsor should describe the culture of aspiration the school will build and sustain: how it will celebrate achievement in all its forms, how it will develop pupils' sense of their own future, how it will raise sights toward further education, skilled employment and active citizenship, and how it will connect children to the world beyond the school gates in ways that make those ambitions feel achievable.

Partnership with families.

Families of children with SEMH needs have often experienced a system that has felt adversarial, confusing or dismissive. This school should offer a different experience: proactive, honest and supportive engagement with families as partners in their child's education and wellbeing. The sponsor should describe specifically how family voice will be embedded in the life of the school, not as a consultation exercise but as an ongoing and reciprocal relationship.

Reintegration to mainstream.

Where it is in a child's best interests to return to a mainstream or less specialist setting, the school should actively support and plan that transition rather than treating it as exceptional. The sponsor should describe its approach to reintegration, including the relationships it will build with mainstream schools and the support it will offer both to the child and to the receiving school.

Vision

Bedford Borough Council seeks a sponsor whose vision for this school is rooted in a simple but profound belief: that every child with SEMH needs has the capacity to learn, to flourish and to lead a fulfilling life, and that the role of the school is to create the conditions in which that capacity can be realised.

This is not a school that should define its pupils by their diagnosis, their history, or the circumstances that brought them here. It is a school that should see each child whole: recognising the experiences that have shaped them, the strengths they bring, and the future that remains open to them. The sponsor should be able to articulate, with conviction and with evidence, how this belief translates into every aspect of school life, from the way staff greet a child at the door each morning to the ambitions they are encouraged to hold for themselves.

Bedford Borough has achieved a Grade 1 local area SEND inspection outcome and is committed to a high quality, inclusive SEND system in which specialist provision plays a defined and purposeful role. This school is not a destination of last resort. It is a centre of genuine expertise: a place where children come to receive the specialist support they need, develop the skills and resilience to engage with learning, and move on to positive destinations in further education, employment, and independent adult life. The measure of this school's success will be visible in what its pupils do next, not only in what they achieve within it.

Bedford Borough serves a community of remarkable linguistic and cultural diversity, with over 140 languages spoken in its schools. The sponsor should demonstrate that the school will be a genuinely inclusive community that reflects and celebrates that diversity, understands the intersecting vulnerabilities that many of its pupils will carry, and holds every child to the same standard of aspiration regardless of background.

Within the vision as a minimum, please ensure you include the following:

- A strong educational vision and a curriculum delivery plan based on high standards of attainment for each key stage.
- Plans for appropriate engagement with the local community and parents during the pre-opening period and any on-going engagement.
- Excellent support facilities to meet the needs of all children, including looked after children, those with Special Educational Needs, etc.
- A commitment to excellent outcomes and high quality of teaching and learning.

Applicants should take account of the relevant criteria in Annex C of the free school presumption guidance.

Education Plan

A coherent, ambitious and personalised curriculum.

The school should offer a broad and balanced curriculum that is ambitious in content and sensitively adapted in delivery. The sponsor should have a considered position on curriculum design for SEMH learners: one that provides structure and coherence whilst allowing genuine personalisation, builds cultural capital alongside emotional vocabulary, and prepares pupils for life beyond school. The curriculum should not be narrowed by perceived limitations. It should be expanded by an understanding of what these children are capable of when the right conditions exist.

Integrated therapeutic and educational practice.

Therapy and education should be experienced as a single, coherent offer rather than parallel systems. The sponsor should describe how therapeutic approaches are embedded in daily school life, how clinical and educational professionals work in genuine partnership, and how the thinking of therapeutic practice informs what happens in every classroom. This does not mean every teacher is a therapist: it means every teacher understands the therapeutic principles that shape how the school responds to children.

Clear and ambitious post-16 pathways.

The school should hold an explicit and well-evidenced commitment to positive destinations. Pupils should leave this school with qualifications that open doors, with skills that employers and colleges value, and with a clear plan for what comes next. The sponsor should describe how post-16 planning is embedded across key stages rather than beginning only in Year 11: how careers education and employer engagement are woven into the school's offer from an early stage, how the school builds relationships with FE providers, apprenticeship employers and supported employment services, and how it tracks and publishes destination data as a measure of its own effectiveness. Bedford Borough Council expects to see ambition here that matches or exceeds what is expected in any other secondary school in the Borough.

As a minimum please ensure that the following elements are highlighted in your application:

- An ambitious, broad and balanced, deliverable curriculum plan which is consistent with the vision and pupil intake. This could include a curriculum table and pupil build up chart.
- Strategies for measuring pupil progress effectively in all areas of their development and setting challenging targets including strategies for baselining, measuring and tracking other skills, e.g. resilience, social skills, self-esteem, so that next steps can be identified and progress can be demonstrated.
- The philosophy underpinning the approach to inclusive practice and holistic behaviour management.
- Strategies for ensuring all pupils have an effective transition pathway and are prepared for the next stage in their lives.
- The actions you will take to ensure effective partnerships with other agencies that support positive outcomes for pupils, including health and social care services. Within this area we would also seek to see evidence of the SEMH special school working in partnership with key services including CAMHS, Education Psychology and other health services to deliver positive outcomes for children.
- How the school will work in partnership with parents to support them to meet their responsibilities in supporting their child's educational outcomes and regular attendance at school.

- 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). This could also include an organogram and staff build up chart
- The school's approach to building capacity and supporting children and young people with SEND across the local area.
- Details of enrichment and extended services, for example, breakfast clubs, after school clubs, community engagement and holiday clubs.
- The school's approach to: PHSE; the Prevent Duty; safeguarding and welfare; and promoting fundamental British values (democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty, mutual respect and tolerance of those with different faiths and beliefs).

Applicants should take account of the relevant criteria in Annex C of the free school presumption guidance.

Capacity and Capability

As a minimum please ensure you include the following:

- The resources you would draw on and/or deploy to support the development of the new free school by the opening date.
- Clear evidence that you 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 applicant will ensure value for money and allow for any unforeseen circumstances.
- How the school would be organised and what the governance arrangements would look like, including a diagram of the proposed structures.
- How the proposed governance model will drive and support high standards.
- How the proposed governance model will link to the community.
- Plans to provide challenge in order to evaluate the school's ongoing strengths and weaknesses and to take appropriate actions to improve outcomes.
- Any experience of opening a new school.

Applicants should take account of the relevant criteria in Annex C of the free school presumption guidance.

Funding and Costs

Bedford Borough Council have a feasibility study confirming that the school is large enough to become an 80 place SEMH school with only internal renovations required. The feasibility is for every classroom to be delivered to BB104 specification, whereas we know that this can be value engineered with not every classroom requiring that level of specification.

Capital works will be required to convert the existing primary school building into a suitable SEMH special school and we would anticipate the successful applicant will be part of the development of the plans and design of the school within the £2.5m envelope for works that is available. The project will be funded from the Council's 2025-26 High Needs Capital Grant allocation.

A project development grant (PDG) of up to £25,000 is available from the DfE for essential non-capital pre-opening revenue costs e.g. legal expenses. Bedford Borough Council will also provide £55,000 of funding from the High Needs Block of the Dedicated Schools Grant.

State-funded special schools receive per-place funding (currently £10,000 per place) and then receive top-up funding for each pupil that attends. For further details of Bedford's top-up funding rates, please refer to Appendix 1.

Equalities Impact Analysis

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.

The purpose of developing the new school is to improve the availability of suitable provision locally. An initial equalities impact analysis undertaken by Bedford Borough Council shows that no particular individuals or groups will be disadvantaged by the proposals for the new SEMH school.

Finding out more

If you would like further copies, a large-print copy or information about us and our services, please telephone or write to us at our address below.

Për Informacion

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Informacja

برای اطلاع

Za Informacije

Per Informazione

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