



Department
for Education

Darlington Special Free School

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

Darlington Borough Council

May 2023

OVERVIEW

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

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 Darlington 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

Darlington currently have 2 ASD resource bases, one at primary (19 places) and one at secondary (14 places). Our local specialist academy, Beaumont Hill whilst offering generic specialist provision also caters for CYP with ASD needs, however this is currently at capacity and limited in terms of having the physical capacity to expand.

In addition to this we are partnering with other Tees Valley LAs in the development of a free school, specialising in provision for SEMH needs with some communication and interaction needs (primarily on the Autistic Spectrum).

We are also seeing a year-on-year growth in the numbers of EHCP's we maintain in Darlington with an average year on year growth of just over 4% per year in the last 3 years. Of our current EHCP cohort nearly 35% have a primary need of ASD, just over half of whom are educated in mainstream provision, and with almost 12% educated in out of area provision.

Demand for ASD provision in Darlington is increasing year on year. Further pressure arises from an increase in the rates of fixed term and permanent exclusions. The complexity of the needs of many special school students is preventing a successful reintegration back into mainstream provision.

Darlington has children and young people accessing out of area settings, including Independent School settings. Young people and families have additional concerns about a lack of more local educational placement opportunities as well as more challenges in terms of becoming part of a local community peer group.

Whilst Darlington is responding to these challenges to ensure our mainstream offer is robust, having a local specialist ASD provision will enhance the support available to children and young people in our area, by providing a more cost effective and more local provision to meet the needs of children and young people aged 11-19 with ASD needs.

A new specialist ASD school will support the local area in delivering our new SEND strategy that is currently being co-produced and finalised, with stakeholders including parents/carers and children and young people. The strategy identifies key strategic outcomes that focus on preparation for adulthood, If places are not delivered and projected growth continues in line with current trends, there will not be sufficient places to meet demand in the long term. The impact of this would create sustained over-reliance on the independent school sector and out of area placements, which frequently also involves excessive home to school travel distances for EHCP pupils outside of area.

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

As outlined above, we have identified that children and young people with a primary need of ASD form the largest group in our current EHCP cohort, 12% of who are educated in provision outside of Darlington. This is in the context of an oversubscribed local specialist provision. Whilst we are working with our specialist Darlington provider to increase capacity by capital investment in their sixth form provision to free pre 16 spaces, as a generic school we would envisage that the addition of an ASD specific provision would be complementary to this, as is the investment in our two new SEMH units and the Tees Valley SEMH Free school.

Increasing capacity within Darlington for an ASD provision will enable children and young people to access provision within the area in which they live, thus promoting community inclusion with the added benefit of reducing demand for out of borough independent placements and associated travel.

We are focusing on the action we must take as a local area to promote inclusion within mainstream school, but we also accept that some young people require more support than could be expected to be provided within a mainstream setting. To neglect to provide this, risks negative impact on mental health and engagement of our young people with long term impact on their outcomes as they progress into adulthood - key themes in our emerging co-produced new SEND Strategy.

By proposing an ASD designated Special School for autistic pupils and those with Communication & Interaction needs we are seeking to address provision for those pupils who are aged between 11 and 19 working at or below broadly age-related expectations. Currently autism is thought to be three times more common in males than females. This ratio may change as understanding of the way autism presents in women and girls improves. Research has suggested that autism may be under-diagnosed in females, gender-fluid and non-binary people.

In Darlington currently 246 male pupils hold an EHCP with a primary need of ASD as compared to 62 female pupils.