

Thousands of places created in new special free schools

Up to 3,000 new school places are to be created for children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), providing tailored support and specialist equipment.

Staffed by specially trained teachers, the 35 new special free schools are expected to from September 2022 onwards and will give pupils with complex needs access to equipment that supports their individual needs such as sensory equipment and communication aids.

Education Secretary Gavin Williamson has today, Sunday 19 July, announced he has approved 33 school trusts to open and run 37 new schools. Two of these will be solely for children who have been or are at risk of being excluded from mainstream education, to level up their educational outcomes and to keep them engaged in learning. The remaining 35 will help drive up standards in special education, providing support and teaching for pupils with complex needs such as autism, severe learning difficulties or mental health conditions.

The announcement builds on the success of the free school programme, which promotes innovation, with more than 500 already open across the country, including 44 special and 47 Alternative Provision (AP) free schools. These new schools will take advantage of the freedoms and opportunities provided by the free school system to ensure that children with special educational needs and in AP are receiving the tailored support they need to fulfil their potential.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson said:

Every child deserves a superb education, regardless of their background or where they grew up, and these new schools will allow those with the most complex needs get the very best start in life.

We are delivering on our promise to reform our education system to ensure the next generation reach their full potential, and have already committed to increasing funding per pupil in primary and secondary schools.

Education Secretary Gavin Williamson said:

Now more than ever we need to make sure we are putting our most disadvantaged and vulnerable children first, including those with complex needs.

We need to be more ambitious for these children, which is why we

are delivering on this Government's commitment to deliver more school places for children with complex special educational needs. This will give these young people the opportunity they deserve for tailored support in a school that responds to their individual needs, making them confident learners and engaged students.

At the same time, I also want to transform the experience of children who have been permanently excluded or are at risk of being removed from the classroom. These new schools, adding to the network of excellent free schools around the country, will help level up opportunities for children from all backgrounds so they can receive a world-class education.

Free schools are new schools set up by parents, teachers, charities, academy trusts and existing schools in response to demand from the local community. Secondary free schools are among the highest performing state-funded schools in the country.

Last month the Prime Minister set out a transformative ten-year rebuilding programme for schools across England, aimed at driving opportunity and prosperity through improvements to the country's education system. This will start in 2020-21 with the first 50 projects supported by over £1 billion in funding.

These 37 new schools add to the 44 special and 47 AP free schools already open and the 49 special and 8 AP free schools in the pipeline. On completion, it takes the total number of special free schools to 128.

The new schools will be open to some of the most vulnerable children in the country – including those with Education, Health and Care Plans, whose needs have been prioritised throughout the pandemic, with nurseries, schools and colleges remaining open for them where appropriate. Charity grants have also been provided to families on low-incomes with disabled children, to pay for specialist equipment required during the lockdown period.

Children and Families Minister Vicky Ford said:

It is vital that we unlock opportunities and improve education for all children, including those who do not attend mainstream school. The investment in new special schools and AP underlines our commitment to levelling up in education by supporting some of our most vulnerable children.

Dame Christine Lenehan, Director of the National Children's Bureau, said:

We are pleased to welcome additional schools and school places for children with some of the most complex needs. We are clear that all children have the right to the best quality education and we look forward to seeing these schools lead by example and enabling

children to have the best possible outcomes.

The Government has also taken urgent action to keep children at risk of harm or exploitation safe during the coronavirus outbreak, investing to expand the work of charities on the front line.

Today's announcement builds on measures announced by the Department for Education to place social workers in more schools to help teachers identify those at risk, and to make £7 million available to pupils leaving AP after their GCSEs this year to help their transition to further education, employment or training. It comes as work on the Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Review continues – a cross-governmental review to improve the support children and young people receive so the system works for everyone, in every part of the country.

The Department also has an ambitious programme of action on school behaviour and is working to rapidly improve the availability of good Alternative Provision so that permanently excluded children and children at risk of exclusion receive a high quality education, meaning fewer of them end up becoming not in Education, Employment or Training.

Of the new free schools:

- three will be in the North East, providing over 200 places in total mostly for children with social, emotional and mental health needs (SEMH);
- six will be in the North West, providing over 400 places, including for children with SEMH, Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD), Severe Learning Difficulty (SLD) and speech, Language and Communication Needs (SLCN);
- five will be in Yorkshire and the Humber, providing over 500 places including for children with SEMH, ASD, SLD, Profound and Multiple Learning Difficulties (PMLD) and SLCN;
- one will be in the East Midlands, providing 50 places for children with SEMH;
- three will be in the West Midlands, providing over nearly 300 places including for children with SEMH, ASD and Multiple Learning Difficulties (MLD);
- three will be in the East of England, providing over 300 places including for children with SEMH, ASD and SLCN;
- four will be in London, providing over 300 places including for children with SEMH, ASD and SLCN;
- four will be in the South East, providing over 300 places including for children with SEMH and ASD;
- six will be in the South West, providing 500 places including for children with SEMH, ASD, Complex Learning Difficulties (CLD) and SLCN; and
- two Alternative Provision free schools will provide over 100 places in the West Midlands for children who have been, or are at risk of being, excluded from mainstream education.

Unity Howard, Director of New Schools Network, said:

This announcement is fantastic news for families across the country. Special and alternative provision free schools are some of the most innovative and successful providers, and I am delighted to see more of them will be opened. Children with complex needs are the most vulnerable in society and the Government's commitment to ensuring their opportunities and experiences are levelled up is very welcome. New Schools Network looks forward to working with these groups to ensure their free schools open successfully, joining the other 91 special and alternative provision free schools already adding much-needed capacity, innovation, and aspiration to the sector.

Mark Vickers, Chair of the AP and SEND MAT CEO Network, said:

Excluded children and young people and those with special educational needs and disabilities need access to local, special and alternative provision schools. Children who have experienced difficulty in learning in mainstream schools depend upon the expert support which special and AP schools can offer them. These new free schools will ensure more of our country's most vulnerable children stay in education and get the targeted support they so desperately need.

Sarah Dove, President of PRUsAP, said:

We welcome the announcement of additional free AP schools. In doing this, there is the reaffirmed commitment that AP can increase support for children who are vulnerable to exclusion and be the cornerstone of breaking the cycle of poor life chances for children who may find mainstream school challenging. We acknowledge that free schools can provide a localised support for children in areas where there is limited support for these children and provide additional options for those who may require alternatives to foster a love of education.