

Choosing a school is an important decision which will impact on your child and your whole family, so it is worth spending time looking at the options available. Understandably, concerns are even greater if a child has special educational needs (SEN); the aim of this guide is to provide advice to parents looking at schools for children with SEN.

""General Guidelines""

These guidelines will apply to any parent looking for a school.

Start by looking at your local schools – visit two or three schools to get some idea of their facilities and ethos so that you have something to compare.

Keep an open mind – you might have heard things about the school from other people or even attended the school yourself. Remember you need to consider the school as it is now and what it will offer your child. Your personal experiences of school will inevitably affect the way you look at schools but it is your child who will be going to the school so try and look at things from their perspective.

There are advantages to attending your local school:

- Local friends /siblings
- Shorter travel time – easier transport arrangements
- They are part of the community

Visit the schools more than once.

Find out the date of the deadline for applications. There is no automatic entry for any child e.g. children from a feeder school or if a sibling already attends the school. All parents with children starting school for the first time and those moving on to secondary school need to complete and submit an application form. Applications can be made on-line. It is important that you complete and submit your forms before the deadline otherwise your options may be affected. On-line applications can be amended at any time before the deadline – so the form can be completed in advance and changed if necessary.

Details of how to apply and the deadlines for applications can be obtained from schools or www.westberkshire.gov.uk.

Look well in advance to get some idea and then again nearer the time – time flies by and your child's needs change but the timescales must be complied with and this is not a decision that you will want to rush.

""Children with Special Educational Needs (SEN)""

Most children with special educational needs go to their local mainstream school and are taught with children of their own age. Sometimes they receive extra help from their class teacher who is trained to differentiate the curriculum according to the specific individual needs of the pupils.

Additional special help may be provided by the school; and the class teacher together with the school's Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator (SENCo) ensure that the child's needs are appropriately met and their progress monitored.

Some children may need more specialist support and the school may seek advice from the Local Authority (LA) or other external sources e.g. speech and language therapy or occupational therapy.

This means that professionals will visit your child in school and provide advice to the school on how best to support your child.

All children with SEN who fall into the above categories will be on the school SEN Register – they will be designated as requiring SEN Support if it is considered that their needs can be met within the school without the need for a Statement of SEN or and EHC plan.

Choosing a school for these children (those requiring SEN Support) follows the same procedure as all other children - although parents understandably have additional concerns they have the exactly the same rights as any other parent. As a parent of a child with SEN it is useful to consider the advice of the professionals who know your child and may have experience of the schools. Then visit the schools and consider your child's needs and how they can be best met. When you have decided, you apply for the school following the standard process - it may be useful to state on the application form any information that you think is relevant.

Where children have more significant and / or complex special educational needs the Local Authority may undertake an EHC Needs assessment to ensure your child's needs are fully identified and if appropriate issue a EHC plan. If your child has an EHC plan, the LA is responsible for ensuring that their education needs, as outlined in the plan are met.

""If your child has a statement of SEN or an EHC plan.""

If your child has a statement or EHC plan, it is the responsibility of the local authority to ensure your child's educational needs are met. In general, the LA will consider the nearest school to your home that is appropriate for your child's needs. It is however, important that you to look round schools and know your preferred school as you will be consulted.

The new EHC process puts children, young people and parents at the heart of decision making and now, you have the right to request the school of your choice.

The Code of Practice makes this clear in (Section 9, 78 &79):

'The child's parent or young person has the right to request a particular school, college or other institution of the following type to be named on their EHC plan:

- Maintained nursery school
- Maintained school and any form of academy or free school (mainstream or special)
- Non-maintained special school
- Further education or sixth form college
- Independent school or independent specialist colleges (where they have been approved for this purpose by the Secretary of State and published in a list available to all parents and young people)

If a child's parent or young person makes a request for a particular nursery, school or post-16 institution, in these groups the local authority must comply with that preference and name the school or college on the EHC plan unless:

- It would be unsuitable for the age, ability, aptitude or SEN of the child or young person,

or

- The attendance of the child or young person there would be incompatible with the efficient education of others, or the efficient use of resources

For children who are coming to the end of their primary schooling parents will be formally asked by the LA to state their secondary school preference (naming three schools in order of preference). If you do not apply for a secondary school the LA may allocate a place as part of the annual review process; however, it is still important to look at schools.

It is a good idea to visit the secondary schools during the autumn term of Y5 so that you have a good idea of the options available. When your child is in Y5 a transition review will be held at their primary school during Term 5 or Term 6. This gives the primary school, parents and other professionals who work with your child the opportunity to consider how their needs may be best met at secondary level. The SENCo(s) from the proposed secondary school/s may also be invited and able to contribute their views and provide specific information about the secondary school which is relevant to the child. If you have visited the possible schools before this meeting and reached a decision you can contribute informed views and state your school preference. Following the annual review the recommendations of the meeting are submitted to the SEN panel for their consideration when deciding on the school placement.

""Special Schools""

A small percentage of children with SEN have needs that cannot be met within a mainstream school and require more specialist provision. Only children with a statement of SEN or and EHC plan identifying specific needs attend special schools. Due to the low incidence of children with this high level of need there is a limited choice of appropriate specialist schools in each area. However it is useful to visit a couple of schools and most of the general points outlined above apply so these should be considered together with your knowledge of your child and their individual needs.

""Looking round schools""

- Visit well in advance and more than once – all schools have Open Days and other events open to the public that you can attend, but before you reach your decision contact the school and ask if you can visit and have a tour during school hours.
- Consider whether to go on your own - if you are looking at several schools it may not be appropriate to take your child with you until you have some idea of your own views or it is nearer the time, as this can be unsettling for a child. If possible, initially go with your partner or a friend as you will notice different things and it is useful to have someone to discuss your views with.
- Before the visit think about the things that are important for your child and make a check list of the things you need to find out – see list below
- Talk to the school SENCo – if they haven't got time to talk then make an appointment to go back when they have got time. Take along any information you have about your child and explain their individual needs, discuss the school's facilities and their experience of educating children with similar needs. Be open about your child's needs – whatever difficulties your child has they will inevitably come to light at some point and the school may understandably feel aggrieved if they weren't given the full picture. Most issues can be addressed if they are discussed and the right support can then be put in place. It is much better to be open, remember you may be working with the school for the next few years so it is important, and in your child's best interests, to build up a good relationship.

- Ask for a prospectus – this is useful to look back on after the visit and can be helpful to look at with your child if you decide on this school.
- You may also wish to look at other documents eg. the latest Ofsted Report; The SEN Policy; The Accessibility Policy; The Behaviour Policy – or specific documents eg. The Administration of Medication Policy or The Toileting Policy may be relevant – these documents should be available on-line or from the school.
- All local schools should be able to meet the needs of the majority of pupils with SEN in their area - there are clear advantages to your child moving up to their new school with friends from their nursery or primary school and being part of the local community. However, every school is different - you know your child best and therefore need to judge which will be best for them.

Things to consider asking

- How does the school organise SEN support?
- How many children will be in the class?
- How does the school organise its day – what does a typical day look like?
- Where will your child go at lunchtime?
- What pastoral support is available in the school?
- Will your child be able to access all activities – after school clubs, excursions and trips?
- Does the school welcome advice / input from external professionals?
- How does the school arrange their transition programmes (for joining a new school)? A good transition can be fundamental to a child settling at a school – similarly if the transition is not successful it can be an uphill struggle to put things right.
- Do children use laptops routinely in the classroom?
- Are there any accessibility issues for your child or special facilities (eg. toileting facilities or medical rooms) they require?
- How does the school inform and involve parents – how will they communicate with you?

In addition if looking at secondary schools you should consider –

- The SEN Department - The great majority of children with Statements of SEN or an EHC plan will have their needs met in their local mainstream schools, with additional support funded through a combination of school SEN resources and funding from the Local Authority. Extra help may take a variety of forms depending on the child's needs, and will be set out in the Statement or EHC plan. Some children may need a higher level of support than can be provided in a local mainstream school. The Authority maintains a number of special resources attached to mainstream schools for children with particular types of SEN. For more details please ring the SEN Department on 01635 519713.

- Does the school have supervised homework time? This can be invaluable for children who need help to understand the task and can prevent a lot of tension at home.
- Is there somewhere your child can go / someone they can talk to if they have a problem?

- What options / choices are available in Y9 – it may seem a while off but time flies by. If your child is not good at academic subjects it is important to consider what their options will be in the future and what qualifications they may be able to get.
- Are the children assessed when they start in Y7 and put in “sets” for some subjects?

“After the visit”

Think about –

- Did you feel welcome?
- Did the children look relaxed and confident?
- Did the school seem under control?
- Did the classrooms provide a good learning environment?
- Was the school a happy and stimulating place to be?
- Were all your questions answered?
- Could you picture your child there?
- How would your child get to school?

Remember whichever school you choose the best outcomes for your child will result from you and the school working together. Sometimes there are so many different things to consider that a compromise has to be made.

The school has to have the right attitude and want to support your child and you have to have confidence in the school. This will help your child feel positive about the school, as most importantly your child needs to feel happy and safe in the school setting – they will then be in the right environment to learn and thrive.

There is no substitute to visiting a school and asking questions about anything that you think is important. Visit as many schools as you can so that you get a good view of what provision is available for your child.

West Berkshire has two special schools, Brookfields School in Tilehurst and The Castle School in Newbury. Both cater for children with learning difficulties aged 2 to 19 who may also have other associated difficulties such as autism, sensory impairment or physical disability.

In a small number of cases children may attend a special school maintained by another Local Authority or a non maintained or independent special school if their needs can't be met in West Berkshire's own SEN provision.