

ROK PLANNING

SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS & DEVELOPMENT (SEND) SCHOOL NEEDS ASSESSMENT

In respect of

Land at Pound Farm, Hitchin, SG5 3RS

On behalf of

Bugler Homes Ltd

Prepared by: **Imogen Seth**

*Authorised
by:* **Alun Evans**

Date/Status: **25 February 2026**

*Project
Number:* **R00715**

CONTENTS

- 1. INTRODUCTION ERROR! BOOKMARK NOT DEFINED.
- 2. SITE AND SURROUNDING AREA ERROR! BOOKMARK NOT DEFINED.
- 3. PROPOSED DEVELOPMENT..... ERROR! BOOKMARK NOT DEFINED.
- 4. METHODOLOGY ERROR! BOOKMARK NOT DEFINED.
- 5. CONCLUSION..... 12

1. INTRODUCTION

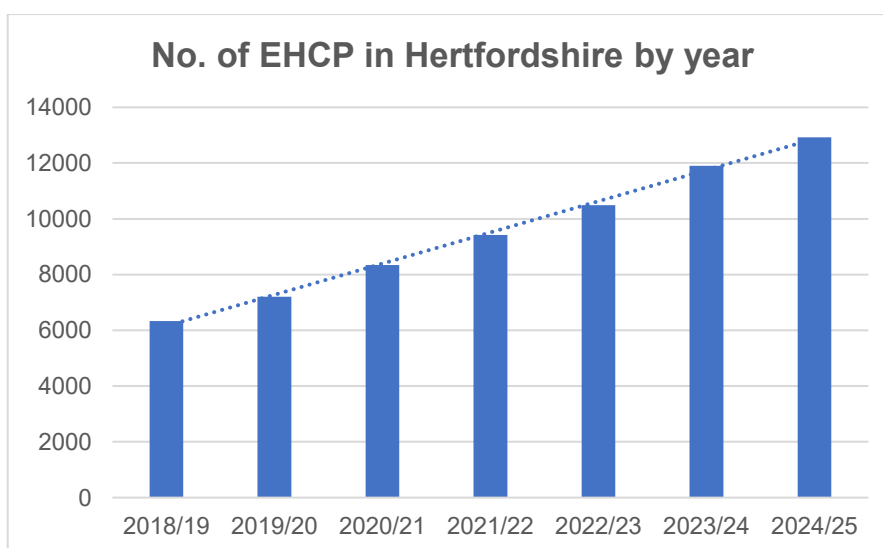
- 1.1 This Special Educational Needs and Development (hereafter “SEND”) School Needs Assessment has been prepared by ROK Planning, on the instruction of Bugler Homes Ltd, to support a planning application at Land at Pound Farm, Hitchin, SG5 3RS.
- 1.2 The application seeks planning permission for:
- “Hybrid application for a mixed-use development to provide a total of up to 230 dwellings, a residential care home (Use Class C2), an Independent Special School (ISS) and new sports pitch, with access from Bedford Road, landscaping, parking and SuDS comprising: Phase 1 – Application for full planning permission for the erection of 100 dwellings, an ISS, new sports pitch and associated parking, landscaping, open space and SuDS; Phase 2 – An outline application on the remaining part of the site for the erection of up to 130 dwellings, a residential care home (Use Class C2) and associated works with access from Bedford Road (all matters reserved apart from access).”*
- 1.3 This needs assessment has been undertaken to evaluate the requirement for additional specialist school provision for pupils with Social, Emotional and Mental Health (SEMH) needs and Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) within North Hertfordshire
- 1.4 The findings and conclusions set out in this report are informed by analysis of publicly available data and strategic documentation, including national SEND statistics, local authority demographic projections, Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) trends, existing specialist provision capacity, and relevant Hertfordshire County Council policy documents.
- 1.5 The evidence presented within this assessment demonstrates a clear and sustained increase in demand for specialist provision for pupils with Social, Emotional and Mental Health (SEMH) needs and Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) within North Hertfordshire.
- 1.6 Analysis of current capacity, projected EHCP growth, and placement patterns indicates that existing provision is under significant pressure and is unlikely to meet forecast demand without additional specialist places.
- 1.7 The subsequent sections of this assessment are structured as follows:
- **Section 2** describes the site and the surrounding area;
 - **Section 3** outlines the proposed development;
 - **Section 4** sets out the methodology; and
 - **Section 5** provides an analysis and conclusion.

2. NATIONAL CONTEXT

- 2.1 The Department for Education's 'Special Educational Needs in England: January 2025' publication, alongside the National Foundation for Educational Research Interim Report (Nov 2026) confirms that SEND prevalence is at historically high levels.
- 2.2 Around 18.4% of pupils in English state-funded schools are identified with SEND, based on combined Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) and SEN support figures.
- 2.3 Longitudinal analysis from the Department shows persistent growth in statutory SEND need, with the percentage of pupils with an EHCP nearly doubling in the last decade, rising from about 2.8% in 2016 to 5.3% by January 2025.
- 2.4 This sustained increase reflects ongoing recognition of needs and greater demand for legally enforceable support, particularly for complex conditions such as Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and Social, Emotional and Mental Health (SEMH) needs, and demonstrates a long-term structural shift in formal SEND demand in the education system.
- 2.5 In the most recently published School Capacity (SCAP) Survey (DfE, March 2025), there were approximately 148,000 special school places reported nationally, yet around 152,000 pupils were on roll in special schools, indicating a shortfall of around 4,000 specialist places across England. Around 63% of special schools were at or over capacity, with many operating above the capacity levels reported by local authorities.
- 2.6 Secondary specialist provision shows even greater pressure. Official figures indicate that at the secondary phase there were around 92,000 reported places compared with around 100,000 pupils on roll, representing an 8,000-place shortfall at this key stage.
- 2.7 This data indicates that national specialist capacity is currently insufficient to meet existing demand, and shortfalls are particularly acute in secondary specialist schools where need is both high and growing.
- 2.8 Forecasts suggest that the number of pupils with EHCPs who will require a specialist place is likely to rise to approximately 273,000 by 2028/29, an increase of nearly 19% on 2024/25 levels. Local authorities have consistently reported that supply will struggle to keep pace with this projected rise.

3. LOCAL CONTEXT

- 3.1 Hertfordshire County Council's adopted SEND Strategy (2022–25) emphasises providing sufficient, local specialist options and working proactively with families and existing providers. Hertfordshire is developing a new SEND Sufficiency Strategy and expanding specialist places, acknowledging current shortfalls in SEND provision within the district.
- 3.2 Hertfordshire County Council published a draft SEND strategy (2026-2029) for which public consultation ran between November 2025 and February 2026.
- 3.3 The draft SEND strategy confirms that there are 365,400 children and young people aged 0–25 in Hertfordshire (2024 estimates). Within this cohort, 9,804 pupils in Hertfordshire schools have Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) and 31,966 pupils receive SEN Support, representing 18.5% of all pupils (January 2025 School Census).
- 3.4 This means that nearly one in five pupils in Hertfordshire requires additional educational support. The scale of need across the county demonstrates sustained and system-wide pressure on both mainstream and specialist provision, with EHCP demand forming a significant component of this pressure.
- 3.5 Department for Education and Hertfordshire County Council data demonstrates sustained and accelerating growth in Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs), reflecting structural expansion in statutory SEND need rather than short-term fluctuation. County-wide EHCP numbers have risen from 6,328 in 2018/19 to 12,920 in 2024/25 — an increase of 104% in six years. This upward trajectory is reinforced by rising assessment volumes, increased mediation and tribunal activity, and mounting timeliness pressures, all of which indicate a system experiencing ongoing and cumulative demand.



- 3.6 This growth is particularly acute at secondary phase. The number of secondary-aged pupils (Years 7–11) with an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) in Hertfordshire has increased from 3,922 in 2015/16 to 9,331 in 2024/25 — an increase of approximately 138% over nine years. This represents more than a doubling of statutory specialist demand within the current secondary cohort, with the steepest acceleration occurring since 2019/20 and evidencing compounding pressure within the existing system. Importantly, primary-phase data indicates that this pressure will persist. The rate of primary school-aged children with an EHCP has risen from 20.7 per 1,000 population in 2016 to 37.8 per 1,000 in 2022, demonstrating a substantial pipeline of pupils who will transition into secondary provision in the coming years and reinforcing the forward trajectory of demand.
- 3.7 The data evidences increasing complexity across the SEND system:
- 4,616 new referrals for Speech and Language Therapy were received in 2024/25 (SEND Data Dashboard).
 - EHC Needs Assessment requests for children with physical disability as their primary need tripled between 2020/21 and 2023/24 (SEND Data Dashboard).
 - 39.8% of children with social care support in June 2025 had an active EHCP (SEND Data Dashboard).
 - In June 2025, there were 61 young people being supported by Youth Justice Service with SEND (SEND Data Dashboard).
- 3.8 These figures demonstrate both increasing demand for specialist therapeutic input and the significant overlap between SEND, social care, and youth justice systems. The high proportion of children supported by social care who also hold EHCPs (39.8%) indicates that a substantial cohort presents with complex, multi-agency needs. This complexity reinforces the requirement for specialist settings equipped to deliver integrated educational and therapeutic provision.
- 3.9 In 2024, 2,916 Families First Assessments for early help support were completed, with 27.8% relating to a child or young person with SEND (SEND Data Dashboard).
- 3.10 This indicates that more than a quarter of early help interventions involve SEND, suggesting that needs are being identified earlier but also that vulnerability and additional learning needs frequently co-exist. Without sufficient specialist capacity, these early indicators risk escalating into higher-cost statutory interventions.
- 3.11 Additionally, there are 165 children and young people with EHCPs who are electively home educated (June 2025, SEND Data Dashboard). The number of pupils with statutory plans outside formal education settings may indicate unmet need or placement challenges within the existing system. This further strengthens the argument for expanded and appropriately designated specialist provision.

- 3.12 Taken together, this data evidences sustained growth in both the volume and complexity of need across Hertfordshire. The system-wide pressures identified support a clear and strategic case for the development of additional specialist SEND school provision to ensure the local authority can continue to meet its statutory duties, improve outcomes, and deliver sustainable, locally accessible education for children and young people with complex needs.
- 3.13 Demand is particularly pronounced in North Hertfordshire. EHCP rates in North Hertfordshire have increased from 18.6 per 1,000 population in 2016 to 32.8 per 1,000 in 2022, exceeding the county average and demonstrating sustained and above-average local growth. This confirms that the proposed school is positioned within a district experiencing acute and escalating SEND need.
- 3.14 Existing specialist settings operate at high levels of EHCP saturation, limiting system elasticity and reducing the ability to absorb further growth. In this context, the proposed school's capacity is proportionate and directly aligned to demonstrable local need. It responds both to current secondary placement pressures and to a clear forward trajectory of demand, particularly within the Autism and SEMH cohorts that dominate specialist provision requirements in Hertfordshire and in North Hertfordshire specifically.

4. PROPOSED DEVELOPMENT

4.1 This section sets out details of the proposed SEND provision and how this relates to the identified local need with regards to the following areas:

- Capacity
- Designation and Specialism
- Coordination and outcomes
- Wider Approach and Stakeholder Engagement

Capacity

4.2 This proposed development, which includes a 30-place SEMH school, would offer local, cost-effective provision, reducing reliance on out-of-county independent placements and aligning with new county strategies. The school addresses a demonstrable demand that directly aligns with the 11–17 age range proposed at the Independent Special School (ISS) and focus on filling the ASD/SEMH gap in Hertfordshire.

4.3 The 30-place capacity has been deliberately planned in response to sustained growth in EHCPs across Hertfordshire, particularly for Autism and Social, Emotional and Mental Health (SEMH) needs. Local data shows a consistent gender imbalance within these primary need categories. Between 2021/22 and 2024/25, boys represented approximately 69–74% of pupils with Autism and 66–69% of those with SEMH as a primary need. While the proportion of girls has increased slightly, boys remain the clear majority in both groups.

4.4 While precise reductions in out-of-area placements are ultimately dependent on Local Authority commissioning decisions, it is highly likely that increased local specialist SEND capacity within Hertfordshire will reduce reliance on out-of-area placements over time.

4.5 Where local specialist provision is insufficient, particularly for secondary-age pupils with Autism and SEMH, Local Authorities are required to commission placements outside their area, often at significant distance from home. This can result in substantially higher transport costs, increased placement instability, and disruption to family and community networks.

4.6 The proposed school will contribute to reducing pressure on both mainstream schools and existing specialist placements by increasing local specialist capacity in line with Hertfordshire's SEND sufficiency strategy objectives. These objectives prioritise expanding appropriate local provision, improving placement stability, and reducing reliance on distant and often costly out-of-area placements.

4.7 For mainstream schools, additional specialist capacity reduces the expectation that complex secondary-age pupils with Autism and SEMH must be sustained in settings that may not be equipped to meet their therapeutic and behavioural needs. While mainstream schools play a

vital role within the graduated response framework, sustained placement of pupils requiring specialist provision can place significant pressure on staffing, resources and overall school stability, and can negatively impact whole-school stability and inclusion capacity. The availability of appropriate specialist placements enables more suitable matching of need to provision.

- 4.8 Similarly, increased local specialist capacity reduces oversubscription pressures within existing special schools. Where consultation requests significantly exceed available places, a competitive or “bottleneck” effect can emerge, leading to placement delays and instability. By providing additional high-quality specialist places, the proposed school helps to ease this pressure, improve system fluidity and support more timely and appropriate placements across the local SEND landscape.
- 4.9 Overall, the proposed provision strengthens local sufficiency, improves alignment between need and placement type, and supports a more balanced and sustainable SEND system within Hertfordshire.

Designation and Specialism

- 4.10 The proposed school will cater primarily for pupils with Autism and SEMH as primary areas of need, many of whom present with co-occurring Speech, Language and Communication Needs (SLCN) and sensory processing differences. These are the fastest growing EHCP categories nationally and locally. Provision will be underpinned by low pupil-to-staff ratios, trauma-informed practice, structured, low-arousal learning environments and embedded therapeutic input.
- 4.11 The school will provide access to specialist therapeutic and behavioural support, including speech and language therapy, occupational therapy, and mental health and counselling provision. These services will be delivered through a combination of commissioned external professionals and, where appropriate, integrated in-house practitioners to ensure coordinated and consistent support.
- 4.12 The physical design of the school reflects the needs of pupils with Autism and SEMH and incorporates zoned regulation spaces, small-group teaching rooms, carefully considered sensory adaptations (including lighting and acoustics), and calm breakout and therapeutic areas to support emotional regulation and reduce overstimulation.
- 4.13 In addition, the school will work closely with relevant external agencies, such as Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) and local substance misuse support services (for example, services equivalent to EYPDAS), to ensure pupils can access specialist interventions beyond the school setting where required. Strong links will also be maintained with social care teams to facilitate timely referrals and provide holistic support to families. This multi-agency approach ensures that therapeutic provision is fully integrated with educational delivery and responsive to pupils’ wider needs.

- 4.14 The school will maintain proactive working relationships with Local Authority SEND commissioning leads, operational casework teams and named key workers. They will take responsibility for coordinating and leading statutory annual reviews, Personal Education Plan (PEP) meetings, and wider Team Around the Child processes, including Child in Need (CIN) and Children Looked After (CLA) reviews where applicable.
- 4.15 Where social care involvement is present, the school will engage directly and routinely with allocated social workers to ensure joined-up planning and consistent oversight of the young person's educational, emotional and safeguarding needs. The school will also work closely with local safeguarding partnerships and will make referrals to Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hubs (MASH) or equivalent services for advice, early intervention or escalation where required.
- 4.16 This coordinated, multi-agency approach ensures that education, health and social care professionals operate within a shared framework of accountability, with the school acting as a central point of communication to support holistic and timely decision-making.

Curriculum and Outcomes

- 4.17 The intended operator, Omnia Foundation, provides a curriculum which is carefully structured to balance academic achievement with therapeutic support, personal development and preparation for adulthood. It is designed to re-engage learners who may have experienced disrupted educational journeys, while ensuring access to meaningful qualifications and long-term progression pathways.
- 4.18 Core academic subjects, including English, mathematics and science, form a central part of the offer and are delivered within small, supportive learning environments that promote confidence and engagement. Alongside this, pupils are supported to achieve recognised qualifications through Functional Skills and other appropriate accreditation routes. The curriculum also incorporates vocational and enrichment opportunities, enabling pupils to develop practical skills, explore interests and build employability awareness.
- 4.19 Life skills and independence development are embedded throughout the curriculum, ensuring that pupils develop resilience, emotional regulation, communication skills and readiness for post-16 destinations. This integrated approach ensures that academic progress, personal growth and preparation for adulthood are developed concurrently rather than in isolation.
- 4.20 Attainment and progress are secured through personalised, EHCP-linked planning and systematic monitoring. Each pupil has an individualised learning plan aligned directly to the outcomes set out in Section F of their EHCP, ensuring that academic, social and emotional objectives remain central to provision.

- 4.21 Progress is reviewed on a termly basis through structured EHCP outcome reviews, supported by teacher assessment and standardised assessment tools where appropriate. Behaviour, attendance and engagement data are tracked continuously to provide a holistic picture of progress, recognising that for pupils with SEMH and Autism, social-emotional development is intrinsically linked to academic achievement.
- 4.22 Transitions between key stages and into post-16 pathways are carefully structured and individualised. Pupils are placed within learning hubs that are organised primarily by ability and stage of development, rather than strictly by age. Placement within each hub is informed by prior attainment, baseline assessment on entry, and ongoing review of academic and social-emotional progress.
- 4.23 At Key Stage 3, the school operates an “academic confidence” model, designed to rebuild engagement with learning and address previous barriers. This phase focuses on strengthening core skills, particularly in English and mathematics, while developing resilience, self-regulation and positive learning behaviours within a therapeutically informed framework.
- 4.24 At Key Stage 4, the focus shifts toward post-16 preparation through a structured “Future Possibilities” programme. This includes securing recognised qualifications, such as Functional Skills in English and mathematics and appropriate vocational awards, alongside broader employability and life skills development. A dedicated Future Possibilities Coordinator oversees transition planning, facilitating college visits, employer engagement, interviews and liaison with further education providers. Families are actively supported throughout this process to ensure informed decision-making and sustainable post-16 destinations.
- 4.25 Post-16 destination tracking forms part of the school’s accountability framework, ensuring that pupils progress to sustainable and appropriate next steps. This comprehensive monitoring model ensures that progress is measurable, transparent and responsive, with provision adapted as required to meet each pupil’s evolving needs.
- 4.26 This staged and personalised approach ensures that pupils are supported academically, emotionally and practically at each transition point, leading to positive and achievable progression pathways.
- 4.27 Externally, progress is subject to Ofsted inspection, Department for Education registration requirements, and Local Authority commissioning oversight. Each pupil’s provision and outcomes are formally reviewed through the statutory annual EHCP review process, ensuring accountability against agreed outcomes.

Wider Approach and Stakeholder Engagement

- 4.28 The school will operate as part of the wider local SEND ecosystem and will commit to collaborative working across education and partner agencies. It will maintain constructive

relationships with mainstream schools, Hertfordshire County Council SEND teams, and alternative provision providers to support coherent and joined-up planning for pupils.

- 4.29 Where appropriate, the school will work collaboratively to help prevent placement breakdown by contributing to shared strategies and information exchange. In cases where managed moves are considered suitable and in the best interests of the pupil, the school will engage proactively with mainstream settings and the Local Authority to support planning and transition. Where capacity allows, the school may also provide advisory input or share specialist expertise to assist mainstream colleagues in understanding Autism and SEMH needs.
- 4.30 Through this collaborative approach, the school seeks to strengthen local inclusion capacity, improve placement stability and contribute positively to the broader SEND landscape within Hertfordshire.
- 4.31 Pre-application discussions and ongoing dialogue with Hertfordshire County Council SEND Commissioning (Joint Children and Young People Commissioning Service) have confirmed sustained EHCP growth trends, acute pressure on specialist secondary placements, and increasing reliance on independent and out-of-county provision. Engagement will continue throughout the planning process to ensure the proposed capacity aligns with identified sufficiency priorities.

5. CONCLUSION

- 5.1 This needs assessment has been prepared to demonstrate the need for SEND provision, in particular additional specialist provision for pupils with SEMH needs and ASD within North Hertfordshire.
- 5.2 The assessment has examined demographic trends, EHCP growth, current specialist capacity, placement patterns, and projected future demand across the district.
- 5.3 The evidence demonstrates a sustained and accelerating increase in the number of children and young people requiring specialist SEMH and ASD provision. Analysis of existing settings indicates that capacity is constrained, with limited flexibility to accommodate forecast growth.
- 5.4 Current placement patterns, including reliance on out-of-area and independent provision, further indicate that local specialist capacity is insufficient to meet present and projected need within North Hertfordshire.
- 5.5 On the basis of the evidence presented, there is a clear and demonstrable need for additional specialist SEMH and ASD school places within North Hertfordshire. The delivery of new provision would support the local authority in meeting its statutory duties, reduce reliance on external placements, and provide more sustainable, locally accessible education for children and young people with complex needs.