FIRST STEPS TOGETHER
SKILLS FOR LIFE

For the purpose of this document; -
MCC = Manchester City Council
FST = First Steps Together
EHCP = Educational Health Plan
SEN = Special Educational Needs

Who are First Steps Together and what drives us

FST is a dedicated network of Independent Special Educational Needs (SEN) schools, committed to providing high-quality education and support to children with diverse learning needs. While our roots are in Greater Manchester, our partnerships extend across multiple councils, reflecting our unwavering dedication to inclusive education at a national level.

Our journey began in November 2022, when the Chair of the Proprietary Board—then serving as a Governor at another local SEN school—witnessed firsthand the systemic failures impacting vulnerable children. Driven by a deep commitment to change, they founded FST to ensure that every child receives the care, respect, and education they deserve. Their passion for creating a safe, inclusive learning environment for children with SEN was further strengthened by their personal experience of supporting a family member with SEN and navigating the challenges of a flawed system.

What sets FST apart is the personal investment of our leadership team. Many of our Senior Management and Leadership members have children with EHCPs and have experienced the challenges and shortcomings of mainstream and SEN education firsthand. This deep understanding drives our uncompromising commitment to transforming the lives of children who have been failed by the system.

At FST, our mission is clear: to give every SEN child the chance to experience a happy, fulfilling, and well-rounded school life, just as their mainstream peers do. We strive to equip them with essential life skills, social confidence, and academic foundations, ensuring they grow into respectable, capable members of society—ready to take on the world with resilience and ambition.

What are our requirements for a building to be suitable for a school

The facility must be situated on its own grounds and cannot be shared with other establishments. Sufficient outdoor space is essential to create a dedicated playground for break times. Additionally, the site should be in an accessible location to assist in ensuring that both staff and students who do not receive transportation can get to site. Given our timeline, we need a location that is nearly ready for immediate use, as operations must be underway by September.
To support FST in reducing costs for MCC, we require a building that can safely accommodate 100 children while providing designated spaces tailored to their specific diagnoses, including ASD

(Autism) and SEMH. A facility of approximately 20,000 square feet would enable FST to employ in-house occupational therapists, eliminating the need for higher-cost external contracting. Mulberry House meets all of these criteria and would be an ideal site for the use proposed.

Why is there a need for a larger school

Since 2015, the number of children with Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) has increased by 151% nationally. FST currently provides education for 30 children within MCC, but faces a growing demand, with 38 consultations awaiting placement and an additional 11–16 new consultations from the EHCP team at MCC each week. Our existing 36-student approved school in Northenden (Watkins) lacks the capacity to accommodate this influx.

Under Section 19 of the Education Act 1996, local authorities are legally required to ensure suitable educational provision for children of compulsory school age who are unable to attend mainstream education due to illness, exclusion, or other circumstances. This responsibility, known as the 'Section 19 duty,' means that when a child is unable to access appropriate full-time education, the local authority must arrange an alternative placement. Failure to secure suitable placements results in financial penalties for councils, reinforcing the urgency of expanding our educational provision to meet the growing demand of the local authority in the next academic year.

Location

The selection of the new school's location is strategically influenced by its proximity to Watkins, our existing facility in Northenden. A significant number of students at Watkins rely on MCC-funded transport, and the greater the distance between the new school and Watkins, the higher the transport costs incurred by MCC. Relocating our current school building to another area in Manchester would not only disrupt the continuity of education for our students, which in itself would be detrimental to their well-being and specific needs but also imposes significant financial burdens on the local authority due to increased transport costs, hence the reason for the 3-mile radius of Watkins set for any new location. Any increased transportation costs would add further strain of already limited local authority resources, diverting funds away from other essential services. In addition, our leadership and community engagement team have built strong relationships with the local community in this area whilst using this as an opportunity to educate the local community of the importance of quality and safe education for children with additional needs.

Additionally, there are new logistical challenges appearing at our Watkins school with MCC Transport vehicles using the adjacent car park for drop-offs/collections. This car park, owned by Sanctuary (Carron House) for social housing, operates under a permit system and imposes an immediate £100 fine for unauthorised parking. As a result, alternative drop-off arrangements could pose potential highway safety risks.

Furthermore, if students continue to attend Watkins under these circumstances, transport companies may factor these additional costs into their future contract pricing, further increasing long-term expenses for MCC. Therefore, securing a suitably located facility for the new school, with suitable on site access and parking arrangements, is essential to mitigating financial and operational challenges while ensuring safe and efficient transport arrangements for students.

Additional considerations

Starting in September, Watkins is earmarked to be an Alternative Provision for MCC (Requested by Katy Harkavy & Jen Kay)
katy.harkavy@manchester.gov.uk jen.kay@manchester.gov.uk and already has 15 AP students signed up for September. There is therefore an additional urgent need to locate a new site to meet the other SEN needs within Greater Manchester which are currently uncatered for in the next academic year.

Mulberry House

Due to time constraints and our previous failed pre-application requests, we are currently focused on Mulberry House in Wythenshawe. Last week we had an Ofsted inspection commissioned by the Department of Education for the movement of our approval from Watkins to Mulberry House. The Ofsted Inspector who approved this move, highlighted the potential benefits of the proposed building, which would provide much-needed space and allow for the internal division of hubs tailored to specific needs. This enhancement would facilitate more effective learning environments, enabling our students to make meaningful progress and develop into active, contributing members of the Manchester community. Therefore, it is crucial to prioritise the establishment of additional SEN school places in South Manchester to meet the growing demand and support our students effectively and FST and Ofsted are in agreement that Mulberry House would be ideal to meet that need.

Our Commitment

First Steps Together is dedicated to fostering employment opportunities within local communities, particularly in relation to the proposed school building. Our commitment extends to upskilling and supporting local residents, which will contribute to a reduction in Manchester's unemployment rate. By focusing on training individuals to live and work in Manchester, we aim to create a sustainable workforce that enhances the local economy and encourages community development. We are looking to introduce a 12-week programme for upskilling people into working in the education industry and the possibility of creating apprenticeships. We are also fostering relationships with local higher education establishments to assist them in offering support to train the next generation of SEN teachers.

Further statement from the Chair of the Proprietary Board – Matthew Bonilla

The anticipated move to the proposed building in September is not merely a relocation, but a crucial step in empowering our students to achieve their full educational potential. The expanded space will directly translate into much-needed SEN school placements, primarily benefiting Manchester students while significantly contributing to addressing the broader SEND crisis plaguing the Greater Manchester Combined Authority. This transition is therefore a critical investment in the future of these students and in alleviating the pressure on the region's already strained special educational needs resources.

Our commitment to supporting the Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) department at Manchester City Council remains steadfast. We are actively providing placements for students who are currently out of education or attending unsuitable school environments, striving to offer them the right setting to thrive. Crucial to this effort are the strong relationships we've cultivated with caseworkers, ensuring open communication and a collaborative approach to meeting each child's unique needs. Furthermore, we understand the financial pressures faced by the council and are dedicated to offering school placements that represent excellent value for money, enabling Manchester City Council to maximize its budget while providing high-quality educational opportunities for its SEND students.

Following the Ofsted Inspector's visit on Tuesday, June 10th, to evaluate our proposed premises on behalf of the Department for Education, I was encouraged by their consistent affirmation that our current building has reached its capacity. They recognized the necessity of providing our young people with more space, dedicated learning areas, and, crucially, enhanced outdoor facilities to support their physical and mental well-being, enabling them to flourish academically and in life. Their assessment of the proposed building instilled confidence that the additional space would perfectly complement our ambitious goals for our students and provide a significantly improved learning environment.

My dedication extends beyond simply providing a service; I'm deeply invested in empowering both individuals and the communities they belong to. By focusing on local recruitment, we're not just

filling positions within schools, but actively creating opportunities for Manchester residents to contribute meaningfully to their own community. Through comprehensive training programs, we equip these individuals with the skills and confidence to alleviate the pressure on an already stretched school system, fostering a more resilient and thriving environment for everyone. This approach allows us to directly impact the lives of young people while simultaneously strengthening the social fabric of Manchester.

We stand united as professionals alongside our parents, carers and advocates for the children who rely on the vital services provided by our local SEN school in Wythenshawe. Relocating this resource would create significant hardship, impacting their progress, wellbeing, and the ability of children and families to access the critical support they need within their community. We implore you to carefully consider the far-reaching consequences of this decision and prioritise the continued presence of this much-needed SEN school in the heart of Wythenshawe.

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Business Manager

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