# **Bristol City Council - Special Education Needs top-up funding service**

## 2. Lead authority details

**2.1 Lead authority name**

Bristol City Council

**2.2.1 Full name**

Amy McGuire

**2.2.2 Role**

Digital Product Owner

**2.2.3 Email**

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## 3. Project details

**3.1 Project title**

Exploring the build of a centralised Special Educational Needs top-up funding service to address an inconsistent and manual assessment and funding application process.

**3.2 Project description**

This is a transformation project which provides additional funding to mainstream education settings for children who have Special Educational Needs or Disability. Schools currently apply for the funding through a process called ‘Top Up’. The current manual process is time-consuming for schools and can result in inconsistencies in funding.

We want to create a centralised web-based application for SEND Coordinators, administrators and reviewers to record the needs of children and establish the provisions needed. The new digital solution will be an application that simplifies the process for all parties involved by unifying the need statements and provisions lists. Funding will be automatically calculated based on selected provisions, which will ensure consistency of funding, and ultimately better tailored support for pupils.

The long-term benefit will be the aggregated data insight, which will allow the council to pre-empt where funds need to be distributed, allowing forward-planning.

**3.3.1 The platform name and company**

Microsoft Azure AppService with Spring Boot

**3.3.2 Do you have the platform already or do you have approval to procure the platform? For example, you have written a business case and the business case has been approved**

Yes, we already have the platform

**3.3.3 Does the platform have a library to share modules/code that other councils can access? If yes, please tell us the URL**

● No, not yet – we will publish one on GitHub

**3.4 Describe how you will research the problem area and user needs arising from it?**

The vision for this platform is to transform the way top-up funding is applied for and distributed. To unify and centralise the process, making the end to end process easier and less frustrating for schools and the council. By the end of phase one, we want the platform to give users the ability to understand what need statements are covered by certain funds, thus saving time and confusion. By the end of the second phase we want to have added the funding calculations so that the provisions can be downloaded as an easy ‘shopping list’. This can then be sent in a formatted way to the reviewers making the final decision on funding. They will easily be able to see what is being requested and if it matches the criteria. Finally, when the platform/product is in use the data will allow for high level insight about where money and funding is spent, and provide invaluable insight.

Currently the service process is mainly done via word documents, emails and people guessing what they can apply for and the funding amounts they can ask for. A spreadsheet is being used as an interim solution, but causes issues with versioning control and user experience. We want to help simplify that even further with this platform.

Even by providing the first phase - the ability to allow SENDCos to see a unified list of Need statements and associated provisions, and download that as a PDF – the result should see a significant decrease in the time taken to understand and submit a top-up application compared to the current process. Testing the phase one of the beta phase with a handful of schools first will inform future iterations in phase two.

**3.5 Tell us about your users**

The primary users of this application will be local authority staff; SENDCos working in schools. Secondary users will be Local Authority staff who will review the application. And Local Authority Managers who will use the data generated to identify the needs in service.

The current process involves each SENDCo doing their own assessment and completing an application in different formats, making it difficult for the fund reviewers to make a fair judgement about who should receive top-up funding.

Provisions asked for across schools varies too and so, again, the funding decisions are not standard across the council. The spreadsheet (the Minimal Viable Product) has proven that having one set of standard need statements and list of provisions will create fairness, transparency, and will help SENDCos know how to assess a child to know what provisions they are entitled to.

By creating a central digital application, we will simplify the process even further by creating a digital space where SENDCos can access, create and update their assessments for each child. When they submit the assessment results, it will be fairly assessed against the same criteria.

Furthermore, eventually the data gathered in the backend of the application can be surfaced to help the Local Authority monitor where the money is being spent, and forecast specific areas of need. For example, a problem at the moment is there are too many children with special educational needs and not enough of specialist school places. Without the data, this kind of issues is almost impossible to anticipate.

A user journey can be viewed here: <https://www.figma.com/file/TeXNqg4lr8GbkmjDn5WGmo/Untitled?node-id=0%3A1>

User mapping viewed here: <https://miro.com/app/board/o9J_lYJYh8o=/>

**3.6 Describe how your project team will have the skills and time available to deliver the project in an iterative/agile and user-centred way?**

Our in-house digital delivery team consists of user experience designers, developers and a testing team. We already work agile (both Kanban for BAU and Scrum for projects) to iteratively develop and test. The project team will consist of two developers, one Senior UX, one Tester, one product owner, and one key service owner.

Due to recent team members leaving we would need to hire a short term Development contractor to cover one of the development team, this would require a higher daily rate.

**3.7 Tell us about your delivery plan**

We are in sprint 2 (week 4) of building the beta phase, which is building the MVP to reflect the spreadsheet. However, the funding currently available will only take us to 8 sprints, and therefore not allow for future iterations which has potential to transform not only Bristol City Council’s Top-up process, but also help other Local Authorities to adopt it too.

What we completed so far:

Prototype built and tested

Understanding and adding new design patterns / components not currently available in the council’s style guide / CSS

Code built for the ability for users to login

Code built for the ability for users to start an assessment against a child’s UPN

Code built for an assessment summary page

Code built for the first assessment area ‘Communication and Interaction’

Key milestones:

Key milestone 1: Beginning of December: phase 1 beta ready for test (with selected schools)

Key milestone 2: End of March: phase 2 beta ready for test (with selected schools)

Key milestone 3: Date TBC Product ready for public consultation

Key milestone 4: Date TBC Product ready for cabinet approval (if approved at public consultation)

Key milestone 5: Date TBC Product rolled out across Bristol City Council schools

We will ensure the solution can be widely adopted and adapted by:

o using Spring Boot which doesn’t require specific server infrastructure and can run separately from any council website.

o using the backend as Azure Cosmos DB (and can be easily adapted to be Mongo DB)

o using Azure Devops for secure user login, which is common but can also be adapted to other login authentication

o Cloud-based hosting

o Open standards of JSON to store the data, and coded in Java as a common language

o We’ll publish as a GITHUB project

o Styling can easily be substituted for other council’s styling

o Designed to be low-cost to operate: no per user licence involved, and cost based on transactions and project is designed to limit the number of transactions

o Subject matter expert has agreed to run workshops / talks

**3.8 Describe how you plan to build your proposed beta**

We will build the frontend as an App Service using Spring Boot. Use Azure Resources as the platform (Function and Logic Apps, Database and API Management services) for the heavy lifting. The App Service (and costs) would be associated with an existing App Service Plan.

It's possible to generate PDFs using Azure Functions, or there are third party solutions like Adobe PDF Tools and Plumsail. Similarly, there are multiple ways to store data like Azure Table Storage, Cosmos DB and Azure SQL.

We are minimising the personal data stored and only using UPN numbers, not the child’s personal data. Any login information will be securely held within the BCC Azure secure environment managed by IT.

The goal is to simplify the process and centralise a top-up fund service. Metrics of success will include:

Goal 1: Reduce time needed to apply for top-up funding

Metric 1: Time taken to apply for funds and have funds approved (looking to reduce)

Goal 2: Reduce volume of assessments that are incorrect

Metric 2: Number of assessments rejected

Goal 3: Have greater transparency and consistency of equity of funding

Metric 3: Costs of specific provision identified and accessed

Goal 4: Increase number of schools following a standardised application submission

Metric 4: Number of SENDCo’s and Schools using the application

The Digital Delivery team already work in a way that supports applications we’ve built and operational support is moved to BAU. When we get a request to build a new digital service, or feature for an existing service we follow Agile methodologies; working in sprints with at least a couple of sprints dedicated to refining user needs and scenarios, and ensuring each sprint is iteratively improving on the sprint before with clear goals.

Because we are building cloud based first, using a Council IT supported Azure platform and documenting everything in a WIKI – any change of people wouldn’t mean a loss of knowledge. We have designed all our style guide components and patterns to be WCAG 2.1AA compliant. But also have thorough documentation and a check list we follow to ensure standards are met as part of the Definition of Done.

**3.9 Explain how your beta will consider the wider context of operating a live service**

No personal data will be held and all login functionality will be done through a secure Azure service which is already securely managed by the central IT team. Any other data will be anonymised. Any future data captured can be discussed with the Council’s dedicated GDPR team to ensure legislation is being met.

We have explored the option of building this as a SaaS so it can be sold to other Local Authorities that may need or want it. However, for now, we have decided to focus on building the platform to test within the council.

Legal have been consulted and have advised that we can’t copyright the application as it’s a reactive process rather than a proactive process. But we will add T&Cs that will allow us to challenge anyone legally, if needed.

SENDCo’s and the school community will be the core community using and feeding into the product’s development. There needs to be an MOT at least once a year whereby the service (funding and provisions) and functionality is reviewed (renewed, removed or updated). On-going review cycles to inform the backlog of improvements on the product.

**3.10 How will you openly share the learnings and outputs from the project as the work develops, both with the sector and MHCLG?**

• Publish the project on GitHub site with updates

• Comms team to publish a communication plan

• Add details and blog post on BCC website

• Subject Matter Expert will contact councils proactively and share knowledge

We also intend to make our outputs available through GitHub for other councils to use: code and documentation (e.g. how another council would need to handle tokens, or use different style sheets).

We would build a ‘green site’ branch version that makes it easier for councils to copy without very specific Bristol Council elements.

**3.11 Describe the estimated return on investment of the beta service / product and the development platform, both at a local level and to the sector, and how you plan to validate these estimates during the beta**

• Greater transparency with this service will ensure resources are targeted and distributed by greatest need. Data will ensure money is spent more efficiently and fairly. It will put in place checks that will mean equity is monitored and spent only where needed, meaning no waste.

• Time savings – SENDCOs will be able to apply for funding in a more timely and efficient manner. This will create more time for direct support of pupils and staff in the school setting.

• SEND review panel - this currently takes 2 weeks with additional days for more complex cases. Numerous LA professionals, SENDCOs, EPs, School improvement officers, service leads give up their time to review applications and make decisions about payments. The new process will significantly reduce not only the time taken to review each application but the number of cases that will require 3rd panel mediation due to the information being standardised and easily comparable.

• Quantifiable social benefits – the number of children receiving funding support, the impact this support is making, progress of CYP in receipt of funding, the number of CYP who’s needs are met and no longer require funding, a reduction in the number of CYP who need increased funding or specialist provision

• Running costs – the termly admin of the review panels should require less time.

• Development – the data generated from the app will allow future development of school based resources to be targeted to specific areas of need. Training needs could be identified as well as core provision and practical resources ( see also running costs above) This could result in more efficient use of funding

**3.12 How much funding are you applying for to complete the project?**

312,400

**3.13 How will the total project budget be used?**

| **Resource (e.g. staff time, supplier, contractor, etc.)** | **Time / Quantity** | **Total cost / Value** | **Who will pay (e.g. Local Digital funding or a particular project partner)** |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Staff time (2 developers, 1 tester, 0.5 UX, 0.5 PO) | 160 days (16 sprints) | £312,400 | Local Digital Funding |