

Report subject	KLOE High Needs Dedicated Schools Grant Expenditure: Benchmarking and Strategic Direction
Meeting date	25 November 2025
Status	Public
Executive Summary	This report responds to a request from the Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee key line of enquiry to benchmark BCP Council's High Needs Block spend and strategic direction against similar local authorities. The purpose is to better understand the wider context of the Council's High Needs deficit and identify potential strategies for improvement. This report provides a strategic overview of BCP Council's High Needs Block position. It also contains comparative data and insights together with an evaluation of the effectiveness of measures taken to address the accumulated Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) deficit. The report aims to support informed decision-making and provide assurance that all reasonable actions are being considered to address the financial challenges within the High Needs Block. improve financial sustainability and outcomes for children and young people with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND).
Recommendations	It is RECOMMENDED that the Committee Use the information in the report to support informed decision-making about the measures and actions necessary to improve financial sustainability. The committee is advised to endorse a strategic package of improvement that includes early intervention, strengthened Education Health and Care Plan (EHCP) oversight, expansion of local provision, and improved dispute resolution. These actions are designed to reduce demand pressures, deliver better value for money, and align with an emerging High Needs Block Recovery Plan. The approach demonstrates that the Council is actively pursuing reasonable, evidence-based strategies to address the High Needs Block deficit while improving outcomes for children and young people with SEND.
Reason for recommendations	- To support overview and scrutiny committee's role in testing and challenging the High Needs Block position and to ensure that BCP Council is learning from best practice elsewhere. - To support the delivery of the Statutory Direction to improve SEND Services in BCP.
Portfolio Holder(s):	Richard Burton, Portfolio Holder for Children's Services
Corporate Director	Cathi Hadley, Corporate Director for Children's Services
Report Authors	Lisa Linscott, Director for Education and Skills
Wards	Council-wide
Classification	For Recommendation

1. Purpose

- 1.1 The quarter two budget monitoring report provides an update on the DSG high needs forecast which is indicating a funding gap of £71 million compared with a budgeted gap of £57.5 million. This is largely due to rising demand for support. The cumulative deficit for March 2026 is projected at £183 million.
- 1.2 The Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee has identified key lines of enquiry contained in **Appendix 1** to better understand the wider context of the Council's High Needs deficit and identify potential strategies for improvement. The committee's objective is to understand why BCP Council is experiencing a higher deficit than similar authorities, and to identify actionable solutions. The key questions/lines of enquiry provide the structure for this report including:
- Details of our accumulated DSG deficit and a comparison with other local authorities as appropriate. This report identifies the current activity and associated cost in the SEND system.
 - Details of the action and impact of measures and advice undertaken in BCP,
 - An assessment of the effectiveness of BCP's own measures compared with other authorities.
 - Benchmarking data to help contextualise our problems and help find solutions.

2. National Context

- 2.1 In 2024, the National Audit Office (NAO) published a review of the support for children and young people with special educational needs. High needs deficits have increased significantly in the past 10 years to the point that the financial sustainability of a growing number of local authorities is a concern. For a number of years, central government has allowed local authorities to hold SEND deficits separate from their main revenue accounts, typically referred to as the 'statutory override'. This has been used as a temporary solution to address increasing deficits; however, this cannot be used as a long-term answer.
- 2.2 The NAO report shows that while there has been a 58% real terms increase in DfE high needs funding between 2014/15 and 2024/25 to £10.7 billion, 43% of local authorities will have deficits exceeding or close to their reserves by March 2026. Overall, this contributes to a national cumulative deficit of between £4.3 billion and £4.9 billion. Whilst funding has increased, this has not kept pace with the rise in the number of EHCPs, resulting in funding per plan decreasing by 35% over the same period. The system is both unsustainable financially, and crucially, not delivering outcomes for children despite record spend. State special schools are over capacity, potentially leading to poor outcomes. This may mean children are not in the most appropriate setting, including more expensive independent schools where the number of children with EHCPs increased by 17,000 between 2018/19 and 2023/24. This cost local authorities £2.0 billion in 2022/23, a real-terms increase of 46% from 2018/19. The NAO report concludes that if left unreformed, the SEND system is economically unsustainable. Looking ahead, for 2027/28 there is an estimated mismatch of between £2.9 billion and £3.9 billion when comparing current funding, maintained in real terms, against forecast costs.
- 2.3 SEND tribunal and appeals data underlines how challenging the SEND system has become. Since April 2018, in addition to judgements relating to education provision, the SEND Tribunal has also been able to make non-binding recommendations on the health and social care elements of EHCPs. Statistics from the Ministry of Justice show that in 2023/24, 17,000 outcomes in relation to SEN appeals were recorded, a 43% increase compared with the previous year, 2022/23. Data from 2014/15 shows 3,300 recorded outcomes for SEN appeals meaning that since the 2014 reforms, appeals have increased exponentially by four times (415%). Furthermore, 11,000 SEN appeals were decided by tribunal in 2023/24. This is more than twelve times (1288%) the number in 2014/15 of 792. In 2023-24, nationally the local authority success rate was 1.3% of cases that went to a full hearing, meaning they won only 150 out of 11,157 cases. The increase in appeals is likely due to several factors, including the growth in families seeking assessments, the continued effect of the 2014 SEND reforms, and the expansion of the tribunal's powers to make recommendations on health and social care.

- 2.4 DfE statistics show that the number of EHCPs has increased to unsustainable levels over the past decade, increasing from 240,183 in 2014/15 to 638,745 by January 2025. This is an increase of 166% across this time period, and in the last year alone, January 2024-2025, there has been an increase of 10.8%. In 2024, 105,340 EHC needs assessments were carried out; this is 15.7% more than in 2023. 46.4% of plans were issued within the 20-week statutory timescales. Timeliness has decreased over time as demand has increased. In the 2024/25 academic year there were 482,640 pupils in schools in England with an EHCP. This is an increase of 11.1% from 2023/24. 5.3% of all pupils in England now have an EHCP, an increase of 4.8% from the previous year.
- 2.5 The workforce challenges are widespread, with shortages among services such as speech and language therapists, health visitors and Educational Psychologists (EPs). In 2023, the DfE report into educational psychology services found that 88% of local authorities' Principal EPs reported that they were currently experiencing difficulties recruiting. Early support is essential for helping children thrive and a key moment to build relationships with parents. The statutory requirement for EP advice for all EHCPs means that this valuable resource is deployed for assessment rather than intervention purposes. EPs themselves have called for their role to do more early intervention and systemic work as part of a graduated response to prevent children and young people's needs from escalating, and therefore potentially reducing the demand for EHCPs.
- 2.6 School capacity data from 2023/24 shows that around 8,000 more secondary pupils are on roll in special schools than the reported capacity. Around two thirds of special schools report they are at or over capacity. It is important to acknowledge that current measurements of capacity do not take type of need into account, meaning the real term levels of capacity may be even more stretched. Since 2014/15 there has been an increase of 60% in placements in state-funded special schools, while placements in independent and non-maintained special schools (INMSSs) have risen 132%. Based on the current system, local authorities forecast that the total anticipated number of pupils in years Reception to 11 with an EHCP that will need a place in specialist provision to be an estimated at 273,000 by 2028/29.
- 2.7 The recent LGA and Isos Partnership report on the future of home to school transport shows that in 2023/24, local authorities spent £2.25 billion on transporting children and young people (with or without SEND) to school and college. This figure has grown dramatically over the last decade – by £1.23 billion, which represents 122% increase. The percentage of children eligible on account of their SEN has increased from 32% in 2021 to 40% in 2025. The research suggests that the average cost per child of providing SEND transport is around £9,000 per year compared with an average cost per child of providing mainstream transport of around £3,000 per year. Home to school transport for pupils under 16 with SEND is the highest proportion of expenditure, which, alongside the higher-than-average cost of SEND transport provision, means it accounts for three-quarters (75%) of the growth in expenditure between 2015/16 and 2023/24.
- 2.8 The Isos Partnership research has previously looked at factors that were contributing to higher demand and cost. Those most commonly reported to them by local authorities included:
- Extension of local authority responsibilities to include the 16-25 age range
 - Increased demand for special school places, with pressures on local capacity leading to increased use of placements in the independent/non-maintained sector
 - Reduced inclusivity of (some) mainstream schools
 - Higher rates of school exclusion and use of alternative provision
 - Greater complexity of need (with particular growth in numbers of children with an Autism diagnosis and those with social, emotional and mental health difficulties (SEMH))

While the Isos Partnership research identified some influence of increasing levels of need and demographic changes, a number of the above factors were reported to be linked to the impact of national policy, particularly expectations generated by the national SEND reforms (without funding to match statutory requirements) and increased attainment pressures on mainstream schools (which were making it more difficult for them to prioritise effective provision for SEND and inclusion).

- 2.9 A total of 38 local authorities with the highest deficits (at a point in time) have been on the government's Safety Valve programme, with agreements signed across four rounds between

2020-21 and 2023-24. The government is no longer entering into new agreements for this programme. The program provided significant extra funding in exchange for a commitment to reducing deficits through specific actions. The success rate is not officially published but there are reports that indicate that many councils are struggling to meet their targets. A further 54 local authorities (including BCP Council) have participated in the Delivering Better Value (DBV) Programme, which provided much smaller sums of financial support. The programme has led to a DBV Toolkit being produced which provides guidance on diagnostic and improvement activities. It does not indicate what the financial improvements from the programme were.

3. Background In BCP Council

- 3.1 BCP Council received a statutory direction from the Department for Education (DfE) in February 2024 due to ongoing concerns about its SEND services and the local area partnership. This followed a series of inspections and monitoring visits that highlighted systemic weaknesses in provision, system leadership, and outcomes for children and young people with SEND. A roadmap of our improvement activity is set out in **Appendix 2**. A summary timeline of SEND Improvement and Statutory Direction in BCP Council is as follows:

December 2021 – Initial SEND Inspection

- A joint inspection by Ofsted and the Care Quality Commission (CQC) found significant weaknesses in the local area partnership SEND services.
- The inspection judged the overall effectiveness of the council's SEND provision to be inadequate, citing poor coordination, inconsistent support, and weak strategic oversight.

2022–2023 – Monitoring and Limited Progress

- The DfE conducted monitoring visits throughout 2022 and 2023 to assess progress against the inspection findings.
- Despite some efforts to improve inclusion and early intervention, the council was found to be failing to meet required standards, particularly in EHCP timeliness, parental engagement, and service integration.

February 2024 – Statutory Direction Issued

- The Secretary of State for Education issued a formal statutory direction to BCP Council under the Children and Families Act 2014.
- The direction required BCP Council to work at pace with partners—including NHS Dorset, schools, multi-academy trusts, and parent/carer forums—to improve SEND services.
- A diagnostic review was conducted, leading to the development of a new SEND Improvement Plan focused on system-wide reform.

March 2024 – Scrutiny and Oversight

- The council's Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee reviewed the statutory direction and the improvement plan.
- Key priorities included improving EHCP processes, expanding local provision, and rebuilding trust with families.
- BCP Council began implementing its SEND Improvement Plan, aligning it with its DSG Recovery Plan and Delivering Better Value programme.
- There is robust governance of the SEND Improvement Plan in place, and the Board has an Independent Chair and representation from the DfE at every Board meeting.
- A total of 8 areas of improvement were identified, and these are summarised in **Appendix 3**.
- While some progress was made in expanding local provision and improving inclusion, EHCP growth continued, and tribunal appeals rose.
- The statutory direction remains in place as of late 2025, with ongoing DfE oversight and quarterly progress reporting. BCP Council and the local area partnership is undergoing its local area SEND Inspection at the point of this report being written.

2024 Safety Valve Agreement

- A safety valve agreement was sought and declined by the DfE.
- BCP Council submitted the 15-year plan. Having worked with finance support, the DfE felt that the plan was challenging but realistic. However, the DfE were unable to agree to the 15-year timescale.

December 2024 1% Schools Block transfer

- This was requested and denied by the DfE. However, Schools Forum agreed to a surplus £1.2m being transferred from the Schools Block for use on the development of three projects focused on inclusion:
 - Increased outreach support
 - Training programmes into schools
 - Trial of local authority Inclusion Lead role to support whole school inclusive practice

4.0 Current Status

- 4.1 BCP Council is under monitoring by the DfE and must, with the local area partnership, demonstrate sustained improvement to lift the statutory direction. In October 2025 the DfE conducted a progress review against the written statement of action, in which they found a number of areas of positive progress: ‘..it was clear to witness the significant progress the partnership has made to improve inter and between agency working to deliver better for children and young people with SEND in Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole (BCP).’ The review found that ‘Over the two-day review, it was evident that the partnership has laid important foundations—through improved collaboration, strengthened governance, a restructured SEND service, and health transformation plans—to drive better outcomes for children and young people. And considering where the partnership has been over the last two years, this is something we recognise and acknowledge.’ However, the review also confirmed that some improvements are yet to yield impact or are in the early stages of delivery. The findings of the review aligned fully with our own self-assessment.
- 4.2 Following a partnership review of the SEND Improvement Plan, an updated SEND and Alternative Provision Improvement Plan has been developed and approved by the SEND Improvement Board in September 2025. This is an indication of the significant progress that has been made against the original plan, and the proactive approach the council and partners have taken to moving the plan on to its next iteration. The plan contains a section on managing resources which explicitly includes action 8.2 to develop and deliver a High Needs Block deficit recovery plan.
- 4.3 The DSG is allocated to councils largely according to relative needs with some elements of historic funding (based on historic actual costs) still working through the system after implementation of the national funding formulae for the different funding blocks of the DSG. BCP Council is in the bottom third of the 151 local authorities in the country in terms of the amount of high needs funding per pupil received from the DfE. The largest element of this funding is being uplifted by the minimum guaranteed percentage each year. This is due to historic funding levels across the three legacy councils being ahead of the current high needs national funding formula calculations. A relatively small amount of high needs funding is based on demand activity. Some other councils will be receiving above minimum increases and improving their relative funding positions. The overall amount of funding allocated to high needs by the DfE must increase significantly and especially in the short term until any national reforms can be developed, considered with stakeholders and start being implemented. The delay to the Schools White Paper shows how difficult this will be.
- 4.4 In terms of DSG funding per mainstream pupil, BCP is in the bottom 10%, being the 14th lowest funding of 151 local authorities. This reflects the relative needs of BCP schools compared with others (in terms of pupil deprivation and attainment, for example), that BCP is a generally low-wage area, BCP has an efficient size of school (fewer schools overall for the number of pupils) and only one school (now closed) has attracted funding for sparsity (allocations which benefit rural counties). Rural counties have historically been a particular focus of the F40 group campaigns for fairer funding, (see the F40 group ([Home - f40](#)) for further information) does also

include conurbations such as York, Wakefield and Plymouth). The tables below compare BCP with the highest and lowest funded local authorities:

- 4.5 To note, tables 1 and 2 below are based on information from the F40 group and used by other Local Authorities to present their position relative to all England authorities.

Table 1: Gross DSG 2025/26

	2025 / 26 Gross DSG	Per Mainstream Pupil	Comment
Lowest funded	Rutland	£7,857.11	BCP is funded 6.46% higher than the lowest funded local authority
14 th lowest out of 151	BCP	£8,364.84	
Highest funded	Camden	£13,255.61	BCP is funded 36.9% lower than the highest funded local authority

Table 2: HNB Funding 2025/26

	2025 / 26 HNB Funding	Per Pupil Allocations	Comment
Lowest funded	East Riding	£968.64	BCP is funded 19.28% higher than the lowest funded local authority
47 th lowest out of 151	BCP	£1,199.93	
Highest funded	Camden	£3,564.95	BCP is funded 66.35% lower than the highest funded local authority

- 4.6 The council is developing an updated High Needs Recovery Plan and associated governance structure. BCP Council's external auditor has confirmed that the Council should:
- Update its DSG management plan and ensure the actions are embedded and monitored. Further action should be identified if the current actions are not having the impact as intended to ensure action is taken at pace
 - Continue to monitor the impact of the DSG deficit on the cashflow position
 - Ensure it monitors and manages the level of reserves and increase its level of reserves where possible.
- 4.7 To ensure continued progress, strengthening partnerships with our schools remains a key priority. During the Spring and Summer terms of 2025, BCP Council hosted the Belonging Conferences with Early Years Providers and Schools to introduce the Belonging Strategy. Both events featured distinguished BCP and national speakers who led engaging discussions on inclusive practices. As a Local Authority, we are committed to providing appropriate support that empowers providers to address the diverse needs of children and young people. This includes adopting a graduated approach and upholding the core principles of inclusion.
- 4.8 BCP have secured funding from the DfE SEND Intervention Support Fund to drive improvement and transformation within Education Services leading to development in three key areas:
- The BCP graduated approach and Ordinarily Available Provision toolkit to provide timely, high-quality support and services to children and young people through early intervention.
 - A sustainable three tier Alternative Provision model based on best practice with improved monitoring and oversight.

- Inclusive whole school practice with the support of an established educational charity (The Difference).

4.9 As part of BCP Council's SEND Sufficiency Strategy, we have delivered 140 additional specialist places during the academic year 2024 – 25 and the plan for delivering beyond this is mapped out in the November report to Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny. We have been gradually reducing the percentage of children in independent non-maintained schools, but it is still above national average, which is why the delivery of the rest of planned growth in specialist places is key.

5. Key Lines of Enquiry – DSG Deficit

5.1 **Accumulated DSG Deficit Comparison:** *Please provide the latest data for BCP's level of accumulated DSG deficit compared with other local authorities.*

The LGA report that the national high needs block funding for SEND rose from £5.3 billion in 2014-15, to £9.4 billion in 2024-25. On top of national funding, councils spent an additional £950 million on SEND expenditure that should have been covered by the DSG in 2023-24 alone (the analysis for actual spend is not yet available for 2024-25).

The LGA estimates that nationally local government's cumulative high needs deficit stands at £3.15 billion for March 2025, noting that this figure would be closer to £4 billion without additional money being invested via the safety valve programme for councils that had the highest deficits at a point in time. Total deficits are projected to rise to £5 billion by 2026. The National Audit Office's (NAO's) recent report, states that 43 per cent of councils are on track to have deficits approaching or exceeding their reserves by March 2026. BCP has already reached that position in March 2025.

National data is not readily available at individual local authority level, and 38 authorities are in the safety valve programme with the benefit of significant additional funding which can make comparisons misleading. However, the comparison of BCP with our statistical neighbours is summarised in table 3 below:

Table 3: Benchmarking of DSG Deficits – BCP Statistical Neighbours for March 2025

DSG Accounts 2024/25	In-Year Deficit/ (Surplus) 2024/25 £000's	Cumulative Deficit/ (Surplus) March 2025 £000's	Final DSG 2024-25 £000	In-Year Deficit / DSG %	Cumulative Deficit/ (Surplus) DSG %
BCP	49,745	113,257	365,830	14%	31%
Southend-on-Sea	4,550	-£7,098	207,763	2%	-3%
East Sussex	£22	-£2,836	508,795	0%	-1%
Kent*	30,315	97,483	1,777,974	2%	5%
West Sussex	52,672	123,206	858,126	6%	14%
Devon*	48,545	167,307	720,542	7%	23%
Bedford	1,532	326	225,561	1%	0%
Milton Keynes	-1,647	-5,055	368,359	0%	-1%
Norfolk*	50,378	131,891	857,973	6%	15%
Bexley*	-3,344	12,991	311,945	-1%	4%
Essex*	34,744	-1,728	1,577,095	2%	0%

Note: Information has been extracted from the draft accounts of these councils. Those marked * have safety valve agreements. Some councils have added general fund contributions towards their deficits as part of their safety valve agreement or otherwise agreed with the DfE. An in-year deficit where the DSG is in credit (such as for Southend-on-Sea) may not be indicating a budget problem but simply the planned spend of reserves.

BCP Council benchmarks high compared with this group, including those without safety valve agreements. The in-year deficit as a proportion of DSG funding is of particular concern as it shows the scale of the problem for BCP Council currently is greater than for other councils.

5.2 **Strategies Used by Other Authorities:** *What strategies have they used to try to minimise their overspend and what have been the associated costs?*

The DfE published DSG management guidance in June 2022: [High needs budgets: effective management in local authorities](#). This document summarises some of the best practices identified at the time that had been adopted by top-performing councils in England to manage high-needs deficits. These practices are drawn from the Department for Education (DfE) research and sector guidance. However, the report states that 'Judging their impacts on the management of high needs funding is a complex task which really requires a more longitudinal evaluation.' And 'It is possible however to provide some quantitative evidence of changes which may help identify practices that have had a particular impact.' It is of note that of the ten 'good practice' local authorities in the report, all ten are reporting a deficit in 2025 / 26. The report cited the following recommendations based on the findings of the case studies, with a brief statement on BCP Council's position in relation to each recommendation:

- **'Local authorities should invest properly in SEND leadership, with dedicated time for strategic functions to avoid constant distractions from operational pressures':** this is built into the SEND Improvement governance in BCP Council. Key leadership roles within Education and Skills have been recruited to and SEND is of a high strategic priority.
- **'Authorities should review their joint commissioning arrangements to support more balanced contributions to high needs provision from the three key services (Education, Health and Social Care)':** there have been some challenges with this, that are being addressed through more robust financial decision-making protocols and commissioning processes. Collaboration with partners informs joint commissioning plans through joint planning and data sharing.
- **'Officers with SEND and Finance responsibilities should have joint accountability for effective management of this area, with high priority given to effective communication and mutual support, building on the positive practices identified in this report.':** Joint accountability is in place and communication is improving but keeping the data up to date for committed expenditure on pupil placements and other costs is challenging for commissioners with the impact on being able to set robust budgets, forecasts and undertake medium term financial planning.
- **'Local authorities should review their capacity for SEND support (and its funding base) to help strengthen their influence on the range of relevant outcomes. They should develop clearer agreements with services which set out commissioning expectations and monitoring arrangements.':** Outreach provided by special schools has been a SEND support service funded by the high needs block over many years. Re-integration officers have also been introduced, and we should be seeing reduced reliance on alternative provision, but this is instead still growing. Early Years support includes area SENCOs, a pupil assessment and outreach service (Dingley's Promise) has recently been introduced, and a portage service has been funded for many years. Support services that schools could purchase had been declining over the years prior to LGR as schools reported that they were too expensive, with these services not reinstated for BCP. There has been a lack of robustness to the monitoring of the services that are commissioned so this has been addressed and going forward more robust monitoring will be in place.
- **'Local authorities should review their current staffing levels and structures for SEND casework and enhance these where necessary, as part of their broader strategy for improving management of high needs expenditure and quality of service delivery.':** A redesign of the SEND Service was completed in 2024, informed by good practice, parents and carers, and financial resource available. The phased pod structure is now embedded and receives positive feedback in terms of the approach. However, the high levels of request for statutory support mean that the teams struggle to meet statutory requirements. This is in line with the picture nationally, and more detail on this is provided later in the report.
- **'Local authorities should review and further develop their approaches to partnership with key stakeholders, taking into account some of the positive practices described in this report (in addition to any broader policy emphasis on this area).':** the work of the local area partnership has significantly improved. The partners have created and embedded a culture of shared values: Trust, Empathy, Belonging, Communication, and Respect. The strengthened partnership working is demonstrated by shared accountability,

clear roles and responsibilities and significant progress in SEND Improvement Board meetings.

- **‘When creating new specialist provision, local authorities should be clear about the expected range and levels of need that this will cater for. They should also consider the potential impact on future demand and whether this can be financially sustained. The case for any proposed development should include detailed projections on the balance between investment and savings.’:** detailed modelling has taken place in relation to SEND sufficiency. Furthermore, BCP Council was already delivering both satellite and resourced provision ahead of this becoming a priority from the DfE. The effectiveness of these provisions requires review.
- **‘With regard to developments in local mainstream provision, investment should be targeted at strengthening inclusion, with impact monitored and evaluated at that level.’:** This is a clear priority across the current development work, evidenced in the SEND and AP Improvement Plan. 100% of schools’ data share, enabling a system leadership approach to addressing the challenges and strengths that the data reveals. Termly Head Teacher Forums enable meaningful discussion and prioritisation of actions in relation to inclusion. The Belonging Strategy is in the course of being delivered.
- **‘Local authorities should set out more clearly their expected pathways for young people with different levels of need, ensure that these are presented earlier and more clearly to young people and their parents, and evaluate quality and outcomes on a more regular basis. Pathways should be realistic but ambitious.’:** some of the pathways have been strengthened as part of the delivery of the previous SEND Improvement Plan. The Balanced System and Early Years support for speech and language needs is a good example of this. However, some pathways are at different stages of development. There is a strong mental health transformation plan in place for example, but this work is only just starting.
- **‘Local authorities should learn from positive examples of innovative approaches to mainstream funding (including the option of greater devolution of resources to individual schools/groups of schools with clear expectations of outcomes).’:** this has not been in place to date. However, as referenced in this report, a shared targeted funding model is being developed, and if approved by Schools Forum and Cabinet, will be able to be delivered.

5.3 **Authorities Not Running a Deficit:** *Are there any such authorities not running a deficit at all? How have they avoided this?*

Within our benchmark group, four councils are not running a DSG deficit. As an example, East Sussex had a small surplus in March 2025 of £2.8m which had been budgeted to carry forward into 2025-26. However, to balance the 2024-25 DSG the council had added £0.7m of its own funding and used £13m of accumulated positive DSG reserves. The council’s 2025-26 high needs budget was balanced with a transfer of £1m from the schools’ block. In June 2025 they reported that a forecast cumulative deficit is expected by the end of 2025/26.

The latest detailed benchmarking available is for the 2024/25 DSG budget and this shows East Sussex spending (detail in appendix 5):

- Below average on high needs places (that is state special school and AP commissioned places are low in the area).
- Below average on top up funding – both mainstream and special schools.
- About average on non-state sector special schools
- Well below average on alternative provision – this is a particular area of concern for BCP with very high spending.
- Well above average for SEND support and inclusion (although this is gross spend as the net budget table considered for 2025-26 in section 10 below was not available). There could be gross budgets included where income is generated from services traded with schools.

5.4 *What funding streams have other LAs accessed to support their SEND function?* They will have received funding support through the Delivering Better Value (DBV) and Safety Valve programmes. BCP Council received support of £1m through the DBV programme to improve SEND services. A local example is Dorset Council, who had a £42 million safety valve agreement in 2022. As at July 2025 they were reporting a forecast outturn of £52.5m overspend

for 2025/26. Adding the historic cumulative deficit position, their revised cumulative deficit is reported as £148.18m.

Local authorities will fund their SEND functions via a combination of general fund revenue resources and DSG funding. There is a regulatory framework and DfE guidance about what aspects can be funded from the DSG and more specifically the high needs block. Pressure on council budgets have led to some councils slimming down or removing some non-statutory services.

6. Engagement and Partnership with Other Authorities

6.1 External Advice and Support: *Have we sought input from anywhere else to advise on possible solutions, such as think tanks, LGA? Since April 2019?*

- a. BCP Council entered the DfE DBV programme.
- b. The Education and Skills Service has had the experience over six years from four different service directors responsible for high needs budgets Each has brought different experiences within a context of a challenging landscape nationally and locally.
- c. The Education and Skills Service collaborates with several different local authorities and national bodies, reaching out to partners with strength in the relevant areas. Examples of this can be seen in the November 2025 report to Overview and Scrutiny Committee on Suspensions and Exclusions and later in this report.
- d. In February 2025 the service secured the support of a highly experienced DfE funded SEND Adviser for the SEND and AP improvement journey and preparation for inspection.
- e. During October 2025 BCP Council SEND Partnership attended the southwest SEND Regional and Collaboration Peer Event which brings together local area partnerships across the Southwest to reflect on current practice, share perspectives, and identify opportunities for collaboration and targeted improvement support.
- f. The current Director of Education and Skills sit on the southwest strategic SEND group of the Southwest Regional Innovation Improvement Alliance (SW RIIA) which focuses on shared challenges and the delivery of the regional SEND Development Plan.
- g. BCP Council secured DfE SEND Improvement funding of up to £600,000. This is being used to deliver on several key priorities within the new SEND and AP Improvement Plan.

6.2 *What work have our officers done with these authorities to share ideas, strategies and plans to try to bring down our deficit?*

The examples below are not exhaustive, but hopefully give some examples of how officers work with other areas:

- Bedford: Bedford are a statistical neighbour and were allocated as a sector led improvement partner to BCP to support improvements in SEND. Examples of their work with BCP Council included supporting the development of an effective SEND Self Evaluation Form (SEF) and supporting the work to review and find a more effective model of banding for funding of EHCPs. This has led to the work to trial the Resource Allocation System of funding which will be presented to Schools Forum and Cabinet for approval in the new year.
- Southampton: We are learning from their cluster model of shared funding, peer collaboration and inclusive practice. An outline was presented to Schools Forum in September for agreement to develop a costed model for formal consideration by Schools Forum and Cabinet. Southampton have agreed to provide ongoing support at no cost. Desktop research also took place in relation to other local areas' models, including Camden, Hertfordshire and Plymouth.
- South Gloucestershire, the Ted Wragg Trust from Devon and the charity The Difference: South Gloucestershire is part of the DfE's funded Change Programme which is used to try out possible improvements to the way things work in the SEND and AP system. We have learnt about the development of their three-tier model of Alternative Provision. Officers also reached out to the Difference and Ted Wragg Trust in Devon. Both have presented to the Head Teacher Forum and are supporting work in relation to the development of the three tier AP model with a multi-agency working group.

- Wiltshire: Wiltshire shared their work to set up Inclusion Advisers to support whole school inclusive practice. This is an initiative which BCP are now trialling using part of the £1.2m schools block surplus, with the recruitment of three Inclusion Leads having taken place in October, with start dates in December and January.

7. Measures we have taken and why we chose those measures over others that were discounted.

- 7.1 Aligned to the 8 areas for Improvement, the council adopted a mix of early intervention, inclusion-focused, and commissioning strategies to manage high needs expenditure. BCP has seen some moderate success, though significant challenges remain. A summary of key measures and their effectiveness are set out below.

Area 1: Strengthen oversight of statutory SEND processes: Key measures to secure improvements across the SEND service are reflected in several areas including:

- Providing timely, high-quality support**
- EHCP Assessment Timeliness and Annual Review Timeliness**
- Measures to Manage the "Yes to Assess" Rate**
- Appeals and Early Dispute Resolution**

a.) Providing timely, high-quality support

- **What:** A focus on compliance in respect of the timeliness of Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) assessments, annual reviews, and tribunal management. Details of each of these is set out below. This includes tighter monitoring, improved panel decision-making, and clearer thresholds for support – see also Yes to Assess rate measure below.
- **Why:** Regulatory inefficiencies were contributing to unchecked EHCP growth, inconsistent decision-making, and rising tribunal appeals—all of which drive up high needs costs. By tightening governance and aligning decisions with statutory guidance, councils aimed to ensure resources were allocated fairly and sustainably.
- **Why others were discounted:** Alternatives such as blanket caps on EHCPs or limiting parental requests were deemed legally non-compliant and risked undermining trust. Informal gatekeeping approaches lacked transparency and often led to increased appeals and reputational damage.
- **Effectiveness:** Councils that invested in robust regulatory frameworks—such as South Gloucestershire and Dorset—reported slower EHCP growth, improved consistency in panel decisions, and fewer successful tribunal challenges. However, effectiveness depends on skilled staffing and cross-agency coordination. In some areas, delays in assessments and reviews persist due to workforce shortages, limiting the full impact of these reforms.

b.) EHCP Assessment Timeliness and Annual Review Timeliness

- **What:** EHC Needs Assessment timeliness and quality, annual review timeliness and developing a sustainable EHCP funding model. These actions will help reduce growth of EHCPs at least in line with national averages, ensure that 100% of phase transfer reviews are completed by the February and March deadlines and all other Annual Reviews are completed within 12 months of the issue of an EHCP or the previous annual review.
- A package of measures including the introduction of an EHCP AI writer to reduce administrative burden, improved communication pathways (e.g., FAQs, Local Offer updates), increased staffing and training for EHCCOs, and strengthened partnership working with health and social care to improve timeliness of advice. These are explored in more detail below:
 - **Introduction of AI Solutions:** An EHCP AI writer aims to reduce the administrative burden on EHCCOs, allowing them to maximise their time available for statutory assessment work and improve communication with parents and carers at key stages of the process through an enhanced parent and partnership portal.
 - **Improved Communication Pathways:** Enhancements in communication pathways, such as signposting and FAQ factsheets sent as auto-replies and included on the Local Offer, are being implemented to streamline processes and provide a model for triage.

- **Increased Staffing and Training:** Following a recruitment drive, the SEND Assessment and Review Team will have increased permanency of EHCCOs to over 93%, significantly reducing the reliance on agency workers. A new workforce development program providing robust induction and training for staff has been implemented to support improved recruitment and retention.
- **Partnership Working:** Collaboration with Social Care and Health to increase the timeliness of the provision of their advice as part of the statutory assessment process.
- **Why chosen:** These actions aim to improve statutory compliance, reduce delays in assessment and review processes, and ensure plans are outcome-focused and legally robust. Improving timeliness is also critical to reducing complaints and building trust with families.
- **Why others were discounted:** Reliance on agency staff and manual processes was unsustainable and led to inconsistent quality. One-off interventions without systemic change failed to deliver long-term improvement.
- **Effectiveness:** EHCCO permanency has increased to over 93%, reducing reliance on agency workers. Communication with families has improved, and the AI writer is expected to free up capacity for direct casework. However, timeliness remains variable and is impacted by workforce pressures in partner agencies.

c.) Measures to Manage the "Yes to Assess" Rate

- **What:** A strategic, system-wide approach to ensure EHCP assessments are reserved for cases where they are truly necessary. This includes strengthening decision-making protocols, improving communication with families and schools, and investing in inclusive practices that offer credible alternatives to EHCPs.
- **Why chosen:** Rising "yes to assess" rates contribute to unsustainable growth in EHCPs and high needs expenditure. By focusing on early support and clarity around the EHCP process, councils aim to reduce assessments driven by frustration, misunderstanding, or lack of access to mainstream support.
- **Why others were discounted:** Blanket refusals or arbitrary thresholds risk breaching statutory duties and eroding trust with families. Passive approaches—such as waiting for demand to stabilise—were ineffective and led to increased tribunal appeals and reputational damage.
- **Effectiveness:** Councils implementing this approach, including BCP and Somerset, have seen modest reductions in EHCP request rates and improved satisfaction among schools. However, success depends on consistent messaging, robust alternatives to EHCPs, and ongoing data analysis. In BCP, tracking referral patterns has helped identify schools with high request rates, enabling targeted training and support. Yet, pressures remain due to rising complexity of need and workforce constraints in mainstream settings.

d.) Appeals and Early Dispute Resolution

- **What:** The service has prioritised training for EHCCOs and Appeals Team members to ensure high-quality, transparent, and consistent support for families throughout the assessment and review processes. This includes embedding nationally recognised IPSEA training into staff development and offering Global Mediation to resolve disagreements early. The SEND Tribunal Team has adopted a proactive approach to resolving disputes through Early Dispute Resolution (EDR), mediation, and—where appropriate—Consent Orders. These practices are embedded into casework and staff development, ensuring alignment with sector best practice and a consistent, child-centred approach. Recruitment of additional Tribunal Officers to support their management of the families they are supporting has been a vital component and has provided the additional resources necessary to facilitate increased capacity for personalised engagement with families.
- **Why chosen:** This approach promotes legal accuracy, strengthens relationships with parents and carers, and supports early resolution of disputes. By equipping staff with the skills and confidence to manage appeals effectively, the council aims to reduce the number of cases progressing to Tribunal and maintain a child-centred focus throughout. These measures also support timely and equitable outcomes for families, reduce the emotional toll of formal legal processes, and help ensure that children's needs are addressed without unnecessary delay. By resolving issues early, the service can maintain trust and reduce the escalation of conflict.
- **Why others were discounted:** Heavy reliance on external legal representation was costly and often adversarial, undermining trust with families. Reactive complaint handling failed to

address underlying issues and led to escalating conflict. Informal or inconsistent approaches lacked transparency and accountability. Delayed resolution increased anxiety for families and risked disrupting provision for children.

- **Effectiveness:** Figure 1 sets out that there has been a significant reduction in the necessity for formal Tribunal hearings and accelerated timelines for achieving resolution. Families report improved satisfaction, and children's needs are being met more promptly. The approach has also contributed to a calmer, more collaborative relationship between the Local Authority and families. The number of appeals has decreased, with 30% now settled before reaching Tribunal. There has been a 50% reduction in reliance on solicitors, with LA Officers now representing the service in most cases—with cost avoidance of £95,000. Staff report improved confidence, and families benefit from more consistent and timely communication. Fewer decisions were found in favour of the parents at the Tribunal Hearing when comparing the full years of 2023 and 2024, showing that the LA is moving closer to a position of only going to Tribunal where we are confident that maintaining our original decision is the right one for the child /young person, with robust evidence to support our position.

Figure 1



Area 2: Early Intervention and Inclusion

- **What:** Investment in early years SEND support and graduated response pathways, offering targeted interventions, and improving multi-agency coordination to identify and support children with emerging needs before they escalate.
- **Why chosen:** These measures aim to reduce the number of children requiring formal EHCPs or placement in specialist provision by addressing needs earlier and more effectively. By embedding support within mainstream environments, councils hoped to promote inclusion, reduce long-term costs, and improve outcomes for children with SEND.
- **Why others were discounted:** Reactive models such as waiting for formal diagnoses or EHCPs before offering support were found to be inefficient and costly. They often led to delayed interventions, increased parental dissatisfaction, and higher rates of exclusion and tribunal appeals. Blanket funding increases without targeted support lacked accountability and impact.
- **Effectiveness:** While there are some examples of strong practice of early identification, EHCP growth and mainstream exclusions remain high. This may be indicative that early intervention leads to early identification of SEND needs and equally it could also suggest that inclusion strategies are not yet fully embedded or consistently applied. Workforce shortages, variable school engagement, and rising complexity of need continue to challenge the effectiveness of early intervention models.

Mentoring

- **What:** Mentors to work directly with pupils at risk of exclusion. These roles focus on building relationships, improving attendance, and supporting emotional wellbeing.
- **Why chosen:** Provides low-cost, high-impact relational support that complements academic and behavioural interventions. Builds trust and reduces isolation.
- **Why others were discounted:** Reliance on punitive sanctions or external referrals often failed to address root causes of disengagement. Generic pastoral roles lacked the targeted focus of dedicated mentors.
- **Effectiveness:** Councils like Bristol and Cornwall have seen improved attendance and reduced exclusions among mentored pupils. Sustainability depends on funding and integration with wider inclusion strategies.

Area 3: Parental Engagement and Co-production/Enhanced Partnerships

- **What:** Embedding IPSEA training for EHCCOs and Appeals Team members, improving communication pathways, and promoting early resolution of complaints. The service also offers Global Mediation and aims to concede appeals earlier in the process. The service has prioritised building strong, collaborative relationships with SENDIASS and parent/carers together and parent/cares Forum alongside other key stakeholders. This includes ongoing consultation with families, continuous professional development for staff focused on mediation and constructive dialogue, and a commitment to direct, transparent communication with parents and carers.
- **Why chosen:** These measures are designed to rebuild trust with families, reduce conflict, and ensure that statutory processes are transparent, legally accurate, and child centred. They foster a culture of proactive engagement and early problem resolution, reducing the likelihood of formal disputes and promoting mutual trust. By involving families and advocates in shaping service delivery, the council ensures that provision remains responsive, adaptive, and child centred.
- **Why others were discounted:** Over-reliance on legal representation was costly and adversarial. Passive communication approaches failed to address rising dissatisfaction and complaints. Reactive or transactional approaches to complaints and appeals often escalated tensions and led to costly, adversarial processes. Limited engagement with SENDIASS and families in the past contributed to mistrust and inconsistent service experiences.
- **Effectiveness:** There has been a marked reduction in formal disputes and an increase in early resolution of concerns. Feedback from SENDIASS and families indicates improved confidence in the system, and staff report greater clarity and consistency in managing complex conversations. 30% of appeals are now settled early, and solicitor use has halved. Staff confidence has improved, but further work is needed to embed co-production consistently across all service areas. Parent Carers Together shared feedback on the Partnerships for Inclusion of Neurodiversity in Schools (PINS) project that they've seen positive outcomes, including the creation of community spaces for parents and carers within schools, aimed at fostering support, connection and a sense of belonging. Recent feedback from Parents/Cares Together about the impact of parenthood working is as follows: 'BCP Council and NHS Dorset have strengthened partnership and co-production, embedding trust, empathy, and respect into SEND services. Some families are seeing earlier identification, faster support, and a stronger voice through initiatives like co-designed charters. While progress is encouraging, challenges remain with diagnostic delays, school consistency, and building trust—continued effort is needed to deliver reliable, timely support'.

Area 4: Integrated Multi-Agency Working

- **What:** Strengthened collaboration with Social Care and Health to improve the timeliness of advice for EHCPs and annual reviews. Multi-agency panels and shared training are also being developed, and an Alternative Provision Panel has been developed that reviews and approves referrals to alternative education settings for pupils who are at risk of exclusion or unable to attend mainstream school. The panel typically includes representatives from education, SEND services, social care, and health, ensuring a holistic view of each case.
- **Why chosen:** Integrated working is essential to delivering holistic, timely, and effective support for children with SEND. It also improves the quality of EHCPs and reduces

duplication. The panel model promotes consistency, transparency, and accountability in placement decisions. It ensures that all referrals are scrutinized against clear criteria, that mainstream support has been exhausted, and that the most appropriate and cost-effective provision is selected. It also facilitates earlier identification of unmet needs and encourages schools to retain responsibility for pupils wherever possible.

- **Why others were discounted:** Siloed working led to delays, inconsistent advice, and fragmented support. Informal coordination lacked accountability and sustainability. A school-led referral system was found to result in inconsistent thresholds, inequitable access, and over-reliance on costly independent providers. Automated or paper-based approval processes lacked the professional dialogue and challenge necessary to ensure robust decision-making.
- **Effectiveness:** Progress has been made in aligning timelines and expectations, but capacity issues in partner services continue to impact delivery. Other councils that implemented AP Panels—such as BCP, Devon, and Gloucestershire—have reported reductions in unnecessary placements, improved reintegration rates, and better alignment between provision and pupil need. It is too early to assess effectiveness, but it is anticipated that the panel will contribute to a reduction in new AP placements in 2025–26. However, effectiveness depends on timely meetings, strong multi-agency engagement, and clear escalation routes when consensus cannot be reached.

Area 5: SEND Sufficiency - Local Provision Expansion

- **What:** Councils invest in expanding local special school places and specialist resource bases to meet rising demand for SEND provision. This includes capital development of new facilities, increasing capacity in existing schools, and establishing satellite units or enhanced mainstream support hubs.
- **Why chosen:** Expanding local provision improves SEND sufficiency by ensuring children with complex needs can be educated closer to home. It reduces reliance on costly out-of-area and independent placements, improves continuity of support, and strengthens local accountability for outcomes. New place provision includes new Dingley's Promise centres to improve early intervention for children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) in the early years (0–5). Through training, research, and direct support, it helps build inclusive practice in early years settings and supports families navigating the SEND system. The development of additional specialist places has been through co-locating satellites on mainstream school sites and developing resourced provision across the primary phase. Some more graduated provision has also been commissioned in the shape of mainstream plus provision in one of our secondary schools. This provides enhanced funding and training to support complex needs. This includes flexible top-up funding, access to specialist outreach teams, helping to reduce demand for specialist places and promote inclusive practice. This allows schools to respond to need without waiting for formal diagnoses or EHCPs.
- **Why others were discounted:** Over-reliance on independent placements was financially unsustainable and often led to fragmented support. Temporary fixes such as short-term commissioning or transport subsidies failed to address long-term capacity gaps and did not improve local inclusion.
- **Effectiveness:** Councils such as BCP, Devon, and Wiltshire have reported improved placement stability and significant cost avoidance following local provision expansion. In BCP, new specialist provision has provided local places for local children and contributed to small increases in children remaining in mainstream schools and reductions in out-of-area placements. The data show that in February 2025 39.8% of children with an EHCP were in mainstream schools compared with 41.4% in September 2025 and the percentage of children with an EHCP in Independent and Maintained Special schools marginally decreased from 11.3% in September 2024 to 10.8% in September 2025.

Area 6: Workforce Development Strategy

- **What:** A comprehensive workforce development programme, including robust induction for EHCCOs. EHCCO permanency has increased to over 93%. A coordinated approach to upskilling the SEND workforce across education, health, and care sectors. This includes targeted training for SENCOs, teaching assistants, and inclusion leads, as well as recruitment campaigns and retention incentives for specialist staff. An example of strong practice in Early Years is set out below to further highlight the effectiveness of enhanced

training. A restructure of the service also formed an important part of the Workforce Strategy. The staffing restructure has been implemented to address weaknesses and streamline roles, reduce reliance on agency staff, and align capacity with areas of greatest need.

- **Why chosen:** A skilled and confident workforce is essential to delivering inclusive education and reducing reliance on EHCPs and specialist placements. Workforce gaps were identified as a key barrier to implementing early intervention and mainstream support effectively. Reliance on agency staff or short-term contracts was costly and led to inconsistent support. This approach optimises staffing capacity and enhances accountability and delivers better value for money by reducing duplication and ensuring the right expertise is available where it's most impactful.
- **Why others were discounted:** Generic CPD programmes lacked the specialist focus needed for SEND and failed to embed sustainable practice.
- **Effectiveness:** Recruitment and retention have improved, and schools report increased confidence. The impact of new training and outreach models will be reviewed in 2026–27. Councils like BCP and Devon have reported improved staff confidence and reduced turnover in key SEND roles. However, national shortages in educational psychologists and speech and language therapists continue to limit impact. In BCP, recruitment remains a challenge, especially in specialist outreach roles, affecting the scalability of inclusion strategies. The restructure has increased workforce stability, improved case management, and contributed to measurable savings through reduced agency spend and more efficient deployment of resources.

Example Under Workforce Development - Early Years Training

- **What:** Enhanced training and access to early funding streams have been provided to early years providers to support earlier identification of need and timely intervention. Early Years Area SENCOs play a key role in assessing children's needs and advising on whether support can be delivered through SEN Support or requires an EHC Needs Assessment (EHCNA). A comprehensive training offer—delivered both in-person and via recorded sessions—supports settings with the graduated response and the EHCNA process.
- **Why chosen:** Empowering early years providers with the knowledge and tools to identify and respond to emerging needs reduces delays in support and improves outcomes. Strengthening the quality of EHCNA submissions ensures that statutory processes are used appropriately and efficiently, reducing unnecessary assessments and improving the experience for families.
- **Why others were discounted:** Delaying training or relying solely on centralised decision-making led to inconsistent practice and late identification of need. Generic continuing professional development without a SEND focus failed to equip providers with the specific skills required to navigate the graduated response and statutory processes.
- **Effectiveness:** The quality and appropriateness of submitted EHCNA requests has improved significantly, as evidenced by high conversion rates: 95.68% in 2023–24 and 97.90% in 2024–25. This suggests that Early Years settings are better equipped to identify genuine need and engage with statutory processes effectively.

Area 7: Data and Performance Monitoring

- **What:** Implementation of improved data tracking systems, including referral pattern analysis, tribunal outcomes, and EHCP timeliness dashboards. A forensic approach is being taken to identify high-request schools and target support.
- **Why chosen:** Robust data is essential for strategic planning, resource allocation, and identifying areas of pressure or inconsistency. It also supports accountability and continuous improvement.
- **Why others were discounted:** Manual tracking and anecdotal reporting lacked reliability and failed to inform timely decision-making.
- **Effectiveness:** Data insights have enabled targeted interventions and improved visibility of system pressures. However, further integration with partner data systems is needed to support whole-system planning.

Area 8: Financial Sustainability and DSG Recovery

- **What:** A range of system changes outlined above were captured in the SEND Improvement Plan and DSG Recovery Plan, including inclusion-focused funding reforms, local provision expansion, and tighter EHCP oversight.
- **Why chosen:** The Plan drives a fiscal focus to measures designed to promote inclusion in mainstream schools, reduce the reliance on costly independent provision, and bring high needs expenditure under control. It provides a structured framework for accountability and progress monitoring.
- **Why others were discounted:** Ad hoc savings targets or isolated interventions lacked coherence and failed to address systemic drivers of overspend. Without a formal recovery plan, councils risked losing access to Safety Valve funding and facing escalating deficits.
- **Effectiveness:** The recovery plan was intended to position BCP on a more sustainable trajectory. However, EHCP growth has not slowed, and expenditure has increased, suggesting that implementation challenges and rising complexity of need are undermining progress. The plan has improved financial visibility and stakeholder engagement but requires stronger enforcement, investments in systems and infrastructure and change to deliver its intended outcomes.

8. **Effectiveness of Measures:** Evaluation of BCP's actions compared with outcomes in comparator councils.

What assessment is there of how effective such measures have been and have we further investigated why our outcomes may have been different from other areas?

- 8.1 It is extremely difficult to find clear evidence of direct comparison in terms of outcomes, as can be seen from the 2022 DfE report cited earlier, and the complexity of how any improvements were funded, and what council revenue has been contributed for example. Therefore, comparator councils show varied outcomes depending on local context and implementation fidelity.

9 **Next Steps**

- 9.1 The revised SEND and Alternative Provision Plan was approved by the SEND Improvement Board in September 2025. It was revised with partners including Parent Carer Forums, BCP Council, NHS Dorset Integrated Care Board (ICB), education settings and health providers. Actions remain under the eight headings identified under the previous plan:

1. SEND Leadership, Management and Governance
2. Communication and Co-production
3. Early Identification and Intervention
4. Inclusion
5. Pathway
6. Sufficiency
7. Preparation for Adulthood (PfA)
8. Managing Resources

- 9.2 **Highlights:** By way of an extract, highlights of our work and activities are set out below.

- 9.3 The council is working on a range of measures that will help manage demand, impact the trajectory of high needs funding and help stabilise the system. This includes new investment to support schools in creating inclusive environments that meet the needs of all children and young people. Investment is made up of:

- A SEND Intervention Fund: A fund of just under £600,000 as part of a grant allocation following a successful bid for funding from the DfE to support training and early intervention approaches and a new model of alternative provision to promote inclusion in mainstream schools.
- A SEND Inclusion Fund: Funding allocated to the 2025-26 high needs budget based on the decision of Schools Forum in January 2025 to permit the transfer of surplus school block funding to the high need block. The funding is earmarked to support outreach support,

training and the recruitment of Inclusion advisors. Further details of investment are detailed below as part of key actions included in updated SEND and Inclusion Improvement Plan.

- **Belonging Plan:** We are co-producing a Belonging Plan to support the implementation of the Belonging Strategy. Belonging and the development of the Belonging Plan was a key focus at our Education Conference which took place in the summer and was attended by school leaders. Our BCP Youth Forum are also contributing to the development of this plan and are in the process of establishing a working group.
- **Conference – Belonging and Inclusion:** During the summer, the council hosted a well-attended Belonging and *Inclusion Conference*, bringing together school leaders, practitioners, and national experts to share best practice and strengthen our collective response. We are now working with The Difference—a charity focused on inclusive leadership—and the Ted Wragg Trust to embed inclusive practice and build capacity across our schools.
- **Three-Tier Alternative Provision (AP) Model:** With a total investment of £143,000 from the SEND Intervention Fund, the Council is working with the Difference and in partnership with local schools, to develop a model of alternative provision aligned with plans set out in the government's national SEND and AP Plan. A multi-agency working group is in the process of developing a BCP three-tier AP model, which aligns with plans set out in the government's national SEND and AP Plan. The three-tiers will comprise of: Targeted early support within mainstream school, time-limited intensive placements in an alternative provision settings and longer-term placements to support return to mainstream or a sustainable post-16 destination. The model is designed to offer flexible, graduated support for children at risk of exclusion. This model includes:
 - Tier 1: School-led internal provision
 - Tier 2: Commissioned outreach and short-term placements
 - Tier 3: Full-time specialist placements
- Membership of the AP Working Group includes representatives from parent groups, school leaders, AP leaders and BCP officers and is being co-led by 'The Difference', who recently published [What-Works-Four-Tenets-of-Effective-Internal-Alternative-Provision.pdf](#). The council is also engaging with best practice from other areas of the country, for example the Ted Wragg Trust. The discussions from the AP working group are being used to develop a plan to support delivery of the BCP three-tier AP model. The first draft of this delivery plan will be shared at the November's working group meeting.
- **Inclusion Practice in Schools:** We have funded and filled 50 places for our school leaders on 'The Difference's', a leading national education charity, Inclusion Leadership Course. This professional development initiative is designed to help school leaders improve whole-school inclusion, reduce lost learning and enhance outcomes for children and young people with vulnerabilities.
- **Co-production of best practice guidance in relation to Emotionally Based School Non-Attendance (EBSNA):** The council is developing best practice guidance to support schools in responding to Emotionally Based School Non-Attendance (EBSNA). The guidance sets out clear strategies for identifying and addressing emotional barriers to attendance, with a focus on early support, inclusive practice, and multi-agency involvement. It aims to help schools create safe, nurturing environments where pupils feel a sense of belonging and are supported to re-engage with learning.
- **Development of 'Way Forward' meetings:** *Way Forward* meetings are planned to provide structured support and planning when an Education Health and Care Needs Assessment Request (EHCNAR) is declined or a decision is made not to issue an EHCP. These meetings bring together professionals and families to review the child's needs, explore alternative support options, and agree next steps to ensure continued progress and inclusion within education settings.
- **Updating our SEND and Alternative Provision Sufficiency Strategy:** An updated strategy is in development which will incorporate a dedicated secondary-phase focus to address the

growing demand for secondary specialist pathways and alternative provision. This includes support for the implementation of a three-tiered model of AP—ranging from school-led interventions to specialist placements—ensuring a more flexible and graduated response to need. The strategy is being co-developed with partners and informed by data, lived experience, and national best practice, and will be monitored through the SEND Improvement Board to ensure accountability and impact.

- **Development of Ordinarily Available Toolkit:** The council has secured funding to second a school leader, supported by suitably experienced and qualified professionals, to develop ordinarily available provision and the graduated approach across the area. As part of the SEND Intervention Support Fund (grant funding allocated by the DfE via a successful bid application), £215k is set aside for this purpose. The OAP toolkit will be developed as part of the SEND Intervention Support Fund and will help schools distinguish between pupils who can thrive with consistent universal support and those who require additional interventions. Feedback from the June 2024 launch showed that 83% of attendees believed the resource would positively impact their inclusive practice, with the remaining 17% expressing cautious optimism pending further exploration. The seconded leader with the support of a suitably experienced and qualified professional will work to embed OAP across the conurbation.
- **The Graduated Approach:** This approach provides structured guidance for teachers and school leaders to identify, assess, and record the needs of pupils requiring additional or special educational provision. It supports schools in planning appropriate support based on individual needs, reviewing progress systematically and ensuring that interventions are evidence-based and proportionate. By embedding this approach, schools are better equipped to intervene early and consistently, reducing the likelihood of escalation to exclusion.
- **Inclusion Advisor Pilot:** As part of a pilot, we have recently appointed three Inclusion Advisors to support schools develop inclusive practice. The impact of their work will be monitored and evaluated, and if effective this is a model that could be scaled up.
- **Outreach offer:** The Council has commissioned outreach services in partnership with our local special schools to provide support for mainstream schools including specialist advice and support to meet the needs of complex children and/or cohorts within their school. There is further scope for outreach services from our Alternative Providers, and this is being explored.
- **Education Effectiveness Framework:** Working with our local school partners and learning from best practice in other areas, the council is developing a robust Education Effectiveness Framework aimed at driving continuous improvement across all educational settings. The framework will bring together key strands including inclusive practice, targeted support for schools, and a commitment to equity in outcomes for all learners. By working collaboratively with school and MAT leaders, as well as other partners, the framework will provide clear guidance on responsibilities and ensure every child, regardless of background or need, has access to high-quality teaching and learning.
- **Transition:** BCP Council has established a cross-phase transition working group to improve the experience of children and young people as they move between different stages of education. The group focuses on strengthening continuity of support, sharing key information between settings, and promoting a sense of belonging during transitions—particularly for vulnerable learners who may face additional challenges.
- **Admissions Re-design:** Work to progress the project to re-design SEND Admission arrangements will start in November 2025. This is a major piece of work that will significantly improve our placement decision making which is a necessary foundation for commissioning sufficiency of specialist places. The purpose of the redesign is to create a fair, transparent and complaint admissions system for children and young people with an education and Health Care Plan, ensuring appropriate placement decisions are made through improved processes and robust governance arrangements. The project will be implemented in 4 phases over a 7-month period with implementation in from April 2026 and a period of a further 7 months thereafter for continuous review and refinement.

- **Updated In Year Fair Access Protocol:** An updated In-Year Fair Access Protocol is in development to ensure that children requiring school placements outside the standard admissions cycle are supported through a fair, transparent, and timely process. Developed in partnership with a task and finish group of headteachers, the protocol includes a decision-making matrix that enables consistent, objective evaluations of each case. At the heart of this approach is a commitment to child-focused discussion and decision making ensuring that every placement considers the individual needs, circumstances, and best interests of the child. This collaborative framework strengthens inclusion and equity, balancing the needs of pupils and schools while promoting positive outcomes for all learners. After extensive consultation, the new protocol is expected to go live during November 2025.
- **Transitions:** Establishment of a cross-phase transition working group to improve the experience of transitions between phases of education for our children and young people. The working group will identify best practice locally, regionally and nationally to improve outcomes.
- **Way Forward Meetings:** Development of 'Way Forward' meetings when an Education Health Care Needs Assessment Request (EHCNAR) has been declined or a decision not to issue an EHCP has been made to ensure that settings are supported to meet the needs of the child or young person.
- **Multi-agency Belonging Forums:** Implement best practice from other local authorities who have established multi-agency forums as a way for schools to both support each other to meet the needs of children and young people with vulnerabilities and gain support from partner agencies.
- **Pre EHCP funding:** BCP Council is currently developing its thinking around a pre-EHCP funding model to strengthen early intervention and reduce escalation to statutory Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs). The aim is to provide timely, targeted support for children with emerging or lower-level SEND needs within mainstream settings, without requiring a full EHCP assessment. The model would offer schools access to additional resources such as specialist input, equipment, or short-term interventions based on clear criteria and evidence of need. Co-produced with schools and parent/carer representatives, the model would be designed to promote inclusion, reduce delays in support, and ensure that children's needs are met earlier and more effectively. The next step is to engage our partners to develop the idea and review best practice in other local authority areas.

9.4 The development of a revised High Needs Deficit Recovery Plan has also been instigated. The Plan is in the early stages of drafting and has the following priority areas, all of which tie in closely to the SEND and AP Improvement Plan:

1. Build skill and capacity to meet need in mainstream
2. Provide support at an earlier stage
3. Develop support while waiting
4. Strengthen support at transition points
5. Deliver SEND sufficiency of places and proactive commissioning
6. Provide timely and high quality statutory support
7. Provide strong financial oversight and governance

New governance of this plan is being developed and will be implemented by January 2026.

10. Benchmark Data and Information

- 10.1 **Financial Benchmarking:** Final benchmarking of all Children's Services budgets for 2025-26 (from the section 251 budget returns) has not yet been released by the DfE.
- 10.2 Provisional information only is available which provides information for BCP only compared with all England information (which may change but this is unlikely to be significant given the scale of national totals), so it is not yet possible to review the current year budgets compared with statistical neighbours or other groups and is indicative only.

- 10.3 Information for 2024-25 budgets has been included in Appendix 5, as comparisons with statistical neighbour information is available, but this is limited to gross expenditure as net expenditure (taking account of fees and charges and other income) is not currently accessible.
- 10.4 The total budgets for BCP DSG gross spend in 2024-25 on high needs are high per head of 0 to 19 population at £908 compared with the national average £718 and statistical neighbours median of £736. The related general fund budgets also benchmark high.
- 10.5 It should be noted that in both the current and previous year that actual DSG expenditure on high needs provision for BCP is much higher than the levels budgeted.
- 10.6 A summary of the information available for 2025-26 budgets is set out in table 4 below.

Table 4: Provisional 2025-26 Benchmarking Table Budget Table (Net) £ per pupil

2025-26	DSG		General Fund					
Provisional All England Comparison	School budgets -place funding delegated to state funded schools	Central high needs budget	Educational psychology service	SEN administration, assessment and coordination and monitoring	Independent Advice and Support Services (Parent partnership), guidance and information	SEN transport Pre 16	SEND transport (aged 16-18)	SEN transport (aged 19-25)
Mean	£173	£799	£24	£44	£4	£190	£97	£15
Median	£171	£777	£23	£39	£3	£172	£77	£8
Maximum	£334	£1,298	£55	£171	£48	£433	£510	£108
Minimum	£0	£0	£0	£0	£0	£0	£0	£0
BCP	£203	£1,261	£26	£70	£6	£246	£201	£22

Denominator

E

E

B

B

B

C

F

G

Denominator - pupil divisors used:

B Total pupils aged 3-19 from maintained schools and all academies.

C Total pupils aged 3-15 from maintained schools and all academies.

E Total population aged between 0-19.

F Total population aged between 16-18.

G Total population aged between 19-25.

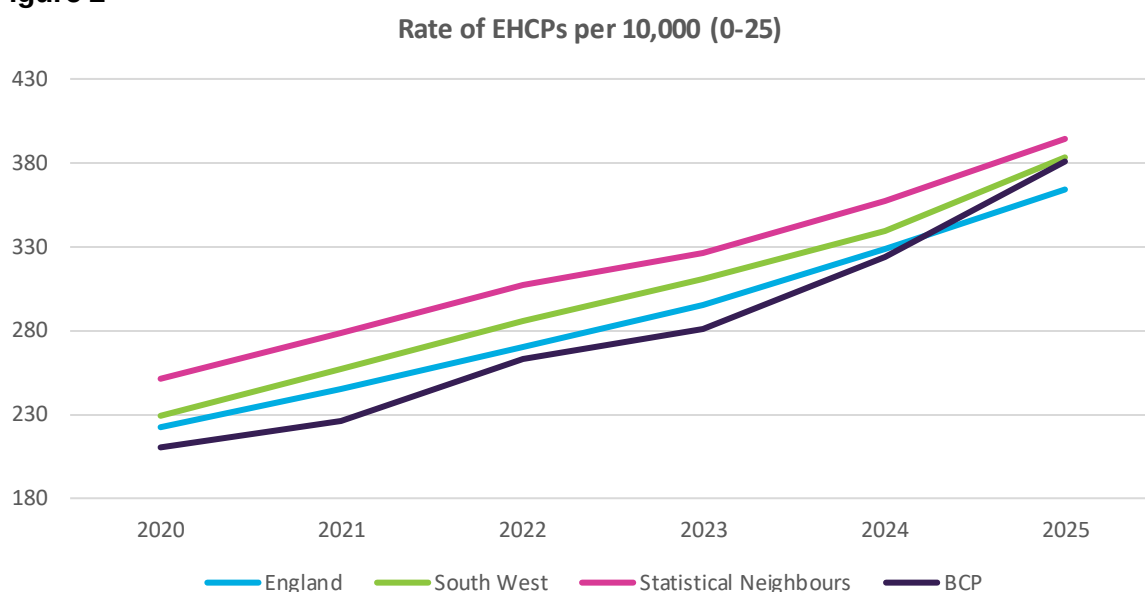
- 10.7 Shaded in the above table are budget areas where BCP expenditure is significantly high compared nationally. Of most concern is that the central high needs budget expenditure is 60% higher than the national average and not far below the national maximum. The main areas of high costs are for non-state special schools and alternative provision (education for children outside of schools, including alternative provision).
- 10.8 Linked to the DSG high needs central spending are also general fund budgets that are similarly high – SEND administration and SEND school transport.

11 Activity Benchmarking

- 11.1 **Latest activity, trend and benchmarking data for EHCPs and permanent exclusions:** This section contains details of the latest trends and benchmarking data to enable comparisons between BCP, our statistical neighbours and the England average. These comparisons help contextual data and provide meaningful comparisons with areas facing similar challenges for the purposes of identifying outliers that may signal issues in provision or policy. The statistical neighbours used for benchmarking in this report are: Bedford, Bexley, Devon, East Sussex, Essex, Kent, Milton Keynes, Norfolk, Southend-on-Sea and West Sussex. Benchmarking data is presented for SEND related performance measures covering growth in the number of EHCPs and timeliness, followed by Inclusion focused performance measures covering exclusions data.

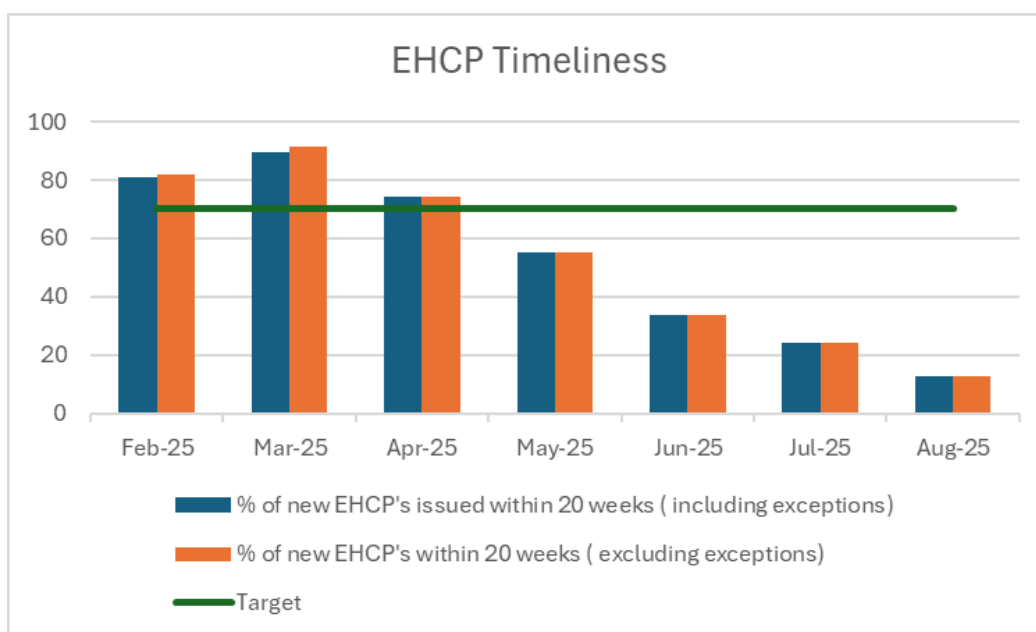
- 11.2 **Rate of EHCPs per 10,000 population (0-25):** The Council's [SEN2] data provides information on both the numbers of children and young people with an EHCP as of January each year. The number of EHCPs is a key cost driver. Each EHCP represents a statutory entitlement to tailored support, often involving specialist provision, therapies, and additional staffing. As the volume of EHCPs increases, more resources are deployed to meet legal obligations, creating an upward pressure on spending.
- 11.3 The data shown in figure 2 below identifies that there has been a significant rise in the rate of Education, Health, and Care Plans (EHCPs). Specifically, BCP's rate of EHCPs (380.8) is now above the England average rate (364.1), whilst remaining below the south west (383.2) and statistical neighbours (394.2) averages. More widely, all comparator groups have seen a consistent rise in the rate of EHCPs over the last 5 years. Key points to note are as follows:
- Bournemouth, Christchurch & Poole (BCP) increased to 380.8, from 210.3 in 2020.
 - England (Eng) increased to 364.1 from 229.2 in 2020.
 - South West (SW) increased to 383.2 from 222.4 in 2020.
 - Statistical Neighbours (SN) increased to 394.2 from 251.2 in 2020.

Figure 2



- 11.4 **EHCP Timeliness:** The Council monitors the timeliness of the number of new EHCPs issued within statutory timescales. The statutory expectation is that all assessments are completed within 20 weeks. Ensuring EHCPs are issued within statutory timeframes helps to manage demand predictably and contain costs. Recent data show that EHCP timeliness is below target and figure 3 below identifies that:
- The % of EHCPs within 20 weeks year to date is 56% this is higher than national at 46.4% and the SW at 25.8%.
 - The % of EHCPs issued exceeding 20 weeks' timeframe was 25.9% in April 2025 to 87.1% in August 2025.
- 11.5 Delays in issuing EHCPs can lead to increased costs in the following ways:
- Families may escalate concerns undermine trust with parents and partners, triggering complaints and legal challenges or tribunal proceedings which are costly to defend and often result in more expensive outcomes.
 - Late plans also disrupt placement planning, forcing reactive decisions that may involve costly interim or out-of-area provisions.
 - timeliness can lead to inefficiencies and duplicated effort across education, health, and social care teams.

Figure 3



- 11.6 **Yes to Assess:** Yes to assess levels refers to the number of assessments that were found to meet statutory thresholds for an assessment. The "yes to assess" rate is a leading indicator of demand within the EHCP system and has direct implications for both operational capacity and financial sustainability. A consistently high rate suggests that a growing proportion of requests for statutory assessment are deemed eligible, which typically leads to an increase in EHCPs and associated costs – see table 5 below. This trend places upward pressure on the high needs budget. Monitoring this rate helps forecast future demand/pressures and informs strategic planning around workforce, placement sufficiency, and early intervention.

Table 5: Number of Assessments that meet statutory thresholds

BCP	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Yes to Assess	322	494	619	628	
%	66.9	83.4	74.0	69.5	

- 11.7 **Permanent Exclusions - The impact of exclusions on high needs expenditure:** School exclusions significantly increase high needs expenditure by:

- driving demand for alternative provision, specialist support, and long-term interventions. The costs of alternative education placements are substantially more expensive than mainstream places and reintegration back into mainstream school is always timely or successful.
- Increase pressures on services for children with special educational needs and associated provision. Many excluded pupils have underlying special educational needs. Their exclusion often leads to Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) and sometimes education other than at school provision (EOTAS) which further strain local authority budgets.
- Exclusions increase demand for mental health support, social care involvement, and behavioural interventions, all funded through high needs budgets.
- Excluded pupils are more likely to experience poor educational outcomes, unemployment, and mental health challenges, which translate into higher public spending over time in welfare, healthcare, and criminal justice.

- 11.8 Details of the rate and number of permanent exclusions are provided in the tables below. Table 6 shows the permanent exclusion rate in BCP compared with regional and national benchmarks. It shows:

- BCP's permanent exclusion rate has fluctuated over the six-year period, starting at 0.12 in 2019/20 (12 permanent exclusions per 10,000 children), dipping to 0.09 in 2020/21, then rising sharply to 0.23 in 2022/23.
- Although the rate dropped to 0.17 in 2023/24, the provisional figure for 2024/25 is 0.20. BCP's exclusion rate has consistently exceeded the Southwest regional average, statistical neighbours, and national figures in every year. For example, in 2022/23, BCP's rate of 0.23

was significantly higher than the national 0.11, the South West's 0.13, and statistical neighbours' 0.10.

Table 6: Permanent Exclusion Rate (per 10,000 children)

	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24	2024/25 (Provisional)
BCP	0.12	0.09	0.14	0.23	0.17	0.20
SW	0.07	0.05	0.09	0.13	0.15	n/a
Stat Neighbour	0.06	0.05	0.07	0.10	0.12	n/a
England	0.06	0.05	0.08	0.11	0.13	n/a

- 11.9 Table 7 shows the number of permanent exclusions. It shows that the number of exclusions increased from 60 in 2019/20 to 119 in 2022/23, before slightly declining to 91 in 2023/24, and then rising again to 105 in the provisional data.

Table 7: Number of Permanent Exclusions

	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24	2024/25 (Provisional)
BCP	60	48	76	105	91	105

*Data for 2024/25 is currently provisional

- 11.10 **Permanent Exclusions by Phase:** The data in tables 8 and 9 reveals a concentration of permanent exclusions in secondary schools across BCP, with figures rising dramatically from 55 in 2020/21 to a peak of 143 in 2022/23. Although there was a reduction to 111 in 2023/24, the overall volume remains high, indicating persistent challenges in managing behaviour and inclusion at the secondary level. Primary exclusions, while lower in number, have steadily increased—from just 3 in 2021/22 to 13 in 2023/24—suggesting emerging concerns in primary settings that may require proactive intervention.
- 11.11 When comparing exclusion rates by phase against national averages, BCP consistently exceeds national benchmarks, particularly in secondary and special schools. In 2022/23, BCP's secondary exclusion rate reached 0.45, more than double the national rate of 0.22. Although this dropped to 0.34 in 2023/24, it still reflects a disproportionately high use of exclusion.

Table 8: Number of Permanent Exclusions by Phase

	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24	2024/25
Primary	8	3	9	13	Not Avail
Secondary	55	81	143	111	Not Avail

2024/25 data is not yet available

Table 9: Rate of Permanent Exclusions by Phase Compared with National

	BCP			National		
	Primary	Secondary	Special	Primary	Secondary	Special
2019/20	0.05	0.20	0.00	0.02	0.13	0.04
2020/21	0.02	0.18	0.10	0.01	0.10	0.03
2021/22	0.01	0.29	0.18	0.02	0.16	0.05
2022/23	0.02	0.45	0.08	0.03	0.22	0.08
2023/24	0.02	0.34	0.00	0.03	0.25	0.08
2024/25*	0.04	0.35	0.30			

*Provisional

- 11.12 **Permanent Exclusions by SEND Status:** Table 10 shows the rate of permanent exclusions by SEND status for all children in BCP compared with national figures. The data reveals a persistent and disproportionate pattern of permanent exclusions among pupils with special educational needs in BCP. Pupils with SEN Support have consistently faced the highest exclusion rates, peaking at 0.85 in 2022/23, more than double the national rate of 0.37 that year.

Although this dropped to 0.52 in 2023/24, the provisional figure for 2024/25 remains elevated at 0.60, indicating ongoing systemic challenges in supporting this group.

- 11.13 Exclusion rates for pupils with an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) in BCP have also risen sharply—from 0.05 in 2020/21 to a provisional 0.56 in 2024/25. This is significantly higher than the national EHCP rate of 0.26 in 2023/24 and suggests that even those with the highest level of statutory support are at increasing risk of exclusion locally. In contrast, pupils without SEND in BCP have consistently lower exclusion rates, aligning more closely with national averages. This widening gap between pupils with SEND and their peers highlights a critical equity issue: children with additional needs are being excluded at rates that far exceed their peers.
- 11.14 The council's data suggests that current systems may not be adequately meeting the needs of SEND pupils, and that exclusion is being used as a response to unmet need rather than as a last resort. Strategic investment in SEND support, staff training, and behaviour pathways will be essential to reversing this trajectory.

Table 10: Permanent Exclusion Rate by SEND Status

	BCP			National		
	EHCP	SEN Support	No SEN	EHCP	SEN Support	No SEN
2019/20	0.18	0.51	0.06	0.10	0.20	0.04
2020/21	0.05	0.34	0.06	0.08	0.15	0.03
2021/22	0.24	0.59	0.07	0.13	0.25	0.05
2022/23	0.27	0.85	0.12	0.20	0.37	0.07
2023/24	0.27	0.52	0.11	0.26	0.41	0.08
2024/25*	0.56	0.60	0.11			

*Provisional

12. SEND Sufficiency

- 12.1 Set out below are details of the specialist places created in recent years. SEND Sufficiency remains a priority in the updated SEND and AP Improvement Plan (references 5.6, 6.1, 6.3 and 6.4). Actions are focussed on increasing the supply of places, improving commissioning arrangements for monitoring the impact through service level agreements and support. In responding to our sufficiency challenges, the Council has delivered an additional 295 places by working with local school leaders to agree to co-locate specialist provisions on mainstream schools. This approach helps to make the best use of the school estate by utilising surplus accommodation in schools thereby sustaining schools experiencing falling rolls. Proposals delivered include resourced provisions, satellite locations and mainstream plus link provision for Year 7 children. Table 11 below sets out the total number delivered plus the number of places in pipeline. Pipeline places are those which are in the commissioning process and are made up of projects that are part of the Round 2 Programme of Expansion.

Table 11: Specialist Place Provision – Number of Places Delivered and in the Pipeline

	22/23	23/24	24/25	25/26	26/27	Total	Total EY/Primary Split	Total Secondary Split
Early Years Assessment Places		12	12			24	24	
Specialist School Places Delivered	46	49	140	60		295	182	113
Places in pipeline				96	128	224	224	
Total Delivered/ In Pipeline	46	61	152	156	128	543	430	113

Note: Numbers filled at the latest census (October 2025 are not available. The council will obtain numbers on roll across each provision in Term 2 and marks the start of a termly data collection from schools to understand the occupancy of our specialist provisions.

- 12.2 In addition to the places in the pipeline, there are opportunities offered by sites that deliver a significant number of places – see table 12 below. The council is still waiting for an update from the DfE on plans for the development of its new special free school previously announced. The LA successfully bid for one of two new special schools. The school will provide 180 specialist places for children and young people with autism aged 3- 18. The school plays an important part in increasing the sufficiency of local specialist places and details are eagerly awaited. The council is also working with the DfE to progress one of the two bids received for the development of specialist places at the former Parkfield School site.

Table 12: Additional Place Opportunities

	Total
New School	180
Parkfield	180
Site locations under review	120
AP	50
Total	410

- 12.3 **Barriers to SEND Sufficiency:** To effectively meet the statutory duty of sufficiency for children with EHCPs, councils must navigate a complex landscape of challenges. While these barriers are significant, there are practical mitigations that can help local authorities respond with agility, creativity, and strategic foresight—ensuring that specialist provision grows in both capacity and quality. Details are contained in **Appendix 4** with particular emphasis on the work necessary to redesign the SEND Admission Arrangements in order to create a strong foundation on which placement decisions can be made ensuring children and young people are able to access the right support at the right time. This work will be vital in enabling a reduction in the number of children and young people who are waiting for a specialist school placement, reducing the volume of consultations being sent to mainstream and special schools and reduce the long-term use of alternative provision placements and the number of children accessing EOTAS as a long term-provision.

Background Papers

The below papers are publicly available or available on request should they be needed.

- Written Statement Of Action 2021
- SEND Statutory Direction 2022
- SEND Statutory Direction 2024
- SEND Improvement Plan 2024 [SEND Improvement plan 2024](#)
-  [High Needs Schools Grant Exp Forecast Cabinet Report 24.docx](#)
- SEND and Alternative Provision Improvement Plan 2025
- Belonging Strategy [Belonging strategy | BCP](#)
- SEND Sufficiency Strategy 2024 [SEND Sufficiency Strategy](#)
- In Year Fair Access Protocol 2025

Appendices

- Appendix 1: Summary of the Key Lines of Enquiry raised by Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee, October 2025
- Appendix 2: Roadmap of BCP's Improvement Journey
- Appendix 3: 8 Areas for Improvement Identified following Inspection
- Appendix 4: Barriers to SEND Sufficiency
- Appendix 5: Budget Benchmarking 2024-25
- Appendix 6: Background information

Key Line of Enquiry: Request from Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee

1. Scrutiny Topic

Benchmarking our High Needs Block spend and strategic direction against similar LA comparators to help understand the wider context and find possible solutions

2. Key Lines Of Enquiry

What are the questions to be answered by this work? Consider the impact that scrutiny can have when selecting questions.

1. Please provide the latest data for the level of accumulated DSG deficit compared with other local authorities.
2. What strategies have they used to try to minimise their overspend and what have been the associated costs?
3. Are there any such authorities not running a deficit at all? How have they avoided this?
4. What work have our officers done with these authorities to share ideas, strategies and plans to try to bring down our deficit?
5. What assessment is there of how effective such measures have been and have we further investigated why our outcomes may have been different from other areas?
6. What funding streams have other LAs accessed to support their SEND function? DBV and Safety Valve
7. Have we sought input from anywhere else to advise on possible solutions, such as think tanks, LGA? Since April 2019:

3. Data and information requests

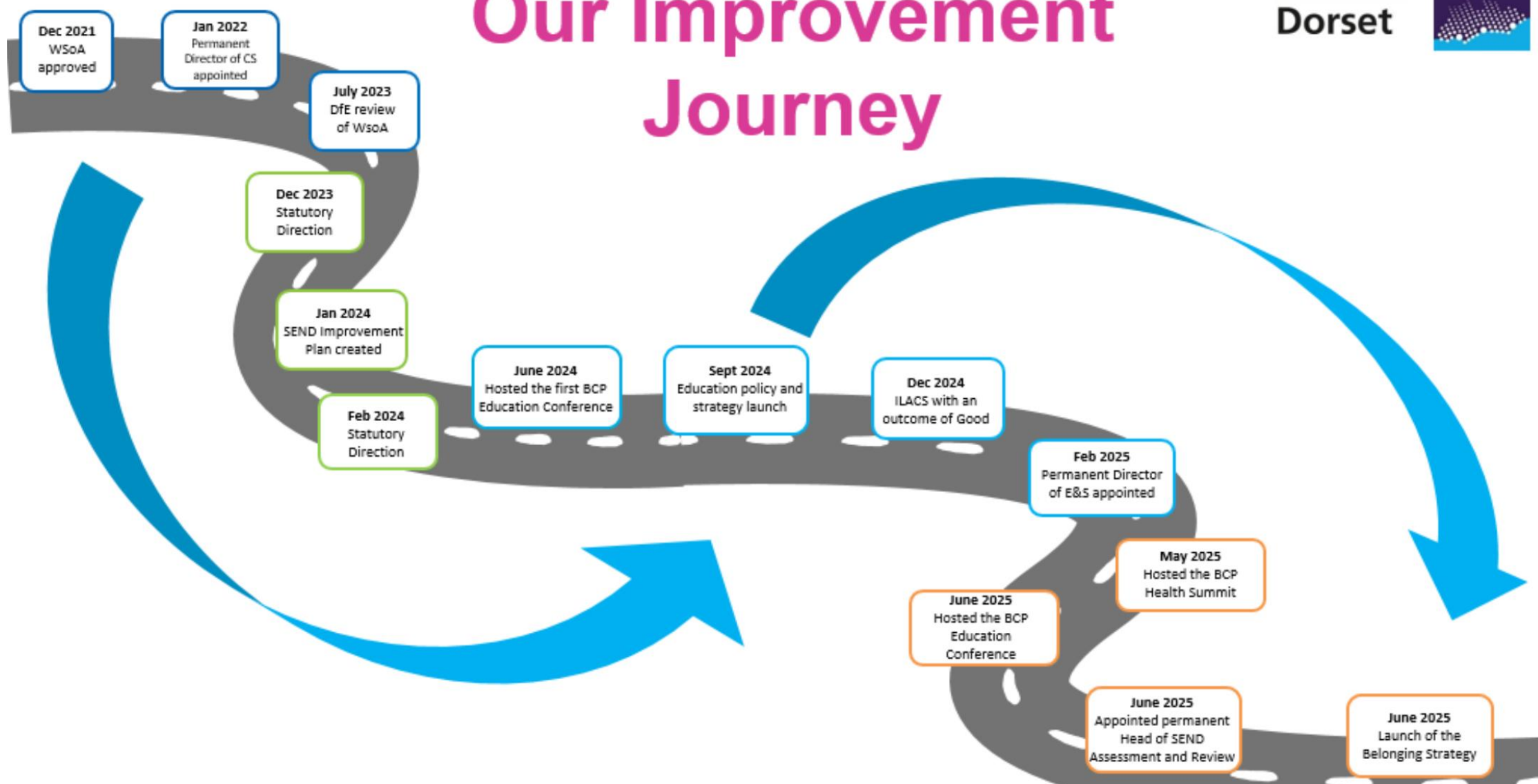
Benchmarking of all Children's Services budgets for 2025-26 (from the section 251 budget returns when available from the DfE).

1. Latest activity, trend and benchmarking data for EHCPs and permanent exclusions
2. Summary of high needs places created in recent years and numbers filled at the latest census (October 2025). What have been the barriers to creating more places?
3. Information on the measures we have taken and why we chose those measures over others that were discounted.
4. Assessment of the effectiveness of measures taken and in comparator Councils.

4. Additional information

Given the impact on the wider council financial position, the committee can bring value by providing test and challenge to the area of High Needs Block spending, to gain assurances that all possible actions are being taken to address this challenge. To effectively scrutinise the spend within Children's Services, the committee first seeks to understand why we are running such a high deficit within our High Needs Block when other, similar local authorities are not. A deep dive benchmarking exercise will help contextualise our problems and help find solutions.

Our Improvement Journey



1. Leadership, Management and Governance

Strengthen strategic leadership and accountability across SEND services.

2. Communication and Coproduction

Improve transparency and co-production with families, schools, and partners.

3. Early Identification and Intervention

Ensure timely identification of needs and access to early support.

4. Inclusion

Embed inclusive practices across all education settings.

5. Pathway

Develop clear, consistent pathways for children and young people with SEND.

6. Sufficiency

Increase local provision to meet demand and reduce reliance on out-of-area placements.

7. Preparation for Adulthood

Support independence, employment, and life skills for young people.

8. Managing Resources

Deliver financial sustainability and value for money while improving outcomes.

Barriers to SEND Sufficiency

- **Rising Demand for EHCPs:** The number of children and young people with Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) has grown rapidly in recent years, outpacing the development of new specialist places. This demand is driven by better identification of needs, increased parental expectations, and a lack of confidence in mainstream inclusion. *Mitigations:* Develop long-term sufficiency strategies with robust forecasting, ensure strategies are in place that focus on early intervention and strengthen mainstream inclusion to reduce pressure on specialist settings and ensure regulatory performance is strong.
- **Complexity of Needs:** Children with EHCPs often have highly individualised and complex needs, requiring bespoke environments and multidisciplinary support. This makes it harder to scale provision quickly or apply a one-size-fits-all approach. *Mitigations:* Invest in workforce development
- **Limited Capital and Revenue Funding:** Building or expanding specialist settings requires significant investment. While the DfE provides High Needs Provision Capital Allocations, these often fall short of covering the scale of need. Even when capital is available, councils must fund ongoing staffing and operational costs, which are rising due to inflation and increased complexity of needs. *Mitigations:* Benchmark funding models and adjust to ensure funding models are sustainable. Maximize opportunities for investment by bidding for new schools and plan for the co-location of specialist provision on mainstream school sites.
- **Planning and Site Availability:** Finding suitable land or buildings for new specialist provision can be difficult, especially in urban or high-demand areas. Planning regulations, site constraints, and community opposition can delay or block development. *Mitigations:* Repurpose council-owned assets that could be converted into specialist provision.
- **Specialist Workforce Shortages:** Recruiting and retaining qualified staff—especially for speech and language therapy, educational psychology, and autism support—is a persistent challenge. Workforce gaps delay the opening of new provision and limit the quality of support available. *Mitigations:* Develop a workforce recruitment and retention strategy and invest in workforce development and cross-sector collaboration.
- **Cross-Agency Coordination:** Effective provision depends on collaboration between education, health, and social care. Misalignment between these services can delay placements or limit capacity. Some councils struggle with fragmented commissioning processes or inconsistent support from health partners. *Mitigations:* Joint commissioning frameworks with health and social care to align funding and priorities. Use integrated digital systems to share data and track outcomes across services. Appoint dedicated SEND coordinators or case managers to oversee complex placements and ensure continuity.
- **Legal and Statutory Pressures:** Councils are under an *absolute duty* to secure the provision in an EHCP, as reaffirmed by recent High Court rulings. This legal obligation can lead to costly out-of-area placements when local provision is unavailable, further straining budgets and reducing flexibility to invest locally. *Mitigations:* Maintain a dynamic sufficiency strategy that is regularly reviewed and updated with stakeholder input. Develop robust local placement panels with clear criteria and transparent decision-making. Engage families early and often, building trust and reducing the likelihood of tribunal escalation.
- **Systems and Process - Admissions Re-Design:** Work to progress the project to re-design SEND Admission arrangements will start in November 2025. This is a major piece of work that will significantly improve our placement decision making which is a necessary foundation for commissioning sufficiency of specialist places. The purpose of the redesign is to create a fair, transparent and complaint admissions system for children and young people with an education and Health Care Plan, ensuring appropriate placement decisions are made through improved processes and robust governance arrangements. The project will be implemented in 4 phases over a 7-month period with implementation in from April 2026 and a period of a further 7 months thereafter for continuous review and refinement.

Appendix 5

2024-25 Budget LA Table (Gross) £ per capita - Extract of High Needs Budgets National Average and Statistical Neighbours Pupil divisor is 0-19 population for all budgets	High needs place funding (note 1)	Top-up funding – maintained schools (note 2)	Top-up funding – academies, free schools and colleges (note 2)	Top-up and other funding – non- maintained and independent providers (note 3)	Additional high needs targeted funding for mainstream schools and academies	SEN support services (note 4)	Hospital education services	Other alternative provision services (note 5)	Support for inclusion (note 6)	Special schools and PRUs in financial difficulty	PF/ BSF costs at special schools, AP/ PRUs and Post 16 institutions only	Direct payments (SEN and disability)	Therapies and other health related services	HN TOTAL (note 7)
ENGLAND - Average (mean)	£166	£211	£212	£192	£6	£43	£4	£21	£19	£0	£1	£3	£6	£718
ENGLAND - Average (median)	£160	£195	£215	£178	£0	£39	£2	£17	£12	£0	£0	£0	£1	£679
ENGLAND - Maximum	£339	£693	£480	£623	£133	£143	£31	£94	£159	£2	£36	£24	£74	£1,275
ENGLAND - Minimum	£45	£1	£9	£20	£0	£0	£0	£0	£0	£0	£0	£0	£0	£415
Statistical Neighbours Average (median)	£157	£120	£244	£205	£1	£54	£0	£23	£16	£0	£0	£3	£3	£736
Statistical Neighbours Maximum	£207	£335	£475	£521	£19	£143	£14	£66	£151	£1	£0	£9	£11	£932
Statistical Neighbours Minimum	£123	£22	£69	£70	£0	£24	£0	£0	£4	£0	£0	£0	£0	£548
BCP	£161	£120	£395	£281	£4	£36	£0	£66	£4	£0	£0	£0	£2	£908
Bedford Borough	£123	£107	£249	£90	£19	£73	£14	£22	£16	£0	£0	£0	£8	£599
Southend-on-Sea	£206	£22	£383	£70	£0	£39	£2	£23	£151	£0	£0	£8	£0	£700
Kent	£207	£335	£136	£261	£5	£24	£0	£30	£31	£0	£0	£4	£10	£836
Devon	£137	£186	£192	£322	£7	£43	£5	£33	£10	£0	£0	£9	£3	£811
Milton Keynes	£176	£308	£197	£113	£5	£30	£1	£0	£15	£0	£0	£0	£0	£668
Bexley	£193	£64	£475	£113	£1	£57	£0	£10	£9	£0	£0	£3	£6	£736
West Sussex	£142	£223	£69	£521	£0	£54	£1	£45	£7	£1	£0	£0	£11	£932
Norfolk	£157	£202	£274	£256	£0	£62	£0	£21	£19	£0	£0	£3	£3	£841
East Sussex	£148	£70	£244	£205	£0	£143	£0	£5	£51	£0	£0	£6	£0	£725
Essex	£137	£87	£213	£126	£0	£55	£0	£29	£24	£0	£0	£3	£10	£548

Analysis Summary - overall BCP spend is high per head of 0 to 19 population at £908 compared with the national average £718 and statistical neighbours median of £736.

- Place funding delegated to mainstream schools (bases) and special schools and AP for commissioned places is close to the average for both groups
 - Top up funding to place funding is high compared with both groups (columns taken together as the number of academies in the area will impact on each column)
- The national average is £423 per head of population and BCP £515. The data for statistical neighbours is the median (mid-point) so numbers cannot be summed.
- BCP funding for INMSS is above average national and statistical neighbours
 - BCP SEND support services are below average for both groups
 - Alternative provision is a significant high spend area at 3 times the national average and the highest for statistical neighbours. Note - national and neighbours average being similar.
 - BCP support for inclusion looks low
 - BCP overall spend is high with only West Sussex in the statistical neighbour group above BCP.

Appendix 5

2024-25 Budget LA Table (Gross) £ per capita (Extract for General Fund Budgets Related to SEND) (population used - see key)	Educational psychology service (B)	SEN administration, assessment and coordination and monitoring (B)	Independent Advice and Support Services (Parent partnership), guidance and information (B)	Home to school transport (pre-16): SEN transport expenditure (C)	Home to post-16 provision: SEN/ LLDD transport expenditure (aged 16-18) (F)	Home to post-16 provision: SEN/ LLDD transport expenditure (aged 19-25) (G)
National Average and Statistical Neighbours	£25	£39	£4	£166	£85	£13
ENGLAND - Average (median)	£23	£36	£3	£153	£61	£8
ENGLAND - Maximum	£80	£122	£27	£447	£467	£87
ENGLAND - Minimum	£0	£0	£0	£26	£0	£0
Statistical Neighbours Average (median)	£20	£43	£3	£206	£48	£15
Statistical Neighbours Maximum	£29	£101	£7	£362	£343	£38
Statistical Neighbours Minimum	£12	£11	£1	£91	£6	£0
BCP	£29	£69	£7	£206	£48	£8
Bedford Borough	£14	£44	£4	£138	£167	£21
Southend-on-Sea	£17	£39	£4	£91	£6	£0
Kent	£21	£43	£1	£314	£60	£38
Devon	£29	£47	£5	£302	£81	£12
Milton Keynes	£13	£11	£3	£102	£83	£25
Bexley	£18	£30	£2	£179	£43	£22
West Sussex	£24	£25	£2	£225	£16	£0
Norfolk	£20	£101	£2	£362	£343	£0
East Sussex	£12	£75	£5	£255	£42	£21
Essex	£20	£23	£2	£139	£48	£15

Key - Pupil Divisors Used (extract does not use all populations)

- B Total pupils aged 3-19 from maintained schools and all academies.
- C Total pupils aged 3-15 from maintained schools and all academies.
- E Total population aged between 0-19.
- F Total population aged between 16-18.
- G Total population aged between 19-25.

Analysis - SEND related general fund budgets are high compared nationally and with statistical neighbours

Benchmarking for school transport is less reliable as rural counties would be expected to have greater travel distances and higher costs for example

Only the gross budget table is currently available, and parental income will reduce the expenditure shown for transport.