

## SCHOOLS FORUM



Subject	<b>DSG Settlement and Draft Budget for 2026-27</b>
Meeting Date	19 January 2026
Status	Public Report
Executive Summary	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The DSG Settlement for 2026-27 was received on 17 December 2025. It included: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Indicative allocations for the early years block, with the 18% increase of £9.7m to £62.2m reflecting increased hourly funding rates for each of the free entitlements and full year funding for the expansion from September 2025 of the free childcare entitlement for working parents.</li> <li>b. Final allocations for the school's block based on the October 2025 schools census. The 1% funding increase of £2.3m to £290m through the schools NFF reflects higher factor unit values (average of 2%) but a reduction in pupil numbers of 1.4%. The growth fund has more than halved to being less than £1m.</li> <li>c. Final allocations for the on-going functions within the central school services block (CSSB) of £1.9m (1% increase) with indicative funding towards unavoidable historic commitments.</li> <li>d. Indicative allocations for the high needs block with the NFF suspended for 2026-27 with no increase in funding.</li> </ol> </li> <li>2. A draft DSG budget for 2026-27 is provided in the Appendix to provide context for decisions on the meeting agenda. The funding gap for high needs pupils is projected to be £95.7m.</li> <li>3. The report also includes budget monitoring information for quarter three 2025-26. This indicates that the accumulated DSG deficit is projected at £183.6m for March 2026, rising to £279.3m by March 2027.</li> </ol>
Recommendations	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <b>To note the contents of the report.</b></li> <li>2. <b>To agree the budgets within the central schools services block (CSSB) as detailed in paragraph 27.</b></li> </ol>
Reasons for Recommendations	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The Schools Forum is to be notified of the DSG settlement and consulted on the budget annually.</li> <li>2. Schools Forum is to agree the budgets within the CSSB and has a consultation role for the high needs block.</li> <li>3. The schools block is considered in a separate paper on the meeting agenda. The early years block will be considered at the February 2026 meeting.</li> </ol>

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Wards	Council-wide
Classification	For information and decision

## 2026-27 DSG Settlement in December 2025

1. The December Settlement information for 2026-27 compared with the current year is included in Table 1 below:

**Table 1 – DSG December Settlement 2026-27**

Funding Block	Forecast	Announced	Annual Change	%
	2025-26	2026-27		
	£000's	£000's	£000's	
<b>Early Years</b>				
Aged under 2	15,848	18,664	2,816	18%
Aged 2	13,268	18,224	4,956	37%
Aged 3&4	22,652	24,456	1,804	8%
Pupil Premium	502	616	114	23%
Disability Access Fund (DAF)	229	245	16	7%
<b>Total Early Years (DfE estimated)</b>	<b>52,499</b>	<b>62,205</b>	<b>9,706</b>	<b>18%</b>
<b>Schools Block</b>				
Primary	135,585	138,883		
Secondary	145,124	151,134		
Supplementary pay grants	7,001	<i>subsumed above</i>		
<b>NFF available for local formula</b>	<b>287,710</b>	<b>290,017</b>	<b>2,307</b>	<b>1%</b>
Premises (includes business rates)	1,930	1,884	-46	-2%
Growth	2,133	922	-1,211	-57%
<b>Total Schools (final)</b>	<b>291,773</b>	<b>292,823</b>	<b>1,050</b>	<b>0%</b>
<b>Central School Services</b>				
NFF	1,885	1,898	13	1%
Commitments*	289	289	0	0%
<b>Total Central School Services</b>	<b>2,174</b>	<b>2,187</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>1%</b>
<b>High Needs (gross**)</b>				
NFF 2025/26 in both years	63,938	63,938	0	0%
Supplementary pay grants	4,431	4,431	0	0%
<b>Total High Needs</b>	<b>68,369</b>	<b>68,369</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0%</b>
<b>Total Funding</b>	<b>414,815</b>	<b>425,584</b>	<b>10,769</b>	<b>3%</b>

2. The early years forecast for 2025-26 and estimate for 2026-27 are both as presented by the DfE in the December announcements. This provides a consistent comparison between years in the data used. The council's own estimate for 2025-26 funding is slightly lower.
3. The above table assumes that the application to the DfE to fully restore commitment funding to previous levels within the CSSB will be successful.

### Early Years Block

4. The published information includes indicative allocations only and these will be updated based on future termly data returns for all ages.
5. The early years block funds the local early years single funding formula (EYSFF) as well as a range of council services supporting the early years free entitlements.
6. The funding growth includes the full financial year costs of the expansion of the free entitlements for working parents from September 2025, increase in funding rates and an allocation within the 3&4 funding level to reflect additional costs of moving to termly census data.
7. The hourly funding rate increases are as follows:
  - a. aged under 2 (working parents) - 6.3%
  - b. aged 2 - 6.5% - both entitlements (working parents, children requiring extra support)
  - c. aged 3&4 - 9% with a further 3% added to reflect that the move to termly census funding is more costly for local authorities.
8. The pass-through rate of funding to providers must be 97% of funding for each of the four different entitlements separately. Included in the passthrough calculation is the local EYSFF funding and special education needs inclusion fund (SENIF) allocations to providers as well a contingency for EYSFF allocations being higher than expected.

### Schools Block

9. School Block allocations are final for 2026-27. The primary and secondary units of funding have been updated to reflect the new unit values for factors in 2026-27 and data from the October 2024 school census with the per pupil result applied to pupil numbers at October 2025. Growth fund allocations have been determined according to the national approach.
10. Table 2 below provides a summary of pupil numbers and DSG funding allocations for each phase compared with the current year.

**Table 2: Mainstream Schools Final NFF 2026-27**

	December 2024 Settlement (including rolled in grants)			December 2025 Settlement			Change
	Pupil Numbers	Average Unit Value £	Funding £000's	Pupil Numbers	Unit Value £	Funding £000's	Funding £000's
Primary	26,296			25,751	3,393.29		
Secondary	20,987.5			20,888	7,325.45		
<b>Total NFF</b>	<b>47,283.5</b>	<b>£6,085</b>	<b>287,710</b>	<b>46,639</b>	<b>£6,218</b>	<b>290,017</b>	<b>2,307</b>

11. Compared with the October 2024 census, the primary roll reduced by 545 pupils and the secondary roll reduced by 100 pupils, a 1.4% reduction in pupils overall.

12. The October 2025 school census data used to calculate individual school budgets for 2026-27 arrived also in December. This data is not reflected in the NFF primary and secondary units of funding until 2027-28. The pupil characteristics included in the NFF have continued to increase each year since covid with unused growth funding needed to top up the NFF allocations to be affordable in full.
13. The large reduction in the growth fund for 2026-27 means that the NFF is no longer affordable in full for 2026-27, with options for the local funding formula evaluated and considered further in a separate paper on the agenda.
14. It is expected that as in previous years additional school grants will be provided by the DfE once the annual pay awards have been agreed.

### **Central School Services Block (CSSB)**

15. The funding rate per pupil for the CSSB for on-going functions is £40.71 (previously £39.86). This represents an increase of 2.1% in unit costs but the 1.4% reduction in pupils reduces the overall funding growth to 0.7%.
16. The funding for historic commitments has not yet been restored to previous levels in government funding tables (the standard 20% reduction being applied), but it is assumed in table 1 that the submission to the DfE of evidence of on-going costs will be successful as in previous years.

### **High Needs Block**

17. Indicative high needs block allocations were announced in December 2025. The 2025-26 separate specialist provider pay grants have been subsumed into the 2026-27 funding.
18. The DfE high needs NFF has been suspended for 2026-27 and allocations remain at the 2025-26 level. It has also been confirmed that this means there is to be no extra funding for the education provided by the Quay School for cross-border provision in the new NHS unit.
19. The core school budget grant (CSBG) and additional national insurance allocations have been subsumed into the high needs block for specialist providers and mainstream school bases. It covers the continuation of pay grants received in 2025-26. Local authorities must allocate this funding to:
  - a. their maintained special schools and PRUs
  - b. special academies and AP academies in their local area
  - c. special and AP free schools in their area
  - d. hospital schools and the equivalent academies in their area
  - e. maintained mainstream schools and mainstream academies with SEN units and resourced provision.
20. There is no recoupment by the DfE for academies and free schools in respect of the pay grant allocations, so local authorities must fund academies and free schools directly. The allocation is to be equivalent to the same amount of funding per place as 2025-26, adjusting the CSBG amount to reflect the 2025 pay award element for 12 months. The combined rate for a mainstream base has been set by the DfE at £286 per place for the national insurance grant and for the annualised SBSG, at £253 per place. The combined rate is therefore £539 per place for mainstream bases.
21. Funding to the local authority will be updated in summer 2026 based on updated place numbers.
22. The DSG deduction for the cross-border flow of pupils based on the January 2026 census (currently included at £2.5m from January 2025) will also be updated in summer 2026.

23. The methodology for allocating high needs funding is to be reviewed for the future so that it supports the SEND reforms be set of in early 2026.
24. Specialist providers receive place funding (amount set by DfE) plus top up funding (set by local councils according to pupil needs through band funding). The MFG applies to top up funding and for 2026-27 has been set by the regulations at 0% uplift from the 2025-26 funding level. Subsumed grants are not included in the MFG calculation so will be paid in addition. The DfE need to agree any disapplication of the regulations and the individual school must be consulted. The local special school banding system remains under review with consultation expected during 2026-27.

### **Draft DSG Budget 2026-27**

25. The Appendix includes a draft budget for 2026-27 with the budget and year end forecast for 2025-26 shown for comparison. The high needs DSG funding shortfall for 2026-27 is projected at £95.7m with other funding blocks budgeted to be balanced.
26. The assumptions in the draft budget for 2026-27 include:
- The mainstream school formula is shown as the amount affordable within school block funding.
  - A growth fund for in year pupil growth is no longer needed.
  - High needs block in-year adjustments have not been forecast. The import/export adjustment in summer 2026 based on January 2026 census data could reduce funding, the scale of which is not known.
  - The early years central retentions of 3% allocated to central services supporting the free entitlement and will be considered for agreement at the February 2026 meeting.
  - Central schools services expenditure for on-going functions is set at the level of funding.
  - Central schools services funding for historic commitments is to be restored to the previous level when the DSG is updated in March 2026.
27. The proposed budgets in the CSSB for agreement of Schools Forum are set out in Table 3 below:

**Table 3: Proposed CSSB Expenditure 2026-27**

<b>Expenditure Budgets</b>	<b>2025-26 £000's</b>	<b>Change £000's</b>	<b>2026-27 £000's</b>
School admissions and access arrangements	422	96	518
Licenses purchased by DfE	360	(26)	334
Servicing Schools Forum	8	0	8
Ex ESG services all schools:			
- Statutory and Regulatory Duties	482	(20)	462
- Education Welfare	450	(20)	430
- Asset Management	162	(16)	146
Commitments – premature retirements (ex DCC)	16	0	16
Commitments – ASD Base / other	274	(1)	273
<b>Total Expenditure</b>	<b>2,174</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>2,187</b>

28. The school admissions budget supports the team managing the co-ordinated school admission arrangements across all schools.

29. The cost of school licenses is paid centrally by the DfE and recharged to councils through the deduction of DSG funding. Charges for 2026-27 have not yet been notified. The estimate included in the above table reflects the cost charged by the DfE for the current year, the 1.4% reduction in pupil numbers at the October 2025 census and an estimate for inflation.
30. The allocations to ex ESG services reflect the apportionment of the balance of funding for on-going functions. Total expenditure on these services is greater with the balance charged to the council's general fund.
31. Funding for historic commitments is a separate allocation within the CSSB, with evidence of the on-going cost provided annually to the DfE to restore funding to previous levels.

### **DSG Budget Monitoring 2025-26 at Quarter Three**

32. The budgeted in-year deficit is predicted to grow to £70.3m due to high needs expenditure with some offset from the schools and early years blocks. The detail is set out in Appendix 1.
33. High needs expenditure is ahead of budget due to the on-going growth in the number and cost of EHCPs and rate of permanent exclusions. An overspend of £15.5m on expenditure is forecast alongside the reduction in high needs funding of £0.5m. This is in addition to the budgeted gap of £57.5m with the total high needs gap, therefore, £73.5m. There are no signs yet that the trajectory for the high needs expenditure is changing.
34. Information was requested at the November meeting of the average cost of SEND placements by age, type of need, and provider category. Based on the current 2025-26 forecast, a summary of average costs by primary need is set out in Table 4 below. This includes all settings, including mainstream schools and colleges and is the top up funding only. Place funding for state funded specialist providers is on top of these costs and mainstream providers will be adding funding from their delegated budgets. A further breakdown of top up funding by provider type is set out in Appendix 2.

**Table 4: Average costs per full time equivalent (FTE) by primary need across age ranges.**

<b>Primary Need / Average Cost</b>	<b>under 5 £</b>	<b>5-11 £</b>	<b>11-16 £</b>	<b>16-19 £</b>	<b>Post-19 £</b>
Not Recorded	28,209	6,391	26,157	8,450	21,230
Social Emotional and Mental Health	10,345	17,008	25,389	21,051	21,705
Visual Impairment	16,117	26,637	10,004	9,722	34,711
Specific Learning Difficulty	18,516	8,693	16,015	18,879	18,788
Speech Language Communication Needs	10,395	17,594	18,538	20,789	18,554
Autism Spectrum Disorder	14,858	25,427	30,210	25,988	34,262
Physical Disability	27,201	22,904	28,406	33,153	47,836
Profound and Multiple Learning Difficulty	6,000	28,436	56,570	51,937	54,113
Other	0	24,268	26,941	9,973	20,485
Moderate Learning Difficulty	13,408	15,400	19,220	17,259	26,964
Downs Syndrome	12,259	12,097	46,737	7,697	0
Hearing Impairment	14,387	22,859	19,174	8,378	11,871
Severe Learning Difficulty	13,742	21,409	32,047	19,434	45,648
Multi-Sensory Impairment	6,143	34,343	31,995	26,269	0

35. The average costs of placements for most categories of need increase with age. The highest costs are for placements for children with profound and multiple learning

difficulties and those with physical disabilities. The above are averages only and the range of costs is significant across providers as children can have multiple needs.

36. The early years block overall is projected with a surplus of £1.1m. The main variance is for the lower than budgeted allocations for the SENIF for the free entitlement for children aged under two and the contingency not being used. The estimated funding differs from the DfE estimate in table 1 as local data has been used. Final funding levels and hours of provision are difficult to predict, with funding to be finalised in summer 2026.
37. The school block fund set aside for in-year explicit basic need pupil growth is forecast not to be used.

### Financial Implications - DSG cumulative deficit

38. There is currently a projected DSG deficit at the end of March 2026 of £183.6m, rising to £279.3m at March 2027 with the addition of the projected £95.7m funding shortfall for high needs in 2026-27. This is set out in Tabel 5 below:

**Table 5 – Summary position for the DSG April 2025 to March 2027**

Dedicated Schools Grant	£m
<b>Accumulated deficit 1 April 2025</b>	<b>113.3</b>
Prior year additional funding – early years	(1.9)
Budgeted high needs funding shortfall 2025-26	57.5
High needs funding reduction 2025-26	0.5
High needs forecast overspends 2025-26	15.5
Other blocks	(1.3)
<b>Projected accumulated deficit 31 March 2026</b>	<b>183.6</b>
Projected high needs funding gap 2026/27	95.7
<b>Projected accumulated deficit 31 March 2027</b>	<b>279.3</b>

39. The government's November 2025 Budget Statement:
  - Confirmed that the DSG statutory Override, which keeps the accumulated deficit out of the general fund, will stay in place until the end of the March 2028.
  - Set out that from 2028/29, central government support to councils for SEND will be at a level that means further deficits need not accrue. Funding for that in 2028/29 will be absorbed within the overall government budget, not the core schools budget.
  - Noted that budgets from 2028/29 onwards will be confirmed in the 2027 Spending Review
  - Indicated that further detail on support for historic and accruing deficits, up to 2028/29, and conditions for accessing such support, will be set out in the Local Government Finance Settlement in December 2025.
  - Indicated that further detail on SEND policy changes will be set out in the Schools White Paper, expected in early 2026.
40. A joint letter from the DfE and NHS England on 15 December 2025 noted that support provided to local authorities will be linked to assurance that they are taking steps to make a new system a reality, in conjunction with government confirming the detail of SEND reform. Best practice and case studies from previous programmes are being disseminated, with a focus on efficient spending, such as from Safety Valve and Delivering Better Value, and providing all local authorities with SEND and financial advisers to help consider how these learnings can be applied. These advisers will also

play a key role in supporting the preparations for reform, reviewing data, embedding best practice and driving progress toward the delivery of high-quality, inclusive services for children and young people.

41. Provided with the above letter was an early version of a maturity assessment tool for local area partnerships to assess the maturity of current practice, and plan the changes needed to strengthen the local system. This will be an integral part of the local SEND reform plan.
42. The provisional Local Government Finance Settlement received on 17 December 2025 did not set out how local authorities with large deficits are to be supported, as indicated in the November Budget Statement, but that further information will be provided later in the process.
43. The progress of the DSG deficit over 2027-28, the remaining year before the government take on responsibility for SEND expenditure, will be assessed once the government has released further details of the support available over the next two years. Without government support for the current deficit and the predicted funding gap over 2026/27 and 2027-28, the accumulated deficit will be in the region of £380m by March 2028. This is higher than projected last year as the growth in expenditure has not yet shown any indication of slowing down with no funding increase expected in future.

### **Legal Implications**

44. Schools Forum must be advised of the DSG Settlement for 2026-27 and be presented with a draft budget to consider as part of the annual consultation process.
45. Schools Forum also has a range of decision-making powers with those for the CSSB included in this report.

### **Summary of human resources/sustainability/public health implications**

46. None

### **Summary of equality implications**

47. An equalities impact assessment has not been undertaken as the operation of the DSG and expenditure to be met from each block is prescribed by the DfE. The council is running a large DSG deficit to support pupils with additional needs.

### **Summary of risk assessment**

48. The main risk within the DSG relates is the high needs funding gap for which there is currently no government solution.
49. There continues to be a risk that projected costs will rise further with activities to reduce budget demand not delivering outcomes as required.

### **Background Papers**

50. DSG allocations and conditions of grant for 2026-27 published on 17 December:  
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/dedicated-schools-grant-dsg-2026-to-2027>
51. School funding operational guide for 2026-2027  
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/pre-16-schools-funding-local-authority-guidance-for-2026-to-2027>
52. High Needs Guidance 2026-27  
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/high-needs-funding-arrangements-2026-to-2027/high-needs-funding-2026-to-2027-operational-guide>



## Appendix 1

DSG Budget	2025-26 Monitoring			2026-27 Draft Budget				
	Budget	Forecast	Variance	E/Years	Schools	CSSB	High Needs	Total
	£000's	£000's	£000's	£000's	£000's	£000's	£000's	£000's
Aged under 2 NFF	-16,389	-15,335	1,054	-18,664				-18,664
Aged 2 NFF	-14,021	-13,784	238	-18,224				-18,224
Aged 3&4 NFF	-22,525	-22,652	-127	-24,456				-24,456
Pupil Premium	-384	-502	-118	-616				-616
Disability Access Fund	-229	-229	0	-246				-246
DSG Prior Year	0	-1,932	-1,932					0
School Block NFF	-280,709	-280,709	0		-290,017			-290,017
School Block Premises	-1,930	-1,930	0		-1,885			-1,885
Grow th Fund NFF	-2,133	-2,133	0		-922			-922
High Needs Block	-64,472	-63,938	534				-68,369	-68,369
Central School Services	-2,174	-2,174	0			-2,187		-2,187
<b>Total DSG Funding</b>	<b>-404,967</b>	<b>-405,318</b>	<b>-351</b>	<b>-62,205</b>	<b>-292,823</b>	<b>-2,187</b>	<b>-68,369</b>	<b>-425,583</b>
Providers – aged under 2	14,959	13,924	-1,034	17,431				17,431
Providers - aged 2	13,166	13,118	-48	17,149				17,149
Providers – aged 3 and 4	20,867	20,985	118	22,135				22,135
Providers SENIF	2,257	1,307	-950	1,559				1,559
Early Years Pupil Premium	384	502	118	616				616
Disability Access Fund	229	229	0	246				246
Contingency	352	0	-352	1,229				1,229
Early Years LA duties	1,335	1,335	0	1,840				1,840
Mainstream Schools Formula	283,385	283,385	0		292,823			292,823
Grow th Fund	150	0	-150		0			0
School Admissions	422	422	0			518		518
Servicing Schools Forum	8	8	0			8		8
Ex ESG Services (all schools)	1,092	1,114	22			1,038		1,038
Commitments - retirements	17	17	0			16		16
Commitments - ASD Base	275	275	0			273		273
Licences Purchased by DfE	360	338	-22			334		334
Place Funding	18,518	15,520	-2,998				15,918	15,918
Top up Funding - State Sector	33,828	42,648	8,820				48,031	48,031
Top up Funding – Independent	31,237	39,138	7,901				49,297	49,297
Top up Funding - Post Schools	11,982	10,102	-1,880				12,103	12,103
Top up Funding - Pre schools	374	271	-103				303	303
Top up Funding – Exclusion/AP	4,500	5,334	834				6,045	6,045
Commissioned Services	2,809	2,208	-601				2,635	2,635
Private hospital charges	100	108	8				121	121
Bespoke SEN /Therapies	14,238	18,685	4,447				20,364	20,364
Support for Inclusion	200	200	0				175	175
Legacy pay & pension grants	2,000	1,821	-179				6,221	6,221
Inclusion Fund	1,237	162	-1,075				839	839
Early Years Central SEN	1,266	1,377	112				772	772
Sensory Impaired Service	922	1,150	228				1,208	1,208
<b>Total Expenditure</b>	<b>462,470</b>	<b>475,685</b>	<b>13,215</b>	<b>62,205</b>	<b>292,823</b>	<b>2,187</b>	<b>164,032</b>	<b>521,247</b>
<b>In-year Deficit</b>	<b>57,502</b>	<b>70,366</b>	<b>12,864</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>95,663</b>	<b>95,664</b>
<b>Deficit brought forward</b>		113,256						183,622
<b>Deficit carried forward</b>		<b>183,622</b>						<b>279,286</b>