

Update on the Schools White Paper & SEND Reform

Report to the Schools Forum 19 March 2026

1 Context

- 1.1 As noted at previous meetings of the Schools Forum, T&W's high needs budget is under considerable pressure. The council's DSG position at the end of 2024/25 was a deficit of £4.7m and the deficit at the end of 2025/26 (including the brought forward deficit from 2023/24) is currently projected to be up to £10m. The council's budget pressures are reflected nationally, with the national DSG deficit having grown from a net figure of £1.1bn at 31 March 2023 to £3.5bn at 31 March 2025.
- 1.2 The government had long promised a White Paper covering SEND reform, intended to describe policy changes to make the system work better for children and young people and enable it to move to a financially sustainable basis. This paper, entitled 'Every child achieving and thriving' was published in February 2026. In March 2026, this was followed by a separate document, entitled 'The Local SEND Reform Plan' with details of how these policy changes are to be delivered locally, through local SEND reform plans.
- 1.3 The local SEND reform plan paper is discussed in a separate paper to this Forum.

2 'Every child achieving and thriving' DfE Policy Paper ('white paper')

- 2.1 The paper is a long document (120 pages) and can be found here:

[Every Child Achieving and Thriving](#)

Document Summary

- 2.2 The following summary picks out the main points. Extracts from the document are in italics. A short commentary follows.
 - All schools are proposed to become academies, *"moving to all schools being part of school trusts, including new trusts established by Local Authorities or Area Partnerships"* (page 15). No timescale is provided for when this is to happen. Local authorities will be able to establish new trusts but *'We will implement safeguards to manage potential conflicts of interest, both within trusts and local authorities, including restrictions on the local authority's involvement in the day-to-day running of a trust.... We will set out arrangements for applications alongside updated commissioning guidance.'* (page 87)
 - New local partnership arrangements will be mandated *"We will create a new model of local partnership and shared accountability for children's outcomes across local communities.... binding local government, schools and trusts, Integrated Care Boards, police, and other local stakeholders around the aim of delivering shared outcomes for children and young people."* (page 22).
 - Below this area partnership level the paper also proposes that *"that every school should be part of a local grouping to work together on SEND.... In the long term, we propose requiring all schools to pool a minimum level of funding to support needs fairly across their group. This pooled funding will be used collectively to meet the needs of children with SEND including through sharing expertise, resourcing, staffing, support bases and commissioning"*

of shared resources, such as specialist teachers”. In terms of the structure of these ‘local groupings’ “we are moving over time to all schools joining or forming high-quality school trusts with coherence and scale. However, as many schools are not yet in a trust with sufficient scale or local presence, in the immediate term many SEND groups may consist of local groups of schools working together. This could include maintained schools working with schools in trusts that are geographically dispersed, for example. We will look to local authorities and their partners to shape the formation of groupings in their areas, and have an oversight role for the local authority groups. Over the next three years we will expect all schools to join SEND group structures and agree operating principles, including peer support and challenge.” (page 56)

- There is to be a consultation on changes to the School Admissions Code, but in the white paper there are few specific details about possible changes. The aspiration is to “*promote fairness for all families, particularly the most disadvantaged and children with additional needs*”. This is to be promoted by “*requiring schools to give parents more information about decisions on in year admission....propose(ing) improvements to how fair access protocols are managed by local authorities..... making the operation of banding arrangements clearer by requiring schools to set out more details about how their arrangements work in practice and tightening the rules that ensure banding produces representative intakes*” (page 46)
- Additional revenue funding for SEND is to be £3.6bn over the three years 2026/27 to 2028/29 (pages 53-54). Whilst individual local authority amounts have yet to be announced, an approximate rule of thumb for T&W is take a national figure and divide by 300, as there are around 150 upper tier authorities and T&W is around half the average size. This gives a figure of £12m, £4m per annum. The total is to be divided as follows:

Amount	Title	Description
£1.6bn	Inclusive mainstream fund	Funding allocated directly to schools
£1.8bn	Experts at hand	Funding allocated to local authorities for speech and language therapists, education psychologists and health specialists
£0.2bn	SEND workforce CPD	Training for all school staff on inclusion and adaptive teaching.

- A similar amount (£3.7bn) is promised for capital investment for SEND, but as this covers a five year period (2025 to 2030, i.e. including the almost complete current year), in reality it is significantly less than the revenue investment.
- As was extensively trailed, there are planned to be reductions in the number of EHCPs being issued, in that ultimately only children needing ‘specialist provision’ will have an EHCP: “*children with an existing EHCP will have a needs assessment as they approach the end of*

each phase of education. The local authority will determine whether they require a Specialist Provision Package and therefore a continued EHCP; if so, a new EHCP will be created based on the relevant Package, supported by an Individual Support Plan setting out day-to-day educational provision. If they do not require a Package, they will move to an Individual Support Plan in a mainstream school and receive support through the Universal and Targeted layers.

The first cohort to transition will be pupils at the end of primary, secondary and post-16 in 2029/30, with assessments from September 2029 and moves to the new system from September 2030; those moving to Individual Support Plans will keep their existing EHCP until the end of that academic year. All children transitioning from an EHCP to an Individual Support Plan will retain the right to request a mainstream placement, and no child will move from a special school or college unless they choose to do so.” (page 58)

- *In terms of accountability/enforcement “Ofsted is – for the first time – grading inclusion, to hold all settings to account for their inclusive practice.” (page 59). With regard to the specific issue of ‘off-rolling’ “We will work to share better more timely data on pupil movement with Ofsted to strengthen its ability to identify poor practice. Where inspectors find evidence of bad practice, it will be reflected in the school’s report card and the leadership and governance evaluation will likely be graded ‘urgent improvement’ – which in turn would normally lead to intervention.” (page 75)*

Off-rolling is unacceptable in any form, and we have strong enforcement arrangements where this is confirmed to be happening. We will work to share better more timely data on pupil movement with Ofsted to strengthen its ability to identify poor practice. Where inspectors find evidence of bad practice, it will be reflected in the school’s report card and the leadership and governance evaluation will likely be graded ‘urgent improvement’ – which in turn would normally lead to intervention. (Page 75)

Commentary

- 2.3 Whilst the white paper was trailed as, and largely is, SEND focussed, the DfE have also used it to propose a very significant structural change, which is requiring all schools to become academies. This represents a reversal of the previous stance of leaving the decision to individual schools. No timescale has yet been suggested for this. Whilst local authorities are offered the opportunity to open trusts, it remains to be seen how restrictive the DfE’s desire to avoid ‘conflicts of interest’ is in practice and thus to what extent the trusts would be linked to the local authority.
- 2.4 This structural change to some extent conflicts with the DfE’s promotion of local partnership arrangements for SEND (covered in more detail in the following paper covering the DfE’s ‘Local SEND reform’ plans), in that SEND partnerships are to be locally based around local authority geographical areas, whereas trusts cut across local authority boundaries.
- 2.5 On the face of it, the additional funds for the reforms represent a re-direction of monies that would otherwise have been used to increase the high needs block. As a reminder, there is no like-for-like increase in the high needs block in 2026/27, the cash increase being a result of moving previously separate grants within the block. However, it remains to be seen whether the high needs block is increased in 2027/28 and 2028/29. The DfE is also having to use funds

to clear 90% of DSG deficits accumulated by 31 March 2026 and it appears (although the commitment is vague) that there will be further support for deficits incurred in 2026/27 and 2027/28. From 2028/29 onwards the DfE has said that DSG deficits will become a DfE responsibility.

- 2.6 The proposal to restrict EHCPs to children and young people (CYP) requiring specialist support, would, from a financial perspective, potentially save significant sums, although this would be a very gradual process given that it is proposed to only take place at the end of each transition phase, and won't commence until 2029/30.
- 2.7 The overriding objective to have a more inclusive system, i.e. a greater proportion of CYP educated in mainstream setting, is to be promoted by a number of different policy strands, from capital investment in buildings, to changes in admission arrangements, to Ofsted practice. However, it remains to be seen whether these collectively will have sufficient impact to deliver an inclusive and affordable SEND system.
- 2.8 The local partnership arrangements that are designed to drive this process, are to be 'led' by local authorities (see next paper), but local authorities' powers and funds in the education system have been remorselessly reduced over the last couple of decades, as a result of successive government's policy decisions. In addition, the conditional approach to DfE financial support brings the DfE firmly into the local decision-making process, through local reform plans being subject to DfE approval.

Tim Davis
Head of Business, Education & Care Finance
March 2026