

	Schools Forum 18 June 2025
	Report from the Corporate Director Children, Young People and Community Development
Update on the DSG High Needs Block Deficit Management Plan and the Delivering Better Value (DBV) in SEND Programme	
Wards Affected:	All
Key or Non-Key Decision:	N/A
Open or Part/Fully Exempt:	N/A
List of Appendices:	One Appendix A: Brent DSG Deficit Management Plan
Background Papers:	None
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1.0 Executive Summary

- 1.1. This report provides a further update on progress to date against the DSG Management Plan and an update on Brent's participation in the Department for Education's (DfE) Delivering Better Value (DBV) in Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) programme, aimed at supporting a reduction in expenditure against the High Needs Block of the Dedicated Schools' Grant (DSG).

2.0 Recommendation(s)

- 2.1 Schools Forum to note the updated Management Plan and update on the DBV in SEND programme.

3.0 Contribution to Borough Plan Priorities and Strategic Context

- 3.1 This report is linked to the Council's Borough Plan which aims to support children and young people to get the best start in life, by working in partnership with schools and other partners to ensure access to education is fair and equal.

- 3.2 In January 2025, an Area SEND Inspection of the Brent Local Area Partnership was undertaken by Ofsted and CQC. The inspection found that the Local Area Partnership's special educational needs and/or disability (SEND) arrangements typically lead to positive experiences and outcomes for children and young people with SEND. The inspection also found that action is being undertaken where improvements are needed.

4.0 Background

- 4.1 The cumulative DSG deficit balance carried forward from 2023/24 was £13.2m. The deficit at the end of 2024/25 was £0.4m (High Needs Block deficit was £2.1m which was offset by underspends in the Schools, Early Years and Central Block), increasing the overall cumulative deficit to £13.6m.
- 4.2 This pressure has arisen within the High Needs Block (HNB) and the main cost driver of this deficit is the rising number of children with Education, Health, and Care Plans (EHCPs).
- 4.3 Table 1 below shows the year-on-year increase of EHCPs over the past 6 years in Brent. The recent trend shows an average rate of growth of 10%, in line with the national trend, with a reduction in the last two years to 8% per year. This decline can be attributed to the successful pilot of the DBV in SEND Programme in Brent which commenced in 2022. For additional context, the HNB allocation from the DSG has only increased by 3% in 2024/25 and 6% in 2025/26, highlighting the ongoing budget pressures.

Table 1: Annual Increase in EHCPs

Brent EHCPs as per SEN2 Return	Jan-20	Jan-21	Jan-22	Jan-23	Jan-24	Jan-25
Number of EHCPs	2426	2784	2938	3251	3500	3795
Brent % Increase	12%	15%	6%	11%	8%	8%
National % Increase	10%	10%	10%	9%	11%	TBC pending publication

- 4.4 The government has indicated that information on a new policy framework for support for children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities will be shared in the autumn. Indications are that the expectation will be that all mainstream schools become fully inclusive schools, but there is as yet no detail of what this means or what funding will be available to support schools in this regard. In the meantime, Brent is continuing to drive forward agreed actions on the DSG Deficit Management Plan and to develop the local SEND system. In this regard, a Headteacher SEND Reference Group has been established with representation from early years, primary, secondary and special schools. The

group is being used to shape changes to the local system, including the SEND support offer, to ensure it meets local needs.

5.0 DSG Deficit Management Plan Update

5.1 The existing Management Plan includes longer-term actions to mitigate the deficit grouped into three themes: a) managing demand, b) increasing the sufficiency of local places and c) financial management adjustments. As at the end of quarter 4, 2024/25, the cost avoidance against the three themes, equated to £2.1m.

5.2 An update on the three themes are as follows:

- a) **Managing demand** – This involved ceasing Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) following appropriate assessment, with 31 plans having been ceased through this route during 2024/25 (cost avoided £0.321m). Savings from a further 40 plans proposed to be ceased will be seen in the 2025/26 financial year. Separately, cost avoidance has been realised from the introduction of the Graduated Approach to SEND across schools and settings, aimed at the early identification of children's needs and delivery of appropriate support with training provided to improve the capacity of schools to meet pupils' needs at an earlier stage. No plans have been issued where Brent's Graduated Approach Framework (GAF) has not been utilised. For example, 29% Education, Health and Care Needs Assessment (EHCNAs) in the fourth quarter of the financial year were not agreed as GAF had not been fully explored and/or needs could be met within ordinarily available provision.

New processes have resulted in tighter control and oversight on placement decisions, with strong emphasis on ensuring that the maintained sector in and out of borough is explored first before children are placed in the independent special sector. This approach aims to ensure both cost-effectiveness and better integration of children within local settings. To support this, a banding review for mainstream schools was completed in October 2024 and implemented in December 2024, aligning funding more closely with pupils' needs.

- b) **Improving sufficiency of local places.** This theme is focused on cost avoidance by reducing the number of children and young people who are placed out of borough or in independent special schools at a higher cost than local provision. This year 72 full time equivalent additional places have been created through increased ARP provisions and Special places within the borough, resulting in an overall cost avoidance of £1.7m. The total number of places planned to be delivered by the end of the 2025/26 financial year is 161, in line with the existing SEND capital programme, including new buildings for Wembley Manor, the new secondary special

school for children with autism. A second phase of the SEND Capital Programme is under development to create additional special school and ARP places within the borough.

- c) **Financial management workstream.** This has involved a deep dive into each area of spend to identify efficiencies, including administrative charges to other local authorities for out of borough pupils in Brent (an increase of £125k in income) and a review of commissioning arrangements for placements within the independent sector.

6.0 DBV in SEND Programme update

- 6.1 Brent participated in the DfE's DBV programme in 2022-25, of which the main objective was to identify local and national opportunities to improve outcomes for children and young people with SEND within the available budget. Brent was awarded a grant of £1m to support the reform of the high needs system whilst achieving efficiencies. As part of the programme for Brent, four main workstreams were developed and quarterly progress update submissions made to the DfE. Actions from the workstreams as a result of the investment from the DfE have led to cost avoidance of £0.264m to date. The DBV programme officially came to an end in March 2025. However, as set out below some of the DBV pilot projects are being taken forward into business as usual:

- a) **Intervention First**

The Intervention First Team (IFT) pilot has been running since October 2023 and ends in September 2025. It offers an intensive 12-week multi-disciplinary programme to children aged between 4 – 7 years old in the Harlesden locality. The service is targeted for children with emotional wellbeing and learning needs who do not have an EHCP. IFT was created as part of the DBV Programme to offer earlier, targeted intervention for children with the aim of achieving a positive impact on outcomes for children without them requiring EHCPs. The clinical team comprises two Child and Family Specialists (1.2 FTE), a Trainee Clinical Psychologist and a Clinical Psychologist (0.4 FTE), an Assistant Education Psychologist and Team Manager. 107 CYP have been referred to the service over the 2-year programme from the 13 identified Harlesden cluster schools, 41 in the academic year 2023/2024 and 66 in the academic year 2024/25. 21 referrals have been received from schools since January 2025 and have been triaged and direct work has now begun with children, families and schools, apart from two referrals which were signposted to another service within the LA. Schools have welcomed access to specialist therapists as part of an early intervention approach and have noted that the majority of the children referred to the IFT might otherwise have been considered for an EHCP. The Inclusion Service is currently considering how

a similar early intervention approach could be rolled out to other school clusters.

b) **SEND Assurance**

This workstream focused on the audit of EHCPs and accompanying records of plans for children aged under 7 that included support 26 hours and above and post-16 plans that included support of 19.5 hours and above to assess if this level of support was needed. The team identified pupils for whom allocated support funding could be reduced and are developing a model of support for these children that can be cascaded to the other cases. A process for allocating hours beyond those given at initial plan allocation has also been reviewed to ensure effectiveness. A new banding tool has been applied to all EHCPs issued from December 2024 (45 in total) that focuses on needs rather than support hours. This will help to ensure that schools have flexibility in how they use funding to support children with SEND.

c) **Workforce and inclusive environments**

This workstream focused on ensuring schools have the relevant training and workforce experience to support the wide range of needs of children and young people at SEN Support. A survey was undertaken across all schools and settings to develop a wider understanding of the training that staff felt they need, with training subsequently commissioned for SCERTS, Makaton and THRIVE (SEMH/Attachment based support). In addition, one of Brent's special schools' Trust, 'The Rise Partnership' supports universal training offers for teachers. At the end of the summer term, a review will take place led by the SEND Support team to ascertain if appreciable impact has been made in children remaining at SEN Support and not requiring an EHCNA. Training will continue to be provided via the half termly SENCO forums to support workforce development for Brent schools.

To enable schools to support a wide range of children at SEN support, £1m capital funding has been set aside to support environmental adaptations that would make more school environments inclusive., 38 proposals from schools were agreed and projects have been installed in 14 schools to date. In September 2024, this funding opportunity was rolled out to the Private, Voluntary, and Independent (PVI) sector. To date, 22 proposals have been agreed, with installations planned over the next few months...

d) **Commissioning**

A review of funding in the Early Years took place in 2024/2025, with proposals subject to consultation with key stakeholders in March 2025. The proposals were well received and the new funding model for SENIF and the new banding for enhanced places (EPs) at early years is planned to come into force from September 2025. The objective is to ensure that funding is more closely

aligned with actual needs while simultaneously minimising administrative workload.

A review of the funding of additionally resourced provisions (ARPs) also took place 2024/2025, with proposals subject to consultation with key stakeholders in March 2025 that proposed a flat rate of funding to create consistency across funding for all ARPs. Though feedback to the wider consultation was minimal, individual meetings held by the Head of Service for Inclusion with schools who either have, or will soon have, an ARP during May and June 2025 have clarified the position. To date, only one school has responded negatively to the proposals stating that their ARP should be funded at a higher rate than the flat rate proposed. The new funding model for ARPs and the new service level agreements (SLAs) designed to clarify expectations between schools and the LA is planned to come into force from September 2025.

Following an extensive review of current provision and local needs, a new speech language and communication needs (SLCN) offer is being developed within Brent. Partners in Public Health will be rolling out the 'WellComm' communication model across Brent (due to commence in autumn 2025)). Additionally, a new speech and language therapy (SALT) contract for children with an EHCP commenced 1st April 2025. This contract represented a 34% increase in the number of children and young people supported by the contract and included an expanded offer for children in ARPs and attending out of borough schools. A similar (in terms of scale and scope) contract is currently being procured for occupational therapy (OT) services for children with an EHCP.

- 6.2 Brent is currently in the process of recruiting a specialist SEND Commissioner, whose role will include a focus on oversight of spend in the independent sector, as well as in assisting case officers to find placements for the hardest to place children.

7.0 Stakeholder and ward member consultation and engagement

- 7.1 Schools Forum is regularly kept abreast of the DSG including the Management Plan. The Lead Member for Children, Young People and Schools is regularly updated on matters related to the DSG including SEND. The DSG Management Plan is also presented at the HNB Sub-group of the Schools' Forum.

8.0 Financial considerations

- 8.1 The statutory override in place to carry forward a deficit balance against the DSG is due to end March 2026 which would put a significant risk against the Council's General Fund reserves.

- 8.2 The current Management Plan including the DBV benefits will not recover the deficit by 2026/27, and the mitigated deficit is at risk of increasing from £13.6m carried forward from 2024/25 to £20.3m by 2027/28. Mitigating actions totalling £4.925m in cost avoidance from the provision of additional in-borough SEND places are planned for the current financial year 2025/26, aiming to deliver a break-even outturn for the period (See Appendix A). A report on the planned SEND Capital programme will be presented to Forum later in November 2025.
- 8.3 There also remains a risk that the number of children and young people with EHCPs will continue to grow without the HNB funding increasing in line with this growth. Over the years, this has created financial pressures with many authorities holding deficit balances. In addition, the continued impact of the cost-of-living crisis could see providers continuing to request high inflationary price increases.

9.0 Legal considerations

- 9.1 There are no legal implications directly arising from this report.

10.0 Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) considerations

- 10.1 The key groups affected by the proposals are children and young people with SEND aged 0-25 in Brent. The Council is committed to inclusive education for all children and young people with SEND in mainstream schools, additionally resourced provision in mainstream schools and within special schools.

11.0 Climate Change and Environmental Considerations

- 11.1 Not applicable

12.0 Human Resources/Property Considerations (if appropriate)

- 12.1 Not applicable.

13.0 Communication Considerations

- 13.1 All Schools Forum reports are published and available to members of the public and schools.

Related document(s) for reference

Previous School Forum papers

Report sign off:

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