

Dorset Schools' Forum

Date of Meeting:	7 November 2025
Report Title:	ANNUAL REVIEW OF PLACES TO BE COMMISSIONED BY THE LA IN LOCAL SPECIALIST PROVISION
Executive Director:	Paul Dempsey, Executive Director for People - Children
Director:	Jen Furnell, Corporate Director, Education and Learning
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Presenting Officer:	Ellen Eager, Sufficiency & Funding Manager
Report Status:	Public
Reason for Submission to Schools' Forum:	For CONSULTATION Under Forum power/responsibility: 2(b) annual consultation on financial issues relating to the arrangements for education of pupils with special educational needs and disabilities, in particular, the places to be commissioned by the LA and the arrangements for paying top up funding
Recommendation(s):	That the Schools Forum note and comment on the number of places we currently anticipate commissioning for September 2026 in specialist places in publicly funded provision.
Reason for Recommendation(s):	The SEND funding system is built around commissioning places in advance of the year to enable planning by those institutions. The numbers proposed (which are subject in some cases to further consultation) are our realistic estimate of the number of specialist places we need and can provide for pupils with SEND.
DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST	Schools' Forum members are reminded of their responsibility to make a declaration of interest in any agenda item in which they have an interest, to the Chair or the Clerk, preferably in advance of the meeting.

1. Executive Summary

- 1.1. Dorset is required to provide the Department for Education (DfE) with the number of places it wishes to commission in academies, and colleges within the Dorset geographical area during November 2025. For consistency and to enable planning, we aim to provide all schools with their commissioned places at the same time where possible. The proposed number of places to be commissioned is shown in Appendix A.
- 1.2. Dorset is required to commission all the places for children and young people (CYP) at providers in the Dorset geographical area regardless of where the CYP is resident. The High Needs National Funding Formula takes account of the numbers of pupils that the LA is commissioning on behalf of other local authorities by adjusting the formula for the following year based upon whether Dorset is a net importer of CYP or a net exporter.
- 1.3. The LA is permitted to pay providers for additional places (or the marginal cost of an additional CYP) in year but is not allowed to remove place funding once it is allocated, to allow the provider some financial clarity and stability in funding.
- 1.4. The number of places commissioned is a key part of the budget build for the year 2026-27 as it gives the number of places we expect to pay for but also gives an indication of the budget requirement for top ups. This information is also used to inform the Safety Valve Model.
2. **Resourced Provision:** Most resourced provision bases are set up at an agreed size to support staffing needs and for the school to be able to plan support for the pupils. We know how many pupils are currently in a place now and how many will naturally leave because of their age next July. If pupil estimates for the next academic year remain close to the agreed base size, we will use the base size number. The school is essentially agreeing to admit up to the number of pupils that we commission places for, and between now and next September there will generally be pupils that meet the criteria of the provision, and the place can be filled. Alternatively, it can be filled in year.
 - 2.1. The Physical Disability bases for pupils with complex physical disability with medical needs at The Prince of Wales school, Dorchester Middle School (DMS) and the Thomas Hardy School work slightly differently and as part of the funding arrangements we stated that we will commission at 5, 8 or 10 places. For September 2026 we are not proposing any changes to the 5 at Dorchester Middle School, 8 at The Prince of Wales School and 8 at The Thomas Hardy School. We would like all the schools to take up to 10 if there are suitable pupils for the places and therefore will increase the number to 10 automatically if a 9th pupil needs a place (or 8 if a 6th or 7th pupil takes a place for Dorchester Middle School).
 - 2.2. **Learning Centres:** Having previously split out Learning Centre places between SEMH RP and AP for reporting purposes, we are now including a total to bring in line with DfE guidance. The Learning Centre places are provisionally commissioned numbers as ongoing sufficiency work continues along with expansion projects, so these commissioned numbers may change ahead of September 2026.
3. **Special Schools:** Our local special schools are full to physical capacity. The numbers included in the forms are the most reasonable numbers that the schools have identified to ensure that they will take as many pupils as possible. In some cases, they may be able to take an additional student where there is a good fit for the pupil in a

specific class.

- 3.1. **Further Education Colleges:** Weymouth College and Kingston Maurward College have now merged creating one entity, Coastland College. They have seen an 18% increase in High Needs pupils compared to last academic year with 369 now on roll. In light of the increase it is our current intention to increase the commissioned number from 340 to 370 for September 2026.
- 3.2. **Unallocated Additional Places:** When creating a budget for places for the financial year 2026-27 we have provided an additional budget for unallocated places so that the budget set does not automatically overspend when the first additional pupil appears. This also takes account of additional projects planned, but where timing has not yet been confirmed.

1. Financial Implications

These commissioned places will commit the High Needs Budget to expenditure in total of £17.7m for 2,025 places comprising:

- £1.6m for 270 places in resourced provisions,
- £3.9m for 387 alternative provision places in our learning centres,
- £2.2m for 370 places in further education colleges.
- £9.98m for 998 places in special schools
- Included in the figures above is £0.7m set aside to pay for additional places where needed and in new resourced inclusion hubs we are planning.

This will all be funded from the High Needs Block in 2026-27 and 2027-28.

2. Health and Well-being implications

None

3. Climate Implications

None

4. Risk Assessment

Having considered the risks associated with this decision, the level of risk has been identified as:

Current Risk: Low

Residual Risk: Low

5. Appendices

Appendix A: Places in Specialist Provision for September 2026

6. Background Papers

None

Footnote:

Issues relating to financial, legal, environmental, economic and equalities implications have been considered and any information relevant to the decision is included within the report.