

The Dorset Schools Forum

The Rt Hon Bridget Phillipson

Secretary of State for Education

Department for Education

Sanctuary Buildings

Great Smith Street

London SW1P 3BT

Dear Secretary of State,

Re: Schools Forum Decision on Block Transfer and Urgent Need for Engagement

I write on behalf of the Dorset Schools Forum following our meeting on 7 November 2025. After careful consideration, Forum members voted to decline the proposed transfer of 0.5% from the Schools Block to the High Needs Block for 2026–27.

This was not a decision taken lightly. We recognise the severe pressures on High Needs funding and remain committed to inclusive education, as exemplified by Dorset Council's SEND strategy, which we continue to work in partnership with the council to implement, despite our decision.

That being said., schools cannot continue as the sole active partner in the original Safety Valve agreement while the Department for Education has paused its contributions. This is inequitable and unsustainable.

Schools' budgets are already under severe strain. For many, this transfer represents £5,000–£30,000—funds that will, because of our decision, now be used immediately to support schools in their mission to deliver greater inclusivity.

Dorset Council has invested £47m in capital projects, created 323 new special school places and 180 mainstream inclusion places, and absorbs £5m annually in financing costs. Despite this, Dorset Council faces an in-year High Needs overspend of £52.79m, driven by rising EHCP demand and costly independent placements. If funded at the national average per EHCP, Dorset would receive £20m more each year.

The recent Local Area SEND Partnership inspection found that Dorset Council's arrangements "typically lead to positive experiences and outcomes for children and young people with SEND." Your own advisers acknowledged Dorset's inclusive strategy in response to our submission on 20 October, 2025, describing "the innovative and robust approaches you have in place to meet the needs of CYP with SEND."

The scale of the deficit risks not only education but all frontline council services. Every pound diverted to unfunded SEND costs weakens wider support systems for

children and families. Delays to national SEND reforms until spring only deepen uncertainty and undermine confidence.

We accept that the original Safety Valve programme has not delivered as intended due predominantly to circumstances beyond everyone's control. A pragmatic financial approach is now essential. We urge the Department for Education to re-engage with Dorset Council and confirm its commitment to a sustainable solution. We would welcome a meeting with you or your officials at the earliest opportunity.

Dorset and its education system have acted responsibly, collaboratively and proactively. We now firmly expect the Department to do the same.

This letter will be shared publicly and copied to all Dorset MPs. Any response will also be published.

Thank you for your attention. We look forward to your reply.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Philip Jones', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Philip Jones.
Chair, Dorset Schools Forum