

The Use and Impact of Mainstream Specialist Funding in Dorset (2025/26)



Dorset
Council

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Executive Summary

Background

In response to increasing pressure on specialist provision and a sustained rise in the number of children and young people (CYP) presenting with complex special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), Dorset Council developed a Mainstream Specialist exceptional funding model to support CYP with needs typically associated with specialist provision to allow them to remain in, or access, education within mainstream settings.

To understand how this funding has been used in practice, its impact, and its limitations, Dorset Council commissioned a consultant-led survey of mainstream schools and settings that had accessed Mainstream Specialist exceptional funding during the 2025–26 financial year. This report presents the findings of that review and considers the implications for future SEND system planning.

Key Findings

The review found that Mainstream Specialist exceptional funding has played a significant and positive role in enabling schools to support CYP with complex needs, particularly in relation to:

- ▶ Stabilising placements and reducing the risk of exclusion
- ▶ Improving regulation, engagement and attendance
- ▶ Enhancing staff confidence and capacity
- ▶ Supporting more inclusive practices across schools; and
- ▶ Benefitting peers and the wider school environment

Schools have used the funding to provide enhanced, short-term or exceptional support where ordinarily available provision and standard SEND funding mechanisms were

not sufficient to meet need. Funding has been used for additional staffing, bespoke provision, specialist equipment, targeted interventions, training, and, in some cases, access to alternative provision.

Many schools reported that, without access to this funding, placements would have been at high risk of breakdown.

However, the review also identified clear limitations in the current approach. While the funding has often been effective as a short-term or mitigating measure, it has not consistently enabled schools to meet need fully or sustainably for CYP with specialist-level needs.

Profile of Need

The CYP supported through Mainstream Specialist exceptional funding represent a diverse but highly complex cohort. Although individual profiles vary, common features include:

- ▶ Significant cognition and learning difficulties (including MLD, SLD and SpLD)
- ▶ Communication and interaction needs, including autism and sensory processing differences
- ▶ Social, Emotional and Mental Health needs, often linked to trauma or anxiety
- ▶ Mixed or overlapping SEND profiles requiring intensive adult support and environmental adaptation

Many CYP supported through this funding spend a substantial proportion of their time outside of mainstream classrooms, accessing bespoke or alternative spaces within the school day. This reflects the reality that, even with enhanced staffing, mainstream classroom environments are not always suitable for CYP with specialist-level needs.

Use of Funding

Schools reported that the funding was most commonly used to:

- ▶ Employ additional staff, particularly teaching assistants and HLTAs
- ▶ Create bespoke, specialist-in-mainstream provision or small group bases
- ▶ Purchase specialist equipment and resources, particularly sensory and communication supports
- ▶ Deliver targeted interventions and therapeutic programmes
- ▶ Access training and external specialist support

While some schools were able to use the funding creatively to develop structured, high-quality provision, others reported that staffing shortages, space constraints and uncertainty about funding timescales limited what could realistically be achieved.

The reliance on 1:1 staffing was a notable feature across responses, reflecting both the complexity of need and the absence of alternative specialist infrastructure within mainstream settings.



Impact and Effectiveness

Overall, schools reported that Mainstream Specialist exceptional funding had a largely positive impact, particularly in relation to:

- ▶ Improved emotional regulation and readiness to learn
- ▶ Increased attendance and engagement
- ▶ Reduced suspensions and exclusions
- ▶ Improved safety and wellbeing for CYP and peers; and
- ▶ Enhanced inclusion and whole-school practice

Funding has been used reactively rather than to deliver a fully appropriate, long-term educational offer for CYP with specialist needs. In several cases, schools reported that despite best efforts, the needs of some CYP exceeded what could reasonably be delivered within a mainstream environment, even with enhanced funding.

“The flexibility this funding comes with allows us as a school to be more responsive and dynamic with the support and provision we put into place for the children.”

Leif Overment, Headteacher,
Salway Ash CE VA Primary

“Exceptional top-up funding has value and impact, but its effectiveness is maximised when it sits within a system that is open, equitable and aligned with shared expectations about inclusion.”

Gary Spracklen, Headteacher,
The Prince of Wales

Challenges and Limitations

The review identified recurring challenges, including:

- ▶ Recruitment and retention of suitably skilled staff
- ▶ Physical space constraints, limiting the ability to create appropriate learning environments
- ▶ Funding sufficiency and timeliness, affecting planning and sustainability
- ▶ Overreliance on 1:1 staffing, limiting independence and inclusion
- ▶ Limited access to suitable alternative provision
- ▶ CYP with needs incompatible with mainstream environments, even with significant adaptation

These challenges were consistently raised across phases and localities and point to structural issues rather than isolated school-level practice.

Strategic Implications

The findings suggest that whilst the provision of Mainstream Specialist exceptional funding has been an important and valuable measure, it is insufficient as a long-term solution to increasing levels of specialist need within mainstream education.

The evidence indicates a need to move away from a predominantly reactive, individualised funding approach towards a planned, differentiated system of specialist-in-mainstream provision, supported by appropriately resourced specialist bases, development of skilled and stable workforces, predictable funding arrangements and strengthened sufficiency across the SEND system, including support for schools and settings to deliver a more inclusive offer as part of their ordinarily available provision. These measures align with the ideas expressed in the recent SEND White Paper *Every Child Achieving and Thriving, 2026*.

Key recommendations include:

- ▶ The development of Inclusion Bases to support different areas of need
- ▶ Improved alignment between mainstream, specialist and alternative provision
- ▶ A reduction in reliance on exceptional funding through the creation of sustainable specialist capacity and more effective ordinarily available provision

Purpose and Scope

The purpose of this review is to evaluate the use, impact and effectiveness of Mainstream Specialist exceptional funding provided to mainstream schools and settings to support children and young people (CYP) with complex special educational needs and disabilities (SEND).

Funding was introduced to respond to a growing cohort of CYP whose needs are typically associated with specialist provision, but who are educated within mainstream settings due to local sufficiency pressures, parental preference, or as part of a planned inclusion approach.

In these circumstances, the intention of the funding is to provide enhanced, time-limited or exceptional support where ordinarily available provision and standard SEND funding mechanisms are not sufficient to meet need.

This review seeks to understand:

- ▶ How schools have used Mainstream Specialist exceptional funding in practice
- ▶ The extent to which the funding has enabled CYP to access education safely and effectively
- ▶ The impact of the funding on CYP, peers, staff and the wider school environment
- ▶ The strengths and limitations of the current approach
- ▶ The implications for future SEND system planning and sufficiency

The review is intended to inform strategic decision-making by Dorset Council, support continuous improvement in SEND provision, and contribute to the development of a more sustainable and equitable system of support for CYP with complex needs.

The review includes all mainstream schools and settings in Dorset that accessed Mainstream Specialist exceptional funding during the 2025–26 financial year and that responded to the survey conducted between February and April 2026.

The review considers:

- ▶ The profile and complexity of CYP supported through the funding
- ▶ The range of provision put in place by schools, including staffing, resources, interventions and bespoke arrangements
- ▶ How funding has been used alongside other support mechanisms, including EHCP provision, outreach services and alternative provision
- ▶ Reported outcomes and impacts for CYP and schools
- ▶ Challenges encountered by schools in implementing provision
- ▶ Variability in practice and experience across settings

The review draws on both quantitative and qualitative survey responses and follow-up interviews to provide a balanced picture of how the funding has been deployed and experienced across the system.

It is important to be clear about the limits of this review. This report does **not**:

- ▶ Evaluate the quality of individual school provision in detail
- ▶ Assess compliance with EHCPs or statutory processes at a case level
- ▶ Provide a cost-benefit analysis of individual placements
- ▶ Replace or duplicate formal quality assurance, inspection or audit processes
- ▶ Act as a commissioning business case for specific types of provision

While references are made to wider system developments and future models of provision, these are considered in the context of responding to the findings of the review, rather than as the primary focus of the report.

Methodology

To inform the review, a structured survey was issued to all mainstream schools and settings that had accessed Mainstream Specialist exceptional funding. The survey gathered information on:

- ▶ The needs and profiles of CYP supported
- ▶ How the funding was used
- ▶ The perceived impact on CYP, peers and staff
- ▶ Challenges and barriers to effective implementation
- ▶ Views on the appropriateness and sustainability of the funding model
- ▶ Suggestions for improvement and future development

Responses included both closed questions and open-ended qualitative feedback, allowing schools to provide detailed reflections on their experiences. Follow-up interviews were conducted with some respondents to gather additional insights.

While the response rate was strong and provided a rich evidence base, it should be noted that responses reflect self-reported perceptions from schools, experiences may vary depending on context, phase and cohort and the review captures a snapshot in time rather than long-term longitudinal outcomes.

It should also be noted that this review sits within a broader context of SEND system development in Dorset and national developments relating to the February 2026 release of the SEND White Paper, *Every Child Achieving and Thriving*.

The findings of this review should therefore be considered alongside wider strategic work to strengthen inclusion, improve outcomes for CYP with SEND, and ensure the long-term sustainability of local provision.



The National and Local Context

Introduction

Nationally, the education system continues to experience sustained pressure in relation to special educational needs and disabilities (SEND).

Over recent years, there has been a significant increase in both the number of children and young people (CYP) with Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) and the complexity of need being supported within mainstream settings.

Across England, local authorities and schools report rising demand for specialist placements, particularly for CYP with autism, Social, Emotional and Mental Health needs, and complex cognition and learning profiles; increasing numbers of CYP requiring alternative or non-standard educational arrangements; challenges in recruiting and retaining suitably skilled SEND staff across all phases; and escalating costs within High Needs Blocks, driven by placement costs, transport and bespoke provision.

These pressures have contributed to a widening gap between demand for specialist provision and available capacity, resulting in more CYP with specialist-level needs being educated in mainstream settings for extended periods of time.

The White Paper

The Government's SEND and Alternative Provision Improvement Plan, *Every Child Achieving and Thriving* (DfE, 2026), sets out a national ambition to create a more inclusive, consistent and sustainable SEND system. The plan emphasises that:

- ▶ Mainstream schools should be supported to play a stronger role in meeting SEND
- ▶ Inclusion must be underpinned by the right expertise, environments and support
- ▶ Reliance on exclusion and unplanned alternative provision should be reduced
- ▶ Specialist provision should be reserved for CYP whose needs cannot reasonably be met in mainstream settings
- ▶ Local authorities should develop clearer, planned SEND systems with stronger early intervention and graduated responses

Crucially, the Improvement Plan recognises that mainstream inclusion is not cost-neutral, and that schools cannot be expected to meet increasingly complex needs without appropriate infrastructure, specialist support and funding. It also acknowledges that, in the absence of sufficient planned provision, systems can drift towards reactive and individualised solutions that are difficult to sustain.

The policy direction therefore reinforces the need for well-planned, specialist provision in mainstream settings, clearer pathways between mainstream and specialist settings, and more consistent local approaches to supporting CYP with complex needs.

The Role of Mainstream Schools and Settings in Supporting Specialist Need

Within this national context, mainstream schools are increasingly supporting CYP whose needs would previously have been met within specialist settings.

This reflects a combination of factors, including insufficient specialist provision capacity, parental preference for local education and continuity, efforts to promote inclusive practice in line with national policy and the need to avoid prolonged periods out of education while awaiting specialist placements.

However, the complexity of need now seen in mainstream settings often goes beyond what can reasonably be met through ordinarily available provision alone. As a result, many schools are required to put in place highly individualised and resource-intensive arrangements, such as 1:1 staffing or intensive adult support, bespoke learning spaces or out-of-class provision and significantly adapted curricula.



Local Context in Dorset

These national trends are clearly reflected locally within Dorset. The local authority continues to see:

- ▶ An increase in the number of CYP with EHCPs
- ▶ Greater complexity within SEND profiles, including overlapping cognition and learning, communication and interaction, and SEMH needs
- ▶ Sustained pressure on special school capacity across phases
- ▶ Increased use of alternative provision and bespoke educational arrangements
- ▶ Ongoing financial pressure within the High Needs Block

At the same time, Dorset has a strong strategic commitment to inclusion and to enabling CYP to be educated as close to home as possible, where this is appropriate and in their best interests. In line with national expectations, mainstream schools in Dorset are therefore supporting an increasing number of CYP with needs that are typically associated with specialist provision.

In many cases, this has required schools to adapt their environments, staffing structures and curriculum offer well beyond what would ordinarily be expected within a mainstream context.

In Dorset, the Mainstream Specialist exceptional funding route was developed primarily as a targeted response to support CYP with complex needs to remain in mainstream settings. Funding has enabled schools to:

- ▶ Employ additional staff to provide intensive support
- ▶ Create bespoke or specialist in mainstream provision
- ▶ Purchase specialist resources and equipment
- ▶ Deliver targeted interventions and therapeutic programmes
- ▶ Access external expertise and training

Mainstream Specialist exceptional funding has also been used to support inclusion, maintain stability, and prevent placement breakdown or exclusion for CYP whose needs cannot be met in mainstream over the long term, creating time for planning and decision-making.

As pressures on specialist provision have continued, the duration and intensity of support required through exceptional funding has increased. In some cases, arrangements initially intended to be short-term have become longer-term, raising questions about sustainability, equity and alignment with the national ambition for a more planned SEND system.

Tensions

The increased reliance on – and acceleration in applications for – Mainstream Specialist exceptional funding in Dorset highlights broader system tensions, including:

- ▶ The balance between inclusion and appropriateness of placement
- ▶ The extent to which mainstream environments can be adapted to meet specialist level needs
- ▶ The sustainability of highly individualised, schooled solutions
- ▶ Equity of access to enhanced support across schools and localities
- ▶ The interaction between exceptional funding, specialist provision and alternative provision

These tensions are recognised within national policy and form an important backdrop to the findings of this review. They help to explain both the positive impact of the funding and the challenges reported by schools.

Understanding this national and local context is essential to interpreting the findings of the review. The use of Mainstream Specialist exceptional funding cannot be considered in isolation from wider SEND system pressures, nor can the experiences of individual schools be separated from the structural constraints within which they are operating.

The Specialist Mainstream Cohort

Children and young people (CYP) supported through the Mainstream Specialist exceptional funding route represent a small but highly complex cohort within mainstream education. The cohort is not a single, homogenous group but includes CYP with a range of primary and overlapping needs, often requiring highly individualised and resourceintensive support.

Primary Areas of Need

Analysis of survey responses suggests that CYP supported fall into three, often overlapping, categories of need.

1. Cognition and Learning

A significant proportion of CYP supported through the funding have cognition and learning (C&L) needs, including:

- ▶ Moderate Learning Difficulties (MLD)
- ▶ Severe Learning Difficulties (SLD)
- ▶ Specific Learning Difficulties (SpLD), particularly where these are compounded by broader developmental delay
- ▶ Difficulties with memory, processing, attention and executive functioning

These CYP often require:

- ▶ Highly structured and cumulative teaching approaches
- ▶ Significant curriculum adaptation
- ▶ Repetition, overlearning and scaffolding
- ▶ Targeted literacy and numeracy intervention
- ▶ Support to develop independence and generalisation of skills

For many, progress within a standard mainstream curriculum is limited without substantial adaptation.

2. Communication and Interaction

A second significant group within the cohort are CYP with Communication and Interaction (C&I) needs, including:

- ▶ Autism Spectrum Condition
- ▶ Social communication difficulties
- ▶ Language and communication delay
- ▶ Sensory processing differences

These CYP experience difficulty accessing mainstream classrooms due to:

- ▶ Sensory overload
- ▶ Communication barriers
- ▶ Anxiety linked to unpredictability or social interaction
- ▶ Difficulty understanding and engaging with classroom expectations

As a result, they often require:

- ▶ Low-arousal environments
- ▶ Structured routines and visual supports
- ▶ Explicit teaching of communication and social skills
- ▶ Opportunities for predictable, supported interaction with peers

3. Social, Emotional and Mental Health (SEMH)

A third group of CYP supported through the funding present with Social, Emotional and Mental Health (SEMH) needs, often alongside other areas of need. These may include:

- ▶ Anxiety, including schoolbased anxiety or emotionally based school avoidance
- ▶ Trauma-related behaviours
- ▶ Difficulties with emotional regulation
- ▶ Behaviour that challenges, often linked to unmet need or dysregulation
- ▶ Attachment difficulties

These CYP often require:

- ▶ Highly consistent, relational adult support
- ▶ Structured and predictable environments
- ▶ Opportunities for regulation throughout the day
- ▶ Adapted expectations and flexible approaches to learning
- ▶ Integrated pastoral and therapeutic input

It should be noted that most CYP have needs that cut across more than one area, reflecting significant neurodiversity in this cohort. For example, a CYP with cognition and learning needs may also present with SEMH needs linked to frustration, low self-esteem or anxiety, whilst a CYP with communication and interaction needs may also experience sensory regulation difficulties and emotional dysregulation.

This complexity means that provision cannot be effectively planned or delivered in isolation by need type alone. Instead, schools are required to respond to interconnected and evolving profiles, often with limited access to specialist expertise on a daytoday basis.



The Challenge of Mainstream Inclusion

Whilst the Specialist Mainstream funding was designed to support CYP to remain with their peers in their local school, several schools report that this has required significant adaptation, including high levels of adult support, removal from mainstream classrooms for part of the day and creation of bespoke or specialist-in-mainstream provision.

A consistent and important finding is that many of these CYP are not accessing the mainstream classroom full-time. Indeed, a significant minority of survey responses indicate that many CYP spend much of their time in small group or bespoke provision whilst others access mainstream learning only for limited periods. Only a minority can sustain full-time access to mainstream classrooms without substantial support.

This reflects the reality that for many CYP in this cohort, the structure, pace and sensory demands of a typical mainstream classroom present significant barriers to learning and engagement. As a result, schools are frequently required to develop hybrid models of provision, combining access to mainstream education with more specialist, adapted approaches delivered outside the classroom.

Implications of the Cohort Profile

The profile of CYP supported through the Mainstream Specialist exceptional funding route has several important implications:

- ▶ Provision must address multiple, overlapping areas of need, rather than focusing on a single primary need
- ▶ Successful support often depends on the availability of adapted environments, not just additional staffing
- ▶ The overwhelming reliance on individualised, 1:1 support reflects underlying structural gaps in provision, rather than preferred practice
- ▶ Mainstream schools are increasingly required to deliver elements of specialist provision within their settings



How Have Schools Used Mainstream Specialist Funding?

Survey responses demonstrate that exceptional funding has been used by schools in a range of flexible and adaptive ways to meet the needs of CYP with complex SEND. While there is variation between settings, clear and consistent patterns have emerged.

The funding has most commonly been used to:

- ▶ Employ additional staffing to provide intensive support
- ▶ Establish bespoke or specialist-in-mainstream provision
- ▶ Deliver targeted interventions and therapeutic programmes
- ▶ Purchase specialist equipment and resources
- ▶ Access training and external expertise

These uses reflect the need for layered and responsive provision, rather than a single intervention or approach.

“The children accessing this provision are settled and happy coming into school. They are making progress academically and with social communication.”

Sally Howard, SENDCo,
Shaftesbury Abbey Primary

Teaching Assistants

The most common use of exceptional funding has been to recruit additional staff, particularly Teaching Assistants (TAs) and Higher-Level Teaching Assistants (HLTAs). In many schools, this staffing has been deployed to provide:

- ▶ 1:1 support for individual CYP
- ▶ Targeted small-group support
- ▶ Supervision and support during transitions and unstructured times
- ▶ Facilitation of access to both mainstream and bespoke provision

The reliance on 1:1 staffing is a notable feature across responses. This reflects both the intensity of need within the cohort and the absence of consistent alternative models of provision within mainstream settings.

However, schools also report that while 1:1 support can be effective in maintaining safety and engagement, it is not always the most sustainable or developmentally appropriate model, particularly where it may limit independence or peer interaction over time. This chimes with guidance from the Education Endowment Foundation (*Making Best Use of Teaching Assistants*, EEF 2015), which warns against over-reliance on one-to-one teaching assistant support, highlighting the risk of reduced independence, separation from the teacher, and lower attainment outcomes.

Bespoke Provision

A significant number of schools have used the funding to create bespoke provision within their setting, effectively establishing small-scale, specialist-in-mainstream environments. These provisions typically include dedicated teaching or intervention spaces, small group teaching models, adapted timetables and curriculum pathways. Structured routines and low-arousal environments and targeted support for regulation, communication and learning.

In many cases, these arrangements resemble elements of specialist provision, delivered within a mainstream context. Schools reported that this approach can be highly effective where staffing is sufficiently stable, where skilled and appropriate physical space is available and where provision is planned and structured, rather than reactive.

However, the ability to develop such provision varies significantly between schools, depending on factors such as building capacity, staffing and leadership and the ready availability of external specialist advice.

“The YP is more settled and has longer periods of emotion regulation due to the bespoke nature of the provision and reduced demand.”

Jill Watson, Headteacher,
St Nicholas CE Primary

Targeted Interventions and Programmes

Alongside providing support and creating enabling environments, schools have also used the funding to implement a range of targeted interventions and structured programmes as part of a broader package of support, particularly in relation to literacy and numeracy development, communication and language skills, emotional regulation and wellbeing, social skills and interaction and attention, processing and executive functioning.

In many schools, structured literacy and phonics programmes, precision teaching approaches, social and emotional interventions (such as ELSA or nurture-based provision) and communication-focused interventions supported by speech and language professionals have been implemented, benefiting not only the CYP in receipt of funding but also a wider cohort.



“It has enabled both of these children to manage their emotions and cope with being in a mainstream school... less escalation of emotions and behaviour.”

Sarah Wanless, SENDCo,
St Ives Primary and Nursery

Specialist Equipment

In a small number of cases, funding has also been used to procure specialist equipment and resources to support better access to learning.

Sensory equipment (e.g. weighted resources, sensory tools, low-arousal furnishings), communication aids and visual supports, adapted furniture and workstations, assistive technology and resources to support structured and independent learning have played a critical role in enabling CYP to engage in learning by reducing sensory overload, supporting communication and promoting independence.

Targeted Professional Development

Many schools have made use of training to build expertise in autism awareness and good practice, communication and language development, trauma-informed and relational approaches, behaviour and regulation strategies and cognition and learning interventions. Much of this support has been accessed from Dorset Council Educational Psychologists and Specialist Teachers, NHS Speech and Language or Occupational Therapists and TADSS Outreach services.

School leaders who have accessed such training report that targeted professional development has contributed to increased staff confidence and capability, though they also report that access to specialist input can be variable and is often constrained by wider system capacity.



Alternative Provision

In some cases, and mostly in the secondary phase, schools have used the funding to support access to alternative provision (AP) or to develop hybrid models, where CYP access provision across multiple settings. This includes:

- ▶ Part-time placement in alternative provision
- ▶ Combination of mainstream and offsite support
- ▶ Bespoke packages combining education and therapeutic input

While this approach can be appropriate in specific circumstances, schools report that suitable AP placements are limited, costs can exceed available funding and provision may not always align with the complexity of need. In addition, there is evidence that many CYP accessing AP are not receiving a full-time offer of education. As a result, AP is often used as a complementary or interim solution, rather than a sustained long-term approach.



Variation in Approach and Efficacy

Although common patterns are evident, there is significant variation in how funding is used across schools, influenced by the profile of CYP supported, the availability of staffing and expertise, the physical space within the school, leadership decisions and local context and ready access to external services.

Some schools have developed highly structured, sustainable models of provision, while others have been more reliant on individualised and reactive approaches, reflecting the challenges of meeting complex need within a mainstream environment, particularly in the secondary phase.

Overall, the use of Mainstream Specialist exceptional funding illustrates that:

- ▶ Schools are employing a wide range of strategies to meet complex and varied need
- ▶ There is a strong reliance on additional staffing, particularly 1:1 support
- ▶ Where possible, schools are creating small-group, bespoke provision models
- ▶ Effective provision typically requires a combination of staffing, environment, intervention and training
- ▶ Variability in implementation reflects underlying differences in capacity, context and agency

Impact of the Funding

Mainstream Specialist exceptional funding has had a significant and largely positive impact on children and young people (CYP), as well as on the wider school environment.

Schools consistently report that the funding has enabled them to maintain placements that would otherwise have been at risk of breakdown, improve the safety, wellbeing and engagement of CYP, reduce disruption and improve outcomes for peers and develop more inclusive practices and provision models.

In many cases, schools highlight that, without access to this funding, they would have been unable to meet need and that the likelihood of exclusion or placement breakdown would have been substantially increased.

Impact on Children and Young People

The most frequently reported impact of the funding relates to improvements in regulation, engagement and readiness to learn. Schools described

- ▶ Increased emotional stability and reduced dysregulation
- ▶ Improved attendance and engagement with education
- ▶ Greater consistency in daily routines and experiences
- ▶ Increased feelings of safety and security within the school environment
- ▶ Improved ability to access learning, particularly where provision was adapted

For some CYP, particularly those with SEMH or communication and interaction needs, the funding has enabled re-engagement with education, including transitions from part-time timetables or periods of absence back into more consistent attendance.

“Children’s attendance is over 90% consistently and they are not being suspended. Children are making progress academically.”

Elly Layfield, SENDCo,
Dorchester Middle School

For those with cognition and learning needs, the funding has supported progress in basic literacy and numeracy skills, communication and understanding, independence and self-management. However, it is important to note that in many cases, progress is described as incremental and developmental, reflecting the complexity of need within the cohort. For some CYP, the most significant impact has been stabilisation, rather than rapid academic progress.

“The funding has supported some of the children to get into a ‘just right state’ for learning... meaning more children receive the support.”

Aimee Bowles, SENDCo,
Bridport Primary School

Impact on Inclusion

A key strength of the Mainstream Specialist exceptional funding – and its defining purpose – has been its role in preventing placement breakdown and exclusion. Schools repeatedly report that CYP who might otherwise have been permanently excluded have been successfully retained in mainstream settings. Funding has enabled schools to manage behaviour that challenges in a more structured and supportive way, with placements stabilised during periods of high need or transition.

In this respect, the funding has made an important contribution to reducing suspensions and exclusions, maintaining CYP within their local communities and supporting continuity of education. This aligns with national policy priorities to reduce reliance on exclusion and to strengthen inclusive practice within mainstream education.

“Reports from parents... their child communicates that they have friends now... they laugh and interact in a fun and fulfilling way.”

Christine Goodall, SENDCo, Downlands
Community Primary

Wider Impact

Schools also highlight the wider benefits of the funding. These include reduced disruption within classrooms, improved learning environments for peers, increased capacity for staff to support the whole class and a strengthened inclusive ethos within the school.

By providing additional support for CYP with complex needs, schools report that they are better able to maintain calm and structured learning environments, support a broader range of learners effectively and reduce the impact of significant need on other pupils. In this sense, the funding has contributed to whole-school improvement, rather than benefiting individual CYP alone.

The impact on staff confidence and professional practice was also noted by respondents. Schools report that access to additional funding has enabled increased adult presence to manage complex situations, opportunities for staff to develop skills through training and collaboration, greater confidence in supporting CYP with high levels of need and improved consistency of approach across staff teams.

Where funding has supported access to specialist training or external expertise, schools note that this has had a lasting impact on staff capability, including improved understanding of SEND profiles, more effective use of strategies for regulation and communication and increased use of structured and evidence-based interventions. However, schools also indicated that confidence is often conditional, depending on the availability of staffing, training and external support.

“Helped both staff and targeted pupils and parents with their mental health and sense of belonging as we can keep them in school, on track and generally happy and learning.”

Louise Greenham,
Head of School, Damers First School.

Opportunities and Limitations

In some schools, Mainstream Specialist exceptional funding has acted as a catalyst for wider changes in practice, including:

- ▶ The development of small-group or specialist-in-mainstream provision
- ▶ Increased use of adapted teaching approaches
- ▶ Greater focus on regulation, wellbeing and readiness to learn
- ▶ Improved collaboration with external professionals

These developments demonstrate that, where implemented effectively, funding has had the potential to contribute to longer-term improvements in inclusion, rather than simply addressing immediate need.

However, whilst the overall impact of the funding has been positive, it is important to highlight the limitations reported by schools.

Funding is often viewed as enabling the management and containment of need, rather than fully meeting it. A small but significant number of schools report that progress for some CYP has been constrained by the limitations of mainstream environments and that the effectiveness of provision has been heavily dependent on staffing availability and expertise.

Despite significant levels of funding, some CYP have required levels of support that are difficult to sustain in mainstream settings. For CYP with the most complex profiles, schools report that even with exceptional funding, their mainstream setting is not the most appropriate long-term placement as provision rely heavily on individual staff members rather than systemic approaches and opportunities for full inclusion in classroom learning is limited.



In summary, Mainstream Specialist exceptional funding has:

- ▶ Had a clear and positive impact on CYP, particularly in relation to regulation, engagement and stability
- ▶ Played a critical role in preventing exclusion and maintaining placements
- ▶ Contributed to improved outcomes for peers and the wider school environment
- ▶ Supported staff development and increased confidence
- ▶ Enabled some schools to develop more inclusive and adaptive models of provision

However, the impact is often focused on stabilisation rather than transformation, provision has relied heavily on additional staffing and local adaptation and for some CYP, needs continue to exceed what some schools feel can reasonably be delivered in mainstream settings, even with enhanced funding.

“It works for some children, but not others.”

Chris Perry, Headteacher,
Cheselbourne Village School



Effective Practice

Alongside the challenges identified, clear and encouraging examples of effective practice have emerged. These illustrate how Mainstream Specialist exceptional funding has and can be used to deliver meaningful and impactful provision when supported by appropriate conditions, including staffing, space and leadership.

Across responses, successful practice is characterised by a shift away from purely reactive, individualised support towards more structured, planned and collective approaches to meeting need.

Bespoke Provision

One of the strongest areas of effective practice is the development of small-group, specialist-in-mainstream provision. A growing number of schools have been able to move beyond a solely 1:1 support model and establish dedicated provision spaces, small teaching groups, structured routines and adapted curricula, often mounted with support from local Special schools.

These schools report significantly improved outcomes for CYP, with successful provision typified by reduced sensory demand and more predictable environments, targeted teaching aligned to CYP developmental stage rather than age, opportunities for over-learning and repetition and a balance between specialist support and access to mainstream experiences. These approaches are consistently described by schools as more educationally effective and financially sustainable than purely individualised support.

“Children who would not have had a specialist place... have been able to have the provision they need within a local setting... attend the same school as their siblings. The impact... has been fantastic.”

Lisa Thompson, Head of School, Sherborne Abbey CE Primary

Culture Change

Schools that have prioritised emotional regulation, wellbeing and readiness to learn as a foundation for provision have also reported more positive outcomes. Most of these schools do not report having put in place bespoke arrangements but, instead, have developed whole school approaches, such as structured opportunities for regulation throughout the day, the development of consistent adult relationships and clear routines, use of low-arousal spaces and sensory supports and the explicit teaching of self-regulation strategies.

In some of these settings, impact is seen not only in behaviour but also in improved attendance, increased engagement and greater capacity for learning over time. This reflects a shift towards a more developmental and needs-led approach, rather than a solely behavioural or academic focus.

Some schools note that this change of focus was backed by investment in staff training and professional development. Many schools report using funding to build staff expertise, leading to improved confidence in supporting complex needs, greater consistency of approach across staff teams and increased use of structured and evidence-informed strategies.

In some cases, schools report developing internal expertise that benefits not only individual CYP, but wider cohorts within the school. So that autism-informed practice and trauma-informed and relational approaches have become the new normal.

Indeed, a notable feature of effective practice reported by schools is the wider impact beyond individual CYP supported by exceptional funding. Many schools report that well-implemented provision improved the overall learning environment, reduced disruption and increased stability, benefitting other CYP with additional needs and, indeed, whole-school inclusion aims.

In schools where provision was developed more strategically, the funding acted as a lever for broader school improvement, rather than a resource for individual pupils.

Timely and Targeted Support

Many schools report positive outcomes where evidence-based interventions have been carefully selected, delivered consistently and integrated into a broader provision model. Effective examples cited in responses include structured literacy and numeracy interventions, precision teaching approaches, communication-focused programmes and social and emotional learning interventions. Crucially, these interventions are most effective where they are embedded within daily practice, rather than delivered as isolated activities.

Positive outcomes are also associated with schools that have effectively utilised external services and multi-agency support, including Educational Psychology, Specialist Teachers, Speech and Language Therapy and Occupational Therapy.

Where external support has been timely, consistent and aligned with school provision, it has contributed to clearer understanding of CYP needs, more targeted and appropriate interventions and increased staff confidence in implementation. Understandably, where a collaborative approach has been taken, the overall quality of provision and the ability of schools to support CYP has been strengthened.

“Effective use of the funding has enabled targeted interventions... improved progress, confidence, independence, and wellbeing.”

Gayle Edwards, Deputy Head,
Shaftesbury CE Primary

Effective Leadership

The most effective examples of practice revealed by respondents have been underpinned by strong leadership and strategic planning. In these cases, schools have taken a coherent, whole-school approach to inclusion, aligned funding use with a clear vision for SEND provision, moved from reactive responses to proactive system design and ensured consistency across staff and provision. This suggests that the impact of Mainstream Specialist exceptional funding is not determined solely by the amount of resource available, but also by how strategically it is used.

Challenges and Limitations

While Mainstream Specialist exceptional funding has provided important and often effective support for CYP with complex needs, the review identifies several consistent challenges and limitations that affect its use and impact.

These challenges are systemic rather than isolated, and reported across schools, phases and localities. They relate not only to how funding is implemented, but to the wider context in which schools are operating, including workforce capacity, infrastructure, and SEND sufficiency. Together, they highlight the limits of a predominantly reactive, individualised funding model in responding to increasing levels and complexity of need.

“While this bespoke provision supported short-term emotional safety... it did not result in sustained access to learning... reinforcing the need for timely access to specialist provision.”

Gary Spracklen, Headteacher,
The Prince of Wales

Workforce

The most frequently reported challenge relates to the recruitment and retention of suitably skilled staff. Schools report difficulty recruiting teaching assistants and HLTAs, limited availability of staff with specialist SEND expertise, reliance on agency or temporary staff and challenges maintaining consistency of staffing for CYP.

These issues directly impact the effectiveness of provision. Where staffing is unstable or insufficiently skilled, consistency of support is reduced, relationships (which are critical to many CYP) are disrupted, and interventions are more difficult to implement. In some cases, schools report that senior leaders, SENDCOs or teaching staff are required to provide direct support due to staffing shortages, placing additional pressure on wider school capacity.

“Recruitment is difficult... you do not get skilled people apply for temporary roles.”

Juliette Frampton, Assistant Principal & SENCo,
Atlantic Academy



“Sometimes difficult to cope with volume of different needs and not enough skilled staff.”

Kirsty Rogers,
SENDCo, Wyke Regis Primary Federation

Physical Space and Environment

A second major challenge is the availability of appropriate physical space within mainstream schools. Many schools report that they do not have sufficient rooms to create dedicated provision spaces and have to repurpose unsuitable areas, including corridors, shared spaces and offices. Consequently, in many of these cases, schools cannot provide low-arousal environments consistently and had difficulty separating groups of CYP with incompatible needs.

This has significant implications for the quality of provision. For many CYP in this cohort, environment is as important as staffing, particularly in relation to sensory regulation, communication and emotional wellbeing. Where appropriate space is not available, schools are limited in their ability to move beyond reactive, adult support, and may be unable to implement more effective small-group or structured provision models.

Suitability of Mainstream Environments

Schools consistently report that, for some CYP, the mainstream classroom environment remains inherently challenging, even with significant adaptation.

Frequent issues include sensory overload due to noise, movement and class size, pace and structure of the mainstream curriculum, social demands of large group settings and limited opportunities for individualisation within whole-class teaching.

As a result, many CYP spend a significant proportion of their time outside the classroom so access to mainstream learning may be highly restricted or supported. This raises important questions about the appropriateness of placement over time, particularly for CYP who require consistently low-arousal, highly structured environments.

“My concern is that this is a place holder and a way of keeping children in a provision which is ultimately not suitable for them.”

Mick Homer, Headteacher,
Mary's CE First School

St



Funding Sufficiency and Timeliness

Aside from issues around provision, a significant minority of schools also identify challenges relating to the level and administration of funding. These schools report that funding does not fully cover the cost of required provision, that delays in funding allocation or confirmation lead to difficulties creating suitable provision and that the model is reactive and inherently uncertain, given that CYP could move on to a specialist placement at any time. In some cases, schools report that they have front-funded provision to meet immediate need, creating financial risk and pressure.

These factors affect schools' ability to recruit and retain staff on a stable basis, invest in longer-term provision models and plan provision strategically, rather than reactively.

“In a larger school with a higher number and complexity of needs, funding... is insufficient to meet the cumulative demand for specialist expertise, intervention time, resources, and leadership oversight required.”

Gayle Edwards, Deputy Head of School,
Shaftesbury CE Primary School

Reliance on Individualised Support Models

The review highlights a strong reliance on 1:1 staffing models, often driven by immediate need and risk management. While effective in the short term, this approach presents several well-understood limitations:

- ▶ It can reduce opportunities for independence and peer interaction
- ▶ It is difficult to sustain financially and operationally
- ▶ It may be vulnerable to staffing changes or absence
- ▶ It does not address underlying structural gaps in provision

Many schools indicate that small-group or structured provision models are more effective than providing 1:1 TA support. However, for many this option is not achievable within the funding envelope.

Access to Alternative and Specialist Provision

Limited access to suitable alternative provision (AP) and specialist placements has also identified as a challenge. Schools report a shortage of appropriate AP placements, variability in the quality and suitability of AP, costs exceeding available funding and delays in securing specialist placements.

As a result, some CYP remain in mainstream settings for extended periods while awaiting alternative provision, requiring schools to provide intensive and sustained support beyond what might reasonably be expected.

“The funding has been used mostly for alternative provision... however the costs are very high and the funding does not cover these costs.”

Emma Sleightholme, Headteacher,
Winterbourne Valley First

Complexity of SEND

The increasing complexity and co-occurrence of needs presents an ongoing challenge. Schools describe supporting CYP with multiple and interacting areas of need, significant developmental delay, high levels of emotional and behavioural dysregulation and limited access to mainstream teaching without adaptation. In these cases, even well-planned provision may be insufficient to fully meet need, and progress may be slow, uneven and focused on stabilisation rather than academic attainment.

This reflects the reality that some CYP supported through the Mainstream Specialist exceptional funding route have needs that extend beyond the capacity of mainstream settings, even when additional funding is available.

Variability and Equity

The review also identified variation in experience between schools, influenced by differences in staffing and expertise, availability of physical space, access to external support and – most critically of all – leadership capacity and strategic approach.

This variation raises issues of equity, as the quality and effectiveness of provision can depend on local circumstances – and particularly the commitment of individual school leaders to truly inclusive practice – rather than need alone.

Many schools that report successful integration of CYP with complex SEND via the Mainstream Specialist exceptional funding route express concern that highly inclusive schools may be disproportionately impacted, that access to resources and support is not always consistent and that the system relies heavily on individual school capacity and goodwill. A small minority of schools used the funding to place CYP somewhere else (such as in independent AP) rather than trying to include them.



Strategic Implications

While the funding is enabling schools to support CYP with complex needs and preventing placement breakdown in many cases, it is also clear that the current approach is not sustainable as a primary mechanism for meeting specialist-level need within mainstream education. Evidence clearly points towards the need for a more planned, structured and differentiated system of provision, aligned with both local priorities and national policy direction.

From Individualised Responses to Planned Provision

A key implication of the review is that the system has become increasingly reliant on case-by-case funding decisions to address need that are, in many instances, predictable and recurring.

The survey clearly indicates that schools are frequently:

- ▶ Recreating similar forms of provision independently
- ▶ Developing bespoke arrangements for individual CYP
- ▶ Relying heavily on 1:1 staffing to manage need

While effective in the short term, this approach leads to inconsistency in provision, creates inefficiencies in the use of resources, places significant pressure on school staffing and leadership and makes long-term planning difficult.

The findings suggest a need to move towards planned specialist-in-mainstream provision, where common patterns of need are met through structured, collectively resourced models, rather than individualised responses alone. This aligns with the SEND and Alternative

Provision Improvement Plan (*Every Child Achieving and Thriving*, DfE 2026), which emphasises the importance of consistent, system-wide approaches and the reduction of reliance on ad hoc, reactive arrangements.

“Money is not the only answer... we need specialists involved... a funding model that follows the child does not allow schools to plan long term.”

Adam Darley, Headteacher,
The Purbeck School

Clarifying the Role of Mainstream Education

While mainstream schools have demonstrated significant commitment and adaptability, the evidence suggests that not all needs can be met effectively within a standard mainstream classroom environment.

Some CYP require sustained access to low-arousal, highly structured provision. The expectation that individual schools can adapt fully to all levels of need is not realistic.

National policy reinforces this position. The DfE is clear that mainstream inclusion must be supported by appropriate infrastructure, expertise and resource, and that specialist provision remains an essential part of the system for CYP whose needs cannot reasonably be met in mainstream settings.

This review therefore supports a model in which mainstream schools:

- ▶ Continue to play a central role in inclusion
- ▶ Are supported by clearly defined specialist pathways and provision including an Experts at Hand offer, to be developed in response to the SEND Reforms
- ▶ Are only asked to support CYP with specialist needs who can be educated locally, with reasonable adaptations to ordinarily available provision

The Importance of Environment

A consistent theme throughout the findings is that environmental factors are as important as staffing in meeting the needs of CYP with complex SEND. The widespread use of bespoke provision spaces, small-group teaching environments and low-arousal and sensory-adapted settings demonstrates that effective support is not simply a function of additional adults, but of how provision is designed and delivered.

It is clear therefore that investment in staffing alone will not be sufficient. Schools require access to appropriate physical environments. Planning for SEND provision must include space and infrastructure considerations. This aligns with national expectations that inclusion requires adaptation of environments and systems, not only increased staffing levels.

“Basing the model on TA/HLTA costs assumes staffing is the solution... the issue is often the suitability of the environment itself.”

Gary Spracklen,
Headteacher, The Prince of Wales

Sustainability and Workforce Considerations

The heavy reliance on additional staffing, particularly 1:1 support, raises important questions about sustainability. The current model depends on a workforce that is already under pressure, is vulnerable to recruitment and retention challenges, requires ongoing, high levels of funding for individual CYP and may not promote independence or longterm outcomes.

The DfE highlights the importance of developing a skilled and confident workforce, supported by clear expectations and consistent training. However, this must be combined with a shift towards models of provision that are less dependent on individual staffing ratios and more focused on structured, specialist practice.

System Equity and Consistency

The variation in how the Mainstream Specialist exceptional funding is used across schools raises important issues of equity and consistency. At present, the quality and type of provision available to CYP may depend on the capacity of individual schools. Access to enhanced support can vary between localities, with highly inclusive schools experiencing disproportionate pressure. Highly inclusive schools may experience disproportionate pressure. Access to enhanced support can vary between localities.

A more planned approach to provision would support greater consistency in the offer available to CYP, more equitable distribution of resources and clearer expectations for schools and families. This reflects the national ambition, set out in *Every Child Achieving and Thriving* (DfE, 2026), to ensure that every child can expect a consistent and high-quality SEND experience, regardless of where they live.

Reducing Reliance on Exceptional Funding

The findings from the survey suggest that, while Mainstream Specialist exceptional funding will continue to play an important role, the system should aim to reduce reliance on it over time as a primary means of meeting need.

This is not because the funding is ineffective, but because it is resource-intensive. It can reinforce reactive approaches and it does not provide a consistent, systemwide offer. Instead, exceptional funding should sit within a broader system where baseline provision is strengthened, specialist-in-mainstream options are clearly defined and pathways between mainstream, specialist and alternative provision are transparent.

This aligns with national policy, which promotes a graduated, coherent system of support, rather than reliance on exceptional measures.

Alignment with National Reform

The findings of this review are closely aligned with the direction set out in *Every Child Achieving and Thriving* (DfE, 2026), particularly in relation to:

- ▶ Strengthening mainstream inclusion through better support and clearer expectations
- ▶ Developing planned local provision systems, rather than reactive responses
- ▶ Improving consistency and equity across local areas
- ▶ Ensuring that specialist provision is used appropriately and effectively
- ▶ Reducing reliance on crisis-driven and unplanned arrangements

In this sense, the experiences of schools in Dorset reflect wider national challenges and reinforce the relevance of the proposed reforms.

In summary, this review suggests that:

- ▶ Mainstream Specialist exceptional funding is valuable but not sufficient as a long-term solution
- ▶ There is a need to move from individualised, reactive responses to planned, structured provision models
- ▶ Mainstream schools require greater support, clarity and infrastructure to meet complex need
- ▶ Effective provision depends on environment and design, not just staffing
- ▶ Future sufficiency development should align with national policy by creating a more coherent, consistent and sustainable SEND system

Recommendations

The following recommendations set out a strategic direction of travel for Dorset, recognising the need to:

- ▶ **Theme 1:** Strengthen Mainstream Inclusion Capacity
- ▶ **Theme 2:** Reduce Reliance on Exceptional Funding
- ▶ **Theme 3:** Develop a Planned and Coherent SEND System, aligning local practice with national ambitions outlined in *Every Child Achieving and Thriving* (DfE, 2026)
- ▶ **Theme 4:** Ensure Consistent Funding Across the System

Strengthen Mainstream Inclusion Capacity

Recommendation 1: Continue to support and develop inclusive practice in mainstream schools through clear expectations, guidance and training

This should include:

- ▶ Strengthening the implementation of ordinarily available provision
- ▶ Promoting evidence-based approaches to teaching and intervention
- ▶ Supporting schools to prioritise regulation, wellbeing and readiness to learn
- ▶ Ensuring consistent approaches to SEND across schools

This aligns with the national expectation that mainstream schools play a central role in inclusion, supported by appropriate training and system-level clarity.

Recommendation 2: Increase access to high-quality training and professional development for the SEND workforce, not only through an Experts at Hand model but through improved local outreach offer

Priority areas should include:

- ▶ Communication and interaction (including autism practice)
- ▶ Cognition and learning strategies
- ▶ Trauma-informed and relational approaches
- ▶ Behaviour and regulation
- ▶ Adaptive teaching and curriculum design

This will support the development of a skilled, confident workforce, reducing reliance on adhoc solutions and strengthening consistency of practice.



Reduce Reliance on Exceptional Funding

Recommendation 3: Reposition Mainstream Specialist exceptional funding as part of a broader, graduated system of support rather than a primary mechanism for meeting need

This should involve:

- ▶ Clearer criteria and thresholds for accessing funding
- ▶ Improved timeliness and predictability of decision-making
- ▶ Alignment with planned provision pathways
- ▶ Regular review of cases to support appropriate transitions

The aim is not to reduce the availability of funding, but to ensure that it is used strategically and proportionately, within a clearer system framework.



Develop a Planned and Coherent SEND System

Recommendation 4: Develop a network of Inclusion Bases across Dorset, aligned to the patterns of need identified in the review

This should include:

Cognition and Learning (C&L) Inclusion Bases

- ▶ Establish C&L inclusion bases across all localities
- ▶ Provide structured, cumulative teaching and adapted curricula
- ▶ Support CYP who require significant adaptation but can benefit from mainstream inclusion

Evidence from the review indicates that many CYP currently supported through exceptional funding fall within this group, and that schools are already attempting to replicate this model on an individual basis.

Communication and Interaction (C&I) Inclusion Bases

- ▶ Expand existing provision to increase capacity and locality coverage
- ▶ Provide lowarousal environments and specialist communication support
- ▶ Support CYP with autism and related needs who cannot access mainstream classrooms consistently

SEMH Inclusion Bases and Alternative Provision (Learning Centres)

- ▶ Ensure specialist support is available in every locality and at every phase to support CYP with Social, Emotional and Mental Health needs who need access to therapeutic, relational and low-demand environments to stabilise and re-integrate into a mainstream environment
- ▶ Support schools to adapt their environments and approaches to better manage CYP at risk of exclusion, through an improved and clearly defined AP offer (including outreach)

Taken together, these developments will reduce reliance on 1:1 staffing models, provide more consistent and equitable access to specialist support, enable earlier and more appropriate intervention and relieve pressure on special schools and alternative provision.

This aligns strongly with the national direction towards planned, locally accessible specialist-in-mainstream provision.

Recommendation 5: Support investment in physical infrastructure to deliver inclusive provision

This should include:

- ▶ Support for schools to make cost-effective adaptations to existing environments to create – for example – small-group and low-arousal (sensory) spaces
- ▶ Support for schools to adapt existing buildings where feasible

Recommendation 6: Strengthen pathways between mainstream, specialist provision and Alternative Provision to ensure CYP receive the right support at the right time

This should involve:

- ▶ Clearer criteria for placement decisions
- ▶ Improved coordination between services
- ▶ Reduced delays in accessing appropriate provision
- ▶ Stronger links between mainstream schools and specialist providers

The aim is to create a system where movement between settings is planned and purposeful, rather than reactive.



Recommendation 7: Use the development of Inclusion Bases to release capacity within specialist provision for CYP with the most complex needs

By enabling some CYP to be supported effectively within specialist-in-mainstream provision, capacity can be created within special schools, resources can be targeted more effectively, and overall system balance can be improved.

This reflects the principle that specialist provision should be used where it is most needed, as set out in national policy.

Ensure Consistent Funding Across the System

Recommendation 8: Review the funding model to ensure it supports the development of a more planned and sustainable system

Efforts should be made to ensure funding levels reflect the true cost of provision, that allocation of funding is consistent and transparent and that reactive, short-term solutions are not incentivised. This will help ensure that resources are used in a way that supports systemlevel improvement, rather than solely individual cases.



Conclusion

This review has demonstrated that Mainstream Specialist exceptional funding is a valuable and impactful component of Dorset's SEND system, enabling schools to support children and young people (CYP) with complex needs who might otherwise be unable to access education within mainstream settings.

The evidence shows that the funding has made a meaningful difference to CYP, schools and communities. It has supported inclusion, improved stability, reduced the risk of exclusion, and enabled schools to respond flexibly and creatively to a wide range of needs.

However, the review also highlights that the funding is operating within a system experiencing significant pressure, and that its current use is often shaped by the need to respond to immediate challenges rather than longterm planning.

Key Messages

Several consistent messages emerge from the findings:

- ▶ Mainstream schools are increasingly supporting CYP with specialist-level needs, often requiring significant adaptation to provision, environment and staffing
- ▶ Mainstream Specialist exceptional funding is effective in stabilising placements and supporting engagement, but does not always enable needs to be fully met over time
- ▶ Schools are developing innovative and effective practice, particularly where they can create structured, smallgroup and specialist provision
- ▶ There are systemic challenges relating to workforce, space, funding and access to specialist provision that limit what can be achieved
- ▶ The current model relies heavily on individualised, reactive responses, which creates variability and challenges for sustainability



Future Direction

The review supports a clear direction of travel towards a more planned, coherent and sustainable SEND system, in line with national policy expectations set out in *Every Child Achieving and Thriving* (DfE, 2026). This includes:

- ▶ Strengthening the role of mainstream schools through improved support, training and clarity
- ▶ Reducing reliance on exceptional, case-by-case funding as a primary mechanism
- ▶ Supporting the development of provision that reflects common patterns of need
- ▶ Improving pathways between mainstream, specialist and alternative provision
- ▶ Ensuring that CYP with the most complex needs can access appropriate specialist settings where required

In this context, Mainstream Specialist exceptional funding remains an important tool, but its role should evolve as part of a wider system that is more proactive, equitable and strategically aligned.

Final Reflections

This review reflects the commitment, adaptability and professionalism of Dorset's mainstream schools in supporting CYP with increasingly complex needs. The overwhelming majority of schools have demonstrated a willingness to innovate and to prioritise inclusion.

The next phase of system development provides an opportunity to build on this strong foundation by creating a more consistent and sustainable framework of support, to ensure that CYP receive the right provision, in the right place, at the right time. Schools are equipped with the resources, environments and expertise they need and the system as a whole can respond effectively to both current and future demand.

By aligning the strengths of current practice with a more structured and planned approach, Dorset is well-placed to continue developing a SEND system that is sustainable, responsive and inclusive.



Appendices

Appendix A

Financial Overview of Mainstream Specialist Funding

Overview of Investment

Mainstream Specialist exceptional funding represents a significant and growing area of SEND investment within Dorset. Between Autumn 2024 and Spring 2026, a total of approximately £7.6 million was allocated to mainstream schools to support children and young people (CYP) with specialist-level needs through the Mainstream Specialist Exceptional Funding route.

	Autumn 2024	Spring 2025	Summer 2025	Autumn 2025	Spring 2026	Total
SEND Chesil	£ 369,096	£ 386,301	£ 477,946	£ 407,216	£ 385,120	£ 2,025,680
SEND Dorchester & West	£ 194,852	£ 225,962	£ 341,425	£ 420,747	£ 341,080	£ 1,524,067
SEND East & Purbeck	£ 434,170	£ 342,978	£ 478,619	£ 499,259	£ 461,429	£ 2,216,456
SEND North	£ 219,348	£ 225,876	£ 424,991	£ 515,195	£ 442,005	£ 1,827,414
TOTAL	£ 1,217,467	£ 1,181,117	£ 1,722,981	£ 1,842,418	£ 1,629,634	£ 7,593,617

Table 1: Total mainstream specialist funding paid in each locality per term

This level of investment reflects both the increasing scale of demand and the intensity of provision required to sustain placements in mainstream settings.

Growth in Demand and Associated Costs

The financial investment closely mirrors a rapid increase in the number of CYP supported. The number of CYP increased from 141 (Autumn 2024) to 296 (Spring 2026), representing a 110% rise. This growth has been particularly pronounced in Key Stage 1, which increased by 127% (49 to 111 pupils). This expansion has driven a corresponding increase in funding allocations, with termly spend rising to a peak of £1.84 million in Autumn 2025, before slightly reducing to £1.63 million in Spring 2026, reflecting the shorter length of the Spring term rather than a reduction in demand.

	Autumn 2024	Spring 2025	Summer 2025	Autumn 2025	Spring 2026	Growth
KS1	49	64	69	109	111	127%
KS2	52	69	53	110	114	119%
KS3	28	31	19	61	46	64%
KS4	12	11	10	27	25	108%
TOTAL	141	175	151	307	296	110%

Table 2: The number of young people in receipt of mainstream specialist funding per term by key stage.

Distribution of Funding by Locality

Funding is distributed across Dorset's four SEND localities, with notable variation:

- ▶ SEND East & Purbeck: £2.22m
- ▶ SEND Chesil: £2.03m
- ▶ SEND North: £1.83m
- ▶ SEND Dorchester & West: £1.52m

East & Purbeck and Chesil account for the largest share of spend, reflecting higher demand, higher complexity and differences in local provision capacity. This variation in spend aligns with themes identified elsewhere in the report regarding uneven pressures and capacity across the system.

	Autumn 2024	Spring 2025	Summer 2025	Autumn 2025	Spring 2026	Total
Chesil						
Primary	£ 233,694	£ 260,430	£ 383,955	£ 309,663	£ 289,823	£ 1,477,566
Secondary	£ 135,403	£ 125,871	£ 93,991	£ 97,553	£ 95,297	£ 548,114
Dorchester & West						
Primary	£ 137,043	£ 159,205	£ 225,274	£ 280,319	£ 243,674	£ 1,045,514
Secondary	£ 57,809	£ 66,757	£ 116,151	£ 140,428	£ 97,407	£ 478,552
East & Purbeck						
Primary	£ 350,144	£ 283,901	£ 409,452	£ 359,682	£ 334,881	£ 1,738,062
Secondary	£ 84,026	£ 59,077	£ 69,167	£ 139,577	£ 126,547	£ 478,394
North						
Primary	£ 207,027	£ 209,447	£ 383,092	£ 436,675	£ 389,471	£ 1,625,711
Secondary	£ 12,321	£ 16,429	£ 41,898	£ 78,520	£ 52,534	£ 201,703

Table 3: Total mainstream specialist funding paid in each locality per term by school phase

Funding by Phase and Key Stage

Analysis shows that funding is heavily concentrated in the primary phase and earlier key stages. The largest numbers of CYP are in KS1 (111 pupils) and KS2 (114 pupils). Many CYP move from mainstream to specialist provision (Special School or Independent Non-Maintained Special School) at the point of transition from primary to secondary phase, reflecting survey responses which indicate that primary schools are more able to adapt their provision to meet the needs of CYP with SEND.

During the time the Mainstream Specialist exceptional funding model has been in place, growth rates by key stage clearly indicate that primary-phase spend significantly outweighs secondary, with primary provision representing the largest share of investment.

This data reinforces a key systemic insight: that increasing need is emerging earlier, perhaps through more effective early identification, placing pressure on primary schools to deliver specialist-level provision much earlier than before.

	Autumn 2024	Spring 2025	Summer 2025	Autumn 2025	Spring 2026	Total
Chesil						
KS1	£ 122,818	£ 145,454	£ 202,973	£ 176,828	£ 152,317	£ 800,390
KS2	£ 110,875	£ 114,977	£ 180,982	£ 132,835	£ 137,506	£ 677,176
KS3	£ 83,806	£ 81,646	£ 45,054	£ 37,058	£ 42,760	£ 290,324
KS4	£ 51,596	£ 44,225	£ 48,937	£ 60,495	£ 52,537	£ 257,790
Dorchester & West						
KS1	£ 58,592	£ 64,700	£ 97,259	£ 95,177	£ 73,301	£ 389,028
KS2	£ 78,452	£ 94,505	£ 128,015	£ 185,142	£ 170,373	£ 656,486
KS3	£ 48,226	£ 63,334	£ 97,417	£ 82,377	£ 67,679	£ 359,033
KS4	£ 9,583	£ 3,423	£ 18,734	£ 58,051	£ 29,728	£ 119,520
East & Purbeck						
KS1	£ 141,483	£ 117,207	£ 188,818	£ 188,434	£ 175,293	£ 811,234
KS2	£ 208,661	£ 166,695	£ 220,635	£ 171,248	£ 159,589	£ 926,827
KS3	£ 51,596	£ 36,964	£ 43,951	£ 101,334	£ 92,339	£ 326,184
KS4	£ 32,430	£ 22,113	£ 25,216	£ 38,243	£ 34,209	£ 152,210
North						
KS1	£ 110,252	£ 113,094	£ 219,719	£ 264,827	£ 226,952	£ 934,843
KS2	£ 96,775	£ 96,353	£ 163,373	£ 171,848	£ 162,519	£ 690,869
KS3	£ 9,583	£ 8,214	£ 20,172	£ 41,094	£ 31,767	£ 110,832
KS4	£ 2,738	£ 8,214	£ 21,726	£ 37,426	£ 20,767	£ 90,871
TOTAL	£ 1,217,467	£ 1,181,117	£ 1,722,981	£ 1,842,418	£ 1,629,634	£ 7,593,617

Table 4: Total mainstream specialist funding paid in each locality per term by key stage

Cost Drivers and Funding Characteristics

An analysis of detailed school-level data shows funding is typically standardised per pupil but varies based on term length (e.g. 11–14 weeks) and the level of need and provision required. Individual placements can range from £9k per term to over £100k annually in the most complex cases, when additional sources of funding are included.

Spend is concentrated in a relatively small number of schools, often those with strong inclusive practice or capacity to deliver bespoke provision, supporting the report's wider finding that the system is relying on highly inclusive schools and individualised funding arrangements rather than planned, equitable provision.

Key Financial Insights

Bringing the data together, several clear messages emerge:

- ▶ Funding has grown significantly in response to demand, rather than through planned system design
- ▶ Investment is closely tied to pupil numbers, indicating a reactive funding model
- ▶ There is significant variation by locality, suggesting differences in demand, access, or practice
- ▶ Spend is concentrated in:
 - ▶ Early years / primary phases
 - ▶ A subset of schools
- ▶ High-cost individual packages highlight the limitations of relying on 1:1 or bespoke provision models

Implications for Sustainability

The financial data strongly reinforces the strategic conclusions of this report, namely:

- ▶ The current model is resource-intensive and difficult to sustain at scale
- ▶ Continued growth at this rate would place significant pressure on the High Needs Block
- ▶ There is a clear need to shift from reactive, individual funding toward planned, locality-based specialist provision

Appendix B

Survey Responses (Overview)

In the first quarter of 2026, a survey was conducted to gather insights from schools on how exceptional top-up funding for children and young people with SEND was being utilised in practice. It aimed to understand the types of provision being implemented, the impact of funding on pupils and wider school communities, and the challenges and opportunities experienced by schools. The findings from the survey informed the report within which this appendix sits, which in turn has provided recommendations on the future development of funding and provision arrangements to support a more effective, needs-led approach to inclusion in mainstream settings.

1. Profile of Respondents

Responses were predominantly from senior leaders, with 49% Headteachers and additional representation from SENDCos and Inclusion Leads. The sample includes a broad cross-section of schools, with representation from secondary and primary phases, maintained and academy settings and all Dorset localities.

2. Scale of Need

Most schools are supporting multiple funded pupils, with 60% supporting 1–2 pupils, leaving a notable proportion (40%) supporting 3+ pupils, indicating growing demand and cumulative pressure within settings.

3. Use of Funding

The funding is overwhelmingly used for staffing capacity. 51% primarily used funding to employ 1:1 staff (TAs/HLTAs), whilst 40% used it primarily to create bespoke provision. Minimal use was reported for training or specialist resources as a primary strategy, suggesting immediate need is workforce-based.

Schools demonstrate layered use of funding, with strong emphasis on Interventions/programmes (41 responses), Training (33 responses) and Specialist resources (33

responses). This suggests schools blend staffing with wider provision development once basic support is secured.

4. Nature of Provision

Qualitative responses indicate provision is typically highly personalised, combining 1:1 support, small groups, and adapted environments, frequently includes sensory approaches, Forest School and external provision (including AP).

5. Inclusion Model in Practice

Where bespoke provision exists, 54% of CYP spend more time in provision than in mainstream with only 17% experiencing full mainstream predominance. This indicates a blended or partial inclusion model, rather than full mainstream integration.

6. Workforce Impact

Funding is used predominantly for Teaching Assistants (63 responses), with limited recruitment of teachers (8) or HLTA roles (11). This reflects reliance on TA-led delivery models, raising questions about sustainability and expertise levels.

7. Impact on Pupils (Direct Beneficiaries)

Strong positive impact reported in terms of improved access to education, increased stability and school retention, better engagement, communication, and regulation.

In several cases, funding has prevented placement breakdown while awaiting specialist provision.

8. Wider School Impact

Benefits extend beyond individual pupils with whole-class learning environments improved (reduced disruption), staff skills and confidence increased and resources and expertise shared across the school. 66 respondents identified the funded pupil as a beneficiary, but large numbers also identify staff, peers, and wider SEND cohorts.

9. System Enablers

Most frequently used external supports include TADSS Outreach (56), EEF guidance (52), Educational Psychologists & Specialist Teachers (45 each). This highlights reliance on external expertise to underpin in-school provision.

10. Key Challenges

The most cited challenges include delays and uncertainty in funding, insufficient levels of funding for complex needs and difficulty accessing specialist expertise or provision.

11. Confidence in Delivery

Most respondents feel confident to deliver provision, with 60% “mostly confident” and 13% “fully confident”. Confidence is limited by complexity of need and the gap between mainstream capability and specialist provision.

12. Views on the Funding Model

Views on current model are mixed. In response to the question, ‘Do you feel the funding model is appropriate for supporting children with special needs in mainstream settings?’ 35% felt that it was appropriate, 25% felt that it wasn’t and 40% were unsure. There was support for reform, with 40% feeling a needs-led and banded model would be preferable to the current system, with 18% opposed.

Appendix C

Sources

Alongside responses from the Mainstream Specialist survey, the following documents, datasets and evidence sources have informed the analysis, findings and strategic interpretation within this report.

1. National Policy, Research and Guidance

- ▶ Department for Education (2026)
Every Child Achieving and Thriving: SEND and Alternative Provision Improvement Plan.
- ▶ Department for Education (2015; updated 2025)
Special Educational Needs and Disability Code of Practice: 0 to 25 years.
- ▶ Education Endowment Foundation (2015)
Making Best Use of Teaching Assistants.
- ▶ Education Endowment Foundation (2025)
Deployment of Teaching Assistants: Guidance Report.
- ▶ Education Endowment Foundation (2020)
Special Educational Needs in Mainstream Schools.

2. Inspection and External Validation

- ▶ Ofsted and Care Quality Commission (2024)
Dorset Area SEND Inspection.
- ▶ Ofsted (2025)
Inspection of Local Authority Children's Services (ILACS): Dorset.

3. Dorset Strategic Plans and Partnership Frameworks

- ▶ Dorset Council (2026)
Best Start in Life Local Plan 2026–2029.
- ▶ Dorset Council (2025)
Strategic Governance Framework.
- ▶ Dorset Council (2023)
Children, Young People and Families Plan (2023-2033).

4. Commissioning, Sufficiency and System Planning

- ▶ Dorset Council (2023)
Principles of How We Commission in Dorset.
- ▶ Dorset Council (2024)
SEND Sufficiency and Capital Planning (including Capital Strategy 2024–2028).
- ▶ Dorset Council (2026)
Mainstream Specialist Exceptional Funding dataset.
- ▶ Dorset Council (2026)
Survey of Schools Using Mainstream Specialist Funding.

Appendix D

Schools and Settings

We would like to extend our sincere thanks to all schools and colleagues across Dorset who contributed to this survey. In total, 77 schools responded to the survey. Your openness, professionalism, and willingness to share both challenges and successes have been invaluable in shaping this report. The insights provided reflect a rich and honest picture of practice across the county, and your contributions will play a vital role in informing future development, improving provision, and strengthening outcomes for children and young people with SEND.

All Saints, Weymouth
Archbishop Wake CE Primary School
Atlantic Academy, Portland
Beaminster School
Bincombe Valley Primary
Bovington Academy
Bridport Primary School
Broadmayne First School
Broadwindsor CE VC Primary
Cerne Abbas CE VC First School
Cheselbourne Village School
Conifers Primary School
Corfe Castle CE Primary School
Damers First School
Dorchester Middle School
Dorset Studio School
Downlands Community Primary School
Emmanuel Middle
Ferndown First School
Ferndown Middle School
Henbury View First School
Hillside Primary
Initio Learning Trust (Small Schools)
Lulworth and Winfrith Primary School
Lytchett Matravers Primary
Lytchett Minster School
Manor Park First School
Motcombe CE Primary
Parley First School
Piddle Valley CE First School
Puddletown First School
Queen Elizabeth School
Radipole Primary School

Rushcombe First School
Salway Ash CE VA Primary School
Sandford St Martin's CE VA Primary
Shaftesbury Abbey CE Primary School
Shaftesbury CE Primary School
Sherborne Abbey CE Primary School
Sherborne Primary School
St Andrew's Primary, Fontmell Magna
St Catherine's Catholic Primary School
St George's Primary School, Portland
St Ives Primary and Nursery School
St James' First School and Nursery
St John's CE Primary
St Mark's CE Primary School
St Mary & St Joseph's Catholic Primary
St Mary the Virgin CE Primary School
St Mary's Catholic Primary School
St Mary's CE First School, Charminster
St Mary's CE Middle School
St Mary's First School and Nursery (WM)
St Michael's CE Middle School
St Nicholas and St Laurence CE Primary
St Nicholas CE Primary School (C Okeford)
St Osmund's CE Middle School
Stalbridge Primary
Stoborough CE Primary School
Stower Provost Community School
Sturminster Marshall First School
The Blandford School
The Gryphon School
The Prince of Wales School
The Purbeck School
The Thomas Hardy School