Dorset Schools' Forum

Date of Meeting:	**6 November 2026**
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, Commissioning Partnerships and Investments**
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 Schools Forum note and comment on the number of places we currently anticipate commissioning for September 2027 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.**

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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 by 6 November 2026. 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 2027-28 as it gives the number of places we expect to pay for but also gives an indication of the budget requirement for top ups.

2. **Specialist Inclusion Bases (previously Resourced Provision):** Continued expansion of Dorset's Specialist Inclusion Bases is key to the SEND transformation plan. Inclusion Bases will be opened in phased tranches across localities and phases growing capacity over the coming years. Dorset will also look to add additional places to existing bases where necessary.

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 Hardye 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 2027 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 Hardye School.

2.2. **Learning Centres:** The Learning Centre places are provisionally commissioned numbers as ongoing sufficiency work continues along with expansion projects. These commissioned places may change ahead of September 2027.

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:** Dorset increased the commissioned number from 340 to 370 for September 2026 for Coastlands College and plan to commission 370 again for September 2027.

3.2. **Unallocated Additional Places:** When creating a budget for places for the financial year 2027-28 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.

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1. Financial Implications

These commissioned places will commit the High Needs Budget to expenditure in total of £17.9m for 2,056 places comprising:

- £1.76m for 293 places in Specialist Inclusion Bases,
- £3.97m for 397 alternative provision places in our learning centres,
- £2.2m for 370 places in further education colleges.
- £9.96m for 996 places in special schools
- Included in the figures above is £0.4m set aside to pay for additional places where needed and in new Specialist Inclusion Bases planned.

This will all be funded from the High Needs Block in 2027-28 and 2028-29.

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 2027

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.