



Solihull Special School Cohort Review Report
2024

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This report identifies significant challenges within Solihull's special education system, particularly concerning funding, placements and cohesiveness of strategy across different parts of the system.

A further shift towards a more inclusive, transparent, and equitable system is needed, ensuring better support for all children and young people with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND). The current system is financially unsustainable.

Background

Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council (SMBC) is dedicated to strengthening inclusive practices within its mainstream schools and settings, aiming for high-quality and consistently good mainstream offerings.

SMBC has encountered challenges with their infrastructure for SEND over recent years and is actively working to enhance the capacity of its mainstream schools', and the knowledge and skills of school staff, to meet a broader spectrum of SEND needs.

As part of these initiatives, Jane Friswell SEND Consultancy Ltd was commissioned to conduct a review of the funding and support mechanisms for the special schools and Additionally Resourced Provision (ARP) across Solihull. This took place between May to December 2024.

The review offers an analysis of Solihull's existing strategies, pinpointing strengths and areas for improvement, alongside proposing potential future development pathways. The review focused on all facets of special school and ARP provision and funding, including additional top-up funding allocated through Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs). During the review, the views and experiences of special school headteachers, school senior leadership teams, and senior leaders within SMBC were captured through structured conversations, a provision mapping activity, group and individual meetings and visits to all the special schools across Solihull as well as some of the ARPs and mainstream settings.

Context

Solihull has more learners in special schools than statistical neighbours and at national level. This has reduced for the 2024 SEN2 return but this is masking those children who are attending a mainstream school despite specialist provision type being named in their EHCP (and places being sought).

Solihull's propensity to place children with high needs within special school provision is evident through a largely 60:40 split of children and young people with plans placed within special school provision rather than mainstream. This is easing more recently possibly, as a result of the refreshed publication and implementation of Graduated Approach Guidance.

However, the extent to which the shared understanding of what "good" looks like is not yet consistent across the partnership. The continuum of specialist provision is not yet seamless in Solihull. The graduated and incremental provision difference is not well articulated and, in some cases, well-matched to meeting local needs. Over time, this has led to a compartmentalising of the broader local offer for SEND.

Solihull's approach to decision-making around children and young people with a complex level of SEN seems focused on placement and not necessarily in all cases establishing a "best-fit" match. There is a long history of local special school headteachers leading the placement arrangements of pupils in their schools which has led to an unhelpful clouding of roles, responsibilities and resource allocation.

The current context for Solihull is challenging but their ambition remains resolute; ensuring that all children and young people with SEND are in the right place, at the right time with the right support. Relationships are key to achieving a shared understanding of the local ambitions for inclusive educational opportunities and the perspectives of commissioners and providers of specialist provision.

Summary of findings

Solihull has two moderate learning difficulty (MLD) special schools, two severe learning difficulty (SLD) special schools, one social, emotional and mental health (SEMH) special academy and a new autistic spectrum disorder (ASD) special academy. The MLD and SLD schools predominantly serve the north and south of the borough between them. Special School Head teachers want to be part of the solution in supporting the inclusive ambitions of the local authority.

Solihull continues to work with the Department for Education (DfE) to address escalating costs in SEND and is taking proactive measures to mitigate potential cost escalations in SEND by sharing information with partners. Work is being delivered via Delivering Better Value (DBV) national programme and through Designated Schools Grant (DSG) Management Plans. The DBV outcomes involve decreasing the number of EHCPs issued and reducing the number of children and young people moving into special school places.

Solihull has evolved its guidance on the Local Offer, outlining expected provisions from all Solihull mainstream schools as part of their graduated approach to identifying and meeting additional support needs. There is helpful guidance and resources to support schools in understanding inclusive quality first teaching and additional targeted SEN support.

Mainstream schools have found the DBV project on developing Trauma Informed Practice beneficial in deepening teachers' understanding and approaches to support, provision and capacity to meet need.

The Hazel Oak School and mainstream school partnership project was identified as highly effective for participating schools in enhancing and widening inclusive practice.

Some schools also identified the supported SEND review initiative as an effective conduit to reflect on and develop inclusive practice. SMBC's investment in developing and sustaining relationships between schools and parent carers through the DBV transformation work is a positive initiative; showing early indicators of success in the schools where this work has begun.

SMBC and the Birmingham and Solihull Integrated Commissioning Board (ICB) are required to make joint commissioning arrangements for education, health and care provision for children and young people with SEND. The development of joint commissioning arrangements across Birmingham and Solihull Integrated Care System (BSOLICS) represents an important step in delivering a place-based approach to the planning and provision of services for the local population. The approach will establish fit for purpose joint commissioning arrangements with the intention of achieving improved outcomes for children and young people. The local ambition is to explore the potential to expand the scope of the Section 75 agreement in future years, bringing more services under the joint commissioning arrangements.

Commissioning conversations are happening on a regular annual basis with special schools and commissioners are working with special schools to address the

increasing pressure on both pupil numbers; post-16 and capital spend requirements. It is the intention of SMBC for all special school providers in borough to have a clear contract of commissioned provision arrangements but fundamentally it needs to address the needs and provision descriptions and adjust the funding fairly.

The point of conversion to the current funding arrangements for special schools was in 2013 where place funding and top-up funding per special school was introduced. Solihull special schools compare favourably on costs per pupil place compared to similar sized schools according to the Schools Benchmarking Service analysis.

The investment SMBC are making on developing inclusive culture across the local area is a positive step, however, this work should be considered strategically as the fundamental part of the continuum of provision vision where a shared understanding by all is the vision.

Issues identified

- **High placement in special schools:** Solihull has a higher proportion of learners in special schools compared to both statistical neighbours and the national average. This is despite a decrease in the number of new education, health, and care plans (EHCP) being issued. The data also shows a 60:40 split of children and young people with plans placed within special school provision rather than mainstream.
- **Inconsistent use of data:** Although SMBC has a comprehensive SEND data dashboard, used by the Education, Inclusion and Additional Needs (EI&A) senior leadership team and directorate leadership team, the data is not consistently shared with partners and used to hold providers accountable for the services and provision delivered to children and young people.
- **Funding discrepancies:** The funding model for special schools and Additionally Resourced Provisions (ARPs) and between special schools is inconsistent. Some of the funding discrepancies between ARP place costs and some special school place costs are significant, and the level of funding does not match an increasing complexity of need through these provisions.
- **Lack of clarity:** There is a lack of a shared understanding of what "good" looks like for children with SEND, and there is a lack of seamlessness in the continuum of specialist provision. This is compounded by unclear roles and responsibilities for a placement at a provision and resource allocation.
- **Mainstream challenges:** Mainstream schools are making efforts to develop inclusive practices but struggle to meet the full range of needs and totality of support outlined in EHCPs, particularly around 1:1 support and therapeutic interventions. There are cases where the description of provision in EHCPs does not align with the level of need or funding.
- **ARP under-occupancy and cost:** ARPs are significantly under-occupied and are funded at a higher rate than typically expected - with some being funded at a higher rate than special schools.
- **Special school pressures:** Special schools are oversubscribed, and some are admitting pupils whose needs exceed their capacity. The definitions of needs and provision within special schools are not clear or specific enough to accurately represent their current offers. This has led to strained relationships between special school leaders and the local authority. Some special school headteachers acknowledge that there are pupils in their schools who are likely candidates for mainstream education.
- **Parental views:** Parent carers believe their preferences are not the primary driver for increased special school placements. They have also noted inconsistencies in the specialist teaching offered.

Recommendations

Solihull Council

1. **Improve relationships:** Address relationship issues between the local authority, special schools, and mainstream schools, by building trust and improving communication.
2. **Co-production:** A task and finish group of local authority and special school representatives work together to design a new model of needs and provision descriptors and work up proposals for a funding review.
3. **Improved commissioning:** Improve the commissioning process to ensure collaboration, transparency, and regular reviews of provision and capacity. Shared understanding of roles and responsibilities in the commissioning process must be developed.
4. **Evaluating commissioning:** Regularly evaluate the effectiveness of the commissioning process across the SEND system to improve outcomes for children and build upon the national focus of inclusion.
5. **Reflecting high costs:** Ensure the commissioning requirements for any new free school reflect the high costs of out-of-borough provisions.
6. **Innovating placement offers:** Consider dual placements or special school satellite provisions for children with complex needs in mainstream primary schools to foster collaboration and expertise sharing.
7. **Expanding outreach programmes:** Build on the success of the Hazel Oak and mainstream schools project by extending outreach programs between mainstream and special partnerships to enhance mainstream capabilities.
8. **Enhancing SISS support:** Increase the level of expertise from SISS (Solihull Inclusion Support Service) to support mainstream schools in understanding and providing for students with high needs.
9. **Clarifying provision within EHCPs:** Enhance clarity in the EHCPs by distinguishing between provisions delivered through Quality First Teaching (QFT) and the mainstream offer, and additional provisions requiring high needs resources. Consider how to improve the match between needs and provision and how the totality of provision in Section F can be 'operationalised' within schools to better support funding decisions.

10. **Auditing annual reviews:** Conduct regular audits of EHCP annual reviews within special schools to consider mainstream options for pupils making progress.

Special schools and ARPs

11. **Reviewing ARP models:** Conduct a thorough review of the ARP offer, addressing under-occupancy and high costs. This could include a review of the Physical Disability (PD) & Specific Learning Disability (SpLD) ARPs to shift towards a support model for all schools rather than on-site provision and reassessing the needs of pupils with SpLDs.
12. **Re-calibrating admission criteria:** Re-calibrate admission criteria to ensure a clear continuum of need and corresponding provision descriptions across ARP and Special School settings.
13. **Specifying adapted curriculum features:** Detail the features of adapted curriculum offers and interventions in ARPs to clarify the nuanced differences in provision and support provided.
14. **Funding model overhaul:** The significant funding disparities between ARPs and special schools need to be addressed. Implement a new funding model that acknowledges increasing complexity of needs, and which ensures special schools are funded as the highest cost option; and follow the same funding model regardless of school or academy status.
15. **Review special school designations:** Review the designations of special schools as some are not serving the pupil population they were initially intended for. The term 'MLD' is seen as unhelpful and inaccurate. Consider re-designating some schools as 'Neurodivergent with Learning Difficulties' or based on primary need data and provision mapping information.
16. **Focus on outcomes:** Place greater emphasis on the outcomes for pupils attending special schools.
17. **Reviewing curriculum:** Review the GCSE curriculum offered by MLD schools and engaging with parents to ensure it meets the needs of pupils.
18. **Designing new models:** Establish a task force with Heads of Services from the local authority and special school representatives to design a new model of needs and provision descriptors, and to propose a SEND funding review.
19. **Updating capacity:** Regularly review provision and update capacity to keep pace with the increased personalisation of the special school offer.
20. **Reviewing pupil profiles:** Reviewing the profile of need and provision requirements for children in special schools who could potentially have their needs met in mainstream settings.

Mainstream schools

- 21. Improving accountability:** Enhance scrutiny of mainstream schools to increase responsibility for inclusive culture and practice, alongside improving the SISS offer.
- 22. Identifying progress in mainstream schools:** Identify and learn from mainstream schools that demonstrate progress with children who typically require specialist placements.
- 23. Using intentional approaches:** Use intentional approaches to identify the extent of personalised provision needed for pupils, enabling schools to develop capacity and embed new approaches.