

Briefing Note — Interim Mainstream School EHCP Funding in Response to Assessment Delays

(For circulation to headteachers, MAT CEOs and Education Inclusion Service colleagues)

Funding to be released: headline position

The LA will release an initial targeted interim allocation of **£4,837,927** to mainstream schools during the summer/autumn test-and-learn phase: **£694,172** for the 'top 10' secondary schools; **£1,346,805** for the 'top 20' primary schools – with these schools having the highest risk related to delayed assessments. Full details set out below.

In addition, **£1,301,429** for schools with EHCP assessments 52 weeks late; and **£1,495,521** for schools with EHCP assessments 18 months late.

A further **£495,000** has also been agreed to begin a phased proof-of-concept approach to reduce delayed assessments in the backlog, with the first tranche expected to be completed by first half of summer term.

The model will be reviewed in the first half of autumn term 2026, with wider rollout from October half term 2026, subject to review and available funding.

1. Purpose

This briefing note explains a new interim approach to allocating additional funding to mainstream schools in response to current delays in completing EHCP assessments. It sets out why the approach is being introduced, how it will operate at a high level, the proxy indicators that will inform the model, and a set of FAQs to support consistent communication.

Background

The unsustainable pressures across the SEND system, driven by a significant surge in demand for EHCPs, are well documented nationally. The DfE Education White Paper (Ever Chid Achieving & Thriving), published in February 2023, set out a new vision underpinned by a commitment to inclusive practice. In Cambridgeshire, Inclusion for All is the agreed framework to support inclusive practice, and this was recognised as the right approach in the Area SEND inspection in January 2024. This ambition, however, is constrained by the lack of funding available to meet the level of demand. This is impacting school budgets, the local authority's DSG position and, most importantly, children and young people themselves while they wait for assessments.

This paper sets out an approach intended to support schools experiencing high and sustained levels of pressure by allocating interim funding before an EHCP is agreed.

2. Context: Why a New Approach Is Needed

The current EHCP funding model for mainstream schools is based on allocation of Element 3 "top-up" funding at the point an EHCP is issued following initial assessment.

Due to the current rate of backlog cases and low performance against the 20-week statutory timescale, schools are continuing to support children and young people (C&YP) at SEN Support for longer periods, including situations where it is likely that an EHCP will be determined as necessary at the end of assessment.

This is:

- increasing operational and financial pressure on schools
- reducing the ability to fully support C&YP while waiting for statutory decisions
- increasing the risk of statutory non-compliance for the local authority (LA)

This backlog must also be seen in the context of a significant and sustained increase in demand for EHCP assessments and specialist placements. The scale of that demand is placing pressure across the whole SEND system, contributing to an unsustainable Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) deficit for the local authority alongside significant financial pressure on schools as they continue to meet need for longer periods before statutory decisions are made.

3. What Is Changing: Interim Funding Prior to EHCP Issue

It is proposed that a formula is developed to provide funding, in specific circumstances, to schools where a combination of risk factors occurs. These risk factors operate at:

- individual child level
- cohort level
- whole school / MAT level

During the autumn and spring terms, the LA trialled an approach with a number of schools, using school-level information about the impact of the EHCP assessment backlog to consider a funding contribution prior to assessment completion. The intention is now to develop that approach into an objective model that can be applied consistently across the county.

We want to begin a “test and learn” implementation from this summer term and into the autumn term, with funding allocations made on a time-limited basis and reviewed at agreed points so that the model can be refreshed using the most up-to-date information before full roll-out during the autumn term 2026 (subject to review and refinement).

4. Why Proxy Indicators Will Be Used

Direct measurement of need at scale is not always timely or consistent across settings. Proxy indicators use standard, routinely available information to provide a transparent and comparable estimate of relative pressure and likely unmet need across the system.

Proxy indicators:

- support consistency between schools and over time
- make the basis of allocation clearer and more transparent
- enable a practical, scalable approach while assessment timelines are delayed

Important: proxy indicators are **indirect measures**. They are not diagnostic, do not label pupils, and should not be interpreted as a judgement on any school. Their role is to support system-level allocation decisions alongside professional judgement and known local context.

5. Proxy Indicators (Table Summary)

The indicators below have been discussed with schools during visits and meetings over the past nine months, in addition to school leader reps from the High Needs Block Working Group, as possible options to include in a revised model.

Level	Proxy indicator / factor	What it approximates (why it matters)	Typical data source / where it comes from	Suggested refresh cycle	Key caveats for communication
Individual C&YP	Current prioritisation criteria for Educational Psychologist (EP) assessment (e.g., Children in Care, Tier 4 health needs)	Highest-risk need and urgency while assessment is delayed	LA prioritisation lists / SEND service records	Termly	Indicates urgency/complexity, not a complete picture of need
Individual C&YP	Phase transfer year (e.g., Years 5 & 6 combined)	Increased risk due to transition pressures and planning timelines	School census / pupil cohort lists	Annual	Phase transfer increases urgency; does not determine eligibility
Individual C&YP	EHCP delay thresholds: 20-week due date + 30 weeks (weighting 1) and + 52 weeks (weighting 2)	Length of delay beyond statutory timeline and escalating risk of unmet need	EHCP tracking / statutory assessment workflow data	Monthly/termly	A measure of delay duration, not of school effectiveness or pupil outcomes

Level	Proxy indicator / factor	What it approximates (why it matters)	Typical data source / where it comes from	Suggested refresh cycle	Key caveats for communication
Cohort	Numbers in Key Stage SEN Support + EHCP combined	Scale of additional needs cohort requiring support	Census / SEN returns	Termly	Volume alone can't explain complexity; needs combining with other factors
School/MAT	School provision maps	Existing level of provision, capacity, and responsiveness to need	School provision maps / structured returns	Annual with interim updates	Can vary in format; requires consistent definitions to compare fairly

Note: Within the current model, the number of children and young people is used as a percentage of the total school cohort rather than as a raw number. The first indicator in the table (Educational Psychologist assessment prioritisation criteria) and the final indicator (school provision maps) are not currently used to drive the formula, but will be used to inform further development and rollout of the model in the autumn term.

6. Operating Rules and Safeguards (Draft Principles)

The following working principles are intended to ensure allocations are fair, time-limited, and reconciled appropriately once final EHCP decisions are made:

The model is intended to provide a targeted and financially bounded response to backlog-related pressures. It is not designed to meet all unfunded need or remove all areas of pressure for schools, but to provide a transparent basis for interim support in the highest-risk cases within the funding available.

1. The proxy indicators generate information to determine relative risk if funding allocation is not made until the final EHCP is issued.
2. LA funding would be designed to “match” the current average top-up rate at **50%** (interim contribution basis).
3. Funding would be **time-limited to two terms**, with allocations confirmed for a defined period and then reviewed against updated information and final EHCP assessment outcomes. All allocations will be cross-referenced with current EHCP funding and reviewed at the point of EHCP issue to avoid double-counting.

4. This funding approach will not apply in 100% of situations; it is targeted at backlog-driven impact.
5. There will be **two review points per year**, at which the model will be refreshed using the latest available information and allocations adjusted as required within the funding available:
 - Summer term
 - Autumn term
6. This approach is intended to address assessment delays of late EHCPs and is not intended to back-date funding to the point the final plan is issued.

7. Implementation

- The SAT finance team, within the Education Inclusion Service, will contact the schools identified through the proxy indicator model as the initial **top 20 primary** and **top 10 secondary** settings to set out the indicative interim funding available and payment arrangements. The initial allocations are **£1,346,805** for the top 20 primary schools and **£694,172** for the top 10 secondary schools, to be released during the summer/autumn test-and-learn phase (note: list of schools set out in Appendix 1).
- Schools will be asked to provide current information about staffing commitments and delegated funding used to support children and young people currently awaiting EHCP assessment where the assessment is **30 weeks+** (that is, 10 weeks late or more).
- An allocation of funding will then be provided on the broad principle of 50% of the current average EHCP top-up rate for those C&YP whose assessment is 30 weeks+ (i.e. 10 weeks late or more), subject to the available funding envelope and the agreed prioritisation criteria.
- Funding will normally be allocated for a two-term period, on the basis that many EHCPs are likely to be finalised during that time. At the point a final EHCP is issued, the usual top-up funding arrangements will apply and interim funding will be reviewed to avoid double-funding.

Note:

- The continued need for this interim approach reflects the ongoing delay in completing EHCP initial assessments. Performance against the 20-week statutory timescale was 9% for calendar year 2024 and remained at 9% for calendar year 2025.
- Performance began to improve during autumn term 2025, when an average of 22% of initial assessments were completed within timescale across the three-month period.
- During the first three months of 2026, performance was 14%.
- Taken together, performance over the past six months is broadly in line with the revised DfE target of 20% for calendar year 2026 and provides the basis for a further improvement trajectory towards the current national average in 2027 (currently 46%).
- The funding envelope for 2026/27 has therefore been forecast using the average EHCP top-up value on the basis of 20% performance in 2026, with a planned improvement towards 46% in the following year.

8. Next Steps and Timeline

- Continue the “test and learn” phase during the remainder of the summer term/into autumn term, using the proxy indicator formula to identify the initial **top 20 primary** and **top 10 secondary** schools.

- Review the operation of the model in first half autumn term 2026 and refresh allocations as required.
- Confirm final model with amendments for full rollout from **October half term 2026**

9. FAQs for Headteachers/MAT CEOs

Q1. What is the purpose of this interim funding approach?

To reduce the impact on schools of delays in completing EHCP assessments by providing a time-limited contribution in specific circumstances where risk indicators suggest significant pressure while statutory processes are ongoing.

Q2. Is this replacing the normal EHCP route or eligibility decisions?

No. Statutory duties, assessment processes, and eligibility criteria are not changing. This is an interim mechanism to help manage system pressures caused by assessment delays.

Q3. Why is the LA using proxy indicators instead of direct measures of need?

Direct measures of need at scale are not always timely or consistent across settings. Proxies use routinely available information to provide transparent, comparable estimates of relative pressure and likely unmet need during the backlog period.

Q4. Does a higher proxy value mean a pupil definitely needs an EHCP?

No. Proxy indicators do not determine individual outcomes. They are indirect measures used to estimate system-level risk and guide allocation decisions alongside professional judgement.

Q5. Will this funding be available to every school with delayed EHCP assessments?

No. The targeted proxy indicator model is intended to identify those schools experiencing the highest levels of backlog-related pressure. In addition, a separate allocation is proposed for all schools where an EHCP assessment has reached 52 weeks late or 18 months late, subject to the agreed criteria and funding available.

Q6. How will fairness be checked across different phases, localities, and school types?

Fairness will be tested and reviewed across phases (primary/secondary), geographies, and types of setting. Rules and calculations will be documented so schools can understand how allocations are derived.

Q7. What extra administrative burden will this place on schools?

The approach is intended to rely primarily on routine data returns and published datasets. Any additional information requests will be limited, clearly defined, and communicated in advance.

Q8. How long will interim funding last, and what happens when an EHCP is issued?

Interim funding is intended to be time-limited to two terms, with reconciliation when the EHCP outcome is known. Allocations will be cross-referenced against EHCP funding to avoid double-counting.

Q9. Can funding be back-dated to cover earlier parts of the assessment delay?

At this stage, the approach is not intended to back-date funding to the point a final plan is issued. The focus is on addressing the current EHCP assessment delays pressures prospectively.

10. Summary of Confirmed Funding Changes

The confirmed interim funding changes are summarised below so that the core decisions and their financial implications are clear in one place. Together, these allocations provide a targeted and time-limited response to backlog-related pressure on mainstream schools while the wider model continues to be tested and refined.

- The proxy indicator formula will identify the **top 10 secondary schools** and **top 20 primary schools** for targeted interim allocations.
- In addition, the LA will provide funding at **50% of the current average EHCP top-up rate** for all schools where an EHCP assessment has reached either **52 weeks late** or **18 months late**, subject to the agreed criteria, review points, and available funding.
- A further **£495,000** has been agreed to support a phased proof-of-concept approach to reducing delayed assessments in the backlog, with the first tranche expected to be completed by **September**.

Confirmed allocation	Total funding
Top 10 secondary schools	£694,172
Top 20 primary schools	£1,346,805
All schools with EHCP assessments 52 weeks late	£1,301,429
All schools with EHCP assessments 18 months late	£1,495,521

Note: The totals shown above relate to the initial allocation only. As set out earlier in this note, the model will be run twice each year, with allocations reviewed and refreshed at the agreed points during the summer and autumn terms.

Note: this action is taken to acknowledge the financial impact on schools regarding the EHCP assessment delays.

However, in addition we will continue to implement our ongoing plans to improve the performance for EHCP assessments (i.e completing them in the statutory 20 week timescale) and to address the high level of delayed assessments.

We have utilised one-off funding provided by the council last year (780k) to start that improvement and have been able to demonstrate the start of that. However, we acknowledge that we need to do more and the council is providing further investment (495k) so that we can move forward with a 'proof of concept' to model a revised approach to targeted staffing to address a significant % of those delayed assessments. Work is starting on this with immediate effect and will continue over the summer break. We will update school leaders at the start of the new academic year regarding the initial results from that work and will provide details regarding our trajectory to address the delayed assessments fully.

Appendix 1:

Top 10 Secondary Schools – to be contacted by Education Inclusion Finance Team for payment transaction

Bottisham Village College
North Cambridge Academy
Netherhall School
Ely College
Cambourne Village College
Cromwell Community College
St Peter's School
Sawston Village College
Comberton Village College
Neale-Wade Academy

Top 20 Primary Schools - to be contacted by Education Inclusion Finance Team for payment transaction

Westwood Primary School
The Rackham CofE Primary School
Alderman Jacobs Primary School
University of Cambridge Primary School
St Andrew's CE Primary School
Fordham CofE Primary School
Fawcett Primary School
Gamlingay Village Primary School
Orchards C of E Academy
Thongsley Fields Primary and Nursery School
Cavalry Primary School
Arbury Primary School
Mayfield Primary School
New Road Primary School
Willingham Primary School
Hardwick & Cambourne Community Primary School
Melbourn Primary School
William Westley CE Primary School
Peckover Primary School
Park Lane Primary and Nursery School

Note: other schools, not in these 'top 10' / 'top 20' lists, will also be contacted directly where there are individual children and young people where the current assessment delays for EHCP are in excess of 52 weeks/18 months.