

## BUDGET SCRUTINY

Top three challenges for delivering within Portfolio budget for 2026/27  
Councillor Sally Cresswell (Education, Skills and Apprenticeships)



### I. CHALLENGE I - UNPRECEDENTED INCREASE IN DEMAND FOR EDUCATION HEALTH AND CARE PLANS (EHCP'S) AND THE MANAGEMENT OF THIS INCREASED DEMAND

In line with national trends, Plymouth has continued to see a significant rise in the numbers of requests for EHCPs, with around 45 new EHCP plans issued each month. All Special School places in the City are full and children who are now identified as needing specialist education provision, beyond what mainstream schools can provide, are requiring more costly specialist education, often outside of the City. Currently, 364 children have places in Independent Special Schools at a cost of £20.5 million for this year.

In each of the past 2 financial years Plymouth City Council committed an additional £770K to enable additional capacity in the team that processes EHCPs to address the volume of requests. The ongoing rise in requests has meant that the team is on track with the recovery work but cannot keep pace with the new requests. It is understandably challenging in the context of our settlement to invest further in this team, but the consequences will be that our meeting of statutory timescales for the issuing of plans will deteriorate, we will have more children's needs determined at tribunal and more complaints escalating to the Ombudsman with costs attached. There is a risk that the relationship and trust and confidence that has been built with parents and carers of children with SEND, that has improved significantly since the inspection in June 2023, will be put under pressure. Meeting the needs of children and young people with SEND will be a significant challenge.

#### I.a. MITIGATIONS FOR CHALLENGE I - UNPRECEDENTED RISE FOR DEMAND IN EHCPs

Plymouth Local Area SEND Partnership has significantly shifted culture, with a stronger focus on earlier intervention and prevention, enabling us to identify and meet needs earlier. A particularly strong model of this is found through the three targeted funding models, currently making good provision for 380 children in mainstream schools in the City. This has prevented the need for these children to have an EHCP because their needs are well met within mainstream school. This is maximizing the use of the resource we have available to support children with SEND. Evaluation shows improved attendance, increased parent / carer satisfaction and improvements in pupils feeling a sense of belonging in their school. The Local Authority plans to provide further targeted funding to more mainstream schools as the programme develops. This is being seen by the DfE as an exemplar way of approaching the provision for children with additional needs.

The Plymouth GATI is now a widely used resource to enable schools and settings to ensure there is provision for every child that meets their needs at the earliest point. This is supported by Universal Services within the Community, for example through Family Hubs, and more specialist services, for example, speech and language support.

There are more robust school to school transitions in place for children thanks to a portal, utilised by all settings and schools, to enable enhanced transitions for pupils who will need extra help. This means that when children attend a new setting, their needs are well identified and understood.

Our health colleagues are reducing waiting times for diagnosis and treatment and offering families better support whilst they wait.

The strength and impact of the Partnership Place Based Plan has enabled fewer children at SEN Support level and those with EHCPs experiencing poor outcomes. Attendance has improved and exclusions have reduced.

The Ofsted Framework for schools now judges inclusion in every area of inspection, offering schools an additional incentive to be inclusive of every child, in every single lesson. In addition, the new national curriculum, to be introduced in September 2026 will enable every teacher to be a teacher of SEND, with an emphasis on a curriculum that enables every child to thrive in education. This will be further strengthened by our Pre-16 education strand of Team Plymouth, seeking for every child to Belong in education and to Belong in Plymouth.

The above improvements will require continued investment across the Partnership to be sustained. They are impressive changes but will need continued attention and focus to ensure children's needs are met, when appropriate, without the need for an EHCP.

The forthcoming SEND white paper is highly likely to underpin the need for early identification of need and inclusive practice, with a strong focus on the early years and The Best Start in Life.

These mitigations aim to both assess and meet the needs of children and young people at the earliest opportunity to prevent the need for an EHCP. With the month on month increase in demand for EHCP assessments and plans, we have not got the resource or capacity to maintain our positive trajectory of meeting our statutory 20 week deadline.

## **2. CHALLENGE 2 - SEND SUFFICIENCY**

Due to some of the elements described in Risk 1, the extent of need in Plymouth was historically not well understood or accounted for. This meant that in our data returns to the DFE we were not highlighting the need for increased specialist provision in the City. As such, Plymouth was not awarded a Free School or other specialist provision. Even in Local Authorities where the identification of need was well known, the increase in need has been such that many Local Authorities are struggling with sufficient places.

As a result, many of our children are now having to travel outside of the city to independent special schools, at high cost to the high needs block element of the DSG.

Analysis of our children's needs demonstrates that we require an additional 396 places in the city, to meet the whole spectrum of current and future needs. This covers the entire range of needs, from Targeted provision for pupils with SEN support through to highly specialist places.

### **2.a. MITIGATIONS FOR CHALLENGE 2 - SEND SUFFICIENCY**

Thanks to this analysis of need, we are developing a revised SEND sufficiency strategy at pace.

We are working with our education community proactively to identify potential sites for satellite specialist provision, building on the success of an existing satellite in the City and using this as a model of good practice.

We are also in discussion with schools for further resourced provision to be developed on their sites, especially where they have high levels of need and space to expand the school or utilise empty classrooms.

One of our special schools needs replacing and we have some High Needs Capital Grant (£12.940 million) remaining, which can be allocated towards a new school.

An announcement of £3bn capital investment for inclusion in mainstream schools has been announced. This will come to Local Authorities to develop capital projects in exactly the way we have described. It is yet to be announced how much of this capital investment will be allocated to Plymouth.

We are also undertaking a comprehensive review of our alternative provision in the City to ensure an emphasis on prevention of children needing provision as well as return to mainstream schools where appropriate, as part of our wider drive for whole system inclusion.

### **3. CHALLENGE 3 - HOME TO SCHOOL TRANSPORT**

As the numbers of EHCPs has risen, so has our need for Home to School Transport. We have managed to stay in budget this year, thanks to previous growth and a tightly held plan. The current year budget is £10.958 million.

As needs and plans continue to rise, alongside related costs, this remains an area of significant risk.

#### **3.a. MITIGATIONS FOR CHALLENGE 3 - HOME TO SCHOOL TRANSPORT**

The 0 – 25 team and the home to school transport team now work much more closely, with bi-weekly meetings in place to enable forward planning as EHCPs are processed.

We continue to deliver a comprehensive plan, which has undergone audit to ensure we are doing all we can to manage risks.

The more inclusive we are as a City, the more likely it is that our children will attend a local school, reducing the mileage covered, especially to schools outside of the City. Therefore, all the actions to mitigate risks 1 and 2 above are also mitigations for Home to School Transport.

We have undertaken a comprehensive route review and have utilised software to ensure we are as efficient as possible in our route planning and route optimisation.

We train children, when appropriate, to travel independently and we have a focused plan on increasing the uptake of this training to enable more young people to travel independently, as part of their preparation for adulthood.

Wherever possible, we utilise minibuses and encourage shared transport. We are revisiting a previous business case to see if it is cost effective to have our fleet of mini-buses for home to school transport.

We are undertaking a review of the Home to School Transport Policy, with a particular critical focus on post 16 provision, to bring it in line with many other Local Authorities.

We are reviewing how we induct, support and employ passenger assistants to improve recruitment and retention rates and our independent travel training programme.