

Local First Inclusion

Changes to SEND top-up funding (Element 3) – information for Norfolk families

Norfolk County Council is working with the government to improve support for children with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND), in a programme called Local First Inclusion. This is funded and brings £70m of investment from the government and £30m from the council.

A key part of the strategy is to support children to go to school in their local communities and stay in mainstream schools wherever possible.

More and more children, both in Norfolk and nationally, need extra support to learn and this is significantly increasing costs for councils everywhere. The budget that the council receives for specialist education isn't currently enough to cover the cost of provision in place and that means that it is overspent. Specialist school places, particularly those in independent schools, are extremely expensive and not always near to children's homes, or their friends. The council wants to reduce the number of children attending these schools by helping mainstream schools to improve the support they offer. To try to achieve this, it has been giving schools more top-up money, from the schools' budget, to support children's needs earlier, at their local school.

The amount being used for this has grown from around £9m in 2020/21 to £35m this year. However, the number of applications from schools for this money has been a lot higher than anyone expected and led to a £12m overspend on the budget. This means the council has no choice but to work with schools to try to bring this spending under control, otherwise the whole SEND programme and schools' budgets will be at significant risk. A condition of the government funding is that we will balance our budget.

The council has decided to cap the budget at £35m so that it does not overspend further. This is a similar level of funding to that spent last year but it does mean that schools will receive a lower rate of funding for the autumn and spring terms, than they received in the summer term. Schools had been expecting to have more money and had made plans for the next academic year based on different rates. The council understands that making this decision mid-year will cause difficulties for some schools and it hasn't taken this decision lightly, but the budget is at its very limit. The council is working with schools to try to reduce the impact on children as much as possible, particularly for those moving from nursery to primary school or from primary school to high school.