

Dear Secretary of State,

I was pleased to receive confirmation that our Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) Reform Plan has been approved and that West Sussex County Council has been allocated grant funding of approximately £183 million. We welcome this commitment from Government and the stability it brings.

However, substantial challenges remain. I am therefore writing to draw your attention to two issues of growing significance for West Sussex County Council: the increasing pressures associated with unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and the continuing pressures facing the SEND system.

In recent years, West Sussex County Council has undertaken a significant improvement journey in Children's Services, which we hope will soon be reflected in our Ofsted inspection. Through sustained investment, strong leadership and the dedication of our workforce and partners, we have strengthened services and improved outcomes for vulnerable children and young people.

Despite this positive progress, many of the challenges we now face can no longer be addressed through local action alone. Councils are increasingly grappling with pressures that stem from national policy decisions, funding arrangements and rising levels of demand.

One example is the impact of national immigration policy. The presence of immigration accommodation and processing facilities associated with the Gatwick immigration estate, including Brook House Immigration Removal Centre and Tinsley House Immigration Removal Centre, creates significant additional demand for support to unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. Government funding does not currently meet the full cost of these responsibilities, creating a funding shortfall of approximately £5.1 million and placing additional pressure on Children's Services and an already stretched care placement market. The number of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children supported by the Council increased from 84 in May 2025 to 139 in September 2026, representing growth of more than 65% in sixteen months.

We therefore urge the Government to fully fund the costs incurred by councils supporting unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and to ensure that authorities hosting major immigration facilities are not unfairly disadvantaged.

The SEND system presents an even greater challenge.

We recognise that our SEND performance must improve and that too many children, young people and families are not receiving the experience they deserve. However, these challenges are not unique to West Sussex. Demand has risen significantly across the country, specialist provision remains insufficient, and the current statutory and funding framework is struggling to keep pace with rising levels of need. Local authorities are held accountable for delivering SEND services, yet many of the pressures driving demand, cost and parental dissatisfaction stem from national legislation, policy and funding arrangements that are no longer sustainable. While councils must continue to improve, local performance cannot be separated from the wider system in which councils operate.

We welcome the Government's commitment to address 90% of local authority SEND deficits. The scale of national funding identified to address this long-standing issue is a significant and positive step. We are also grateful for confirmation that West Sussex County Council will receive the SEND Reform Grant.

To help alleviate ongoing financial pressures, we would ask that the grant is paid on 1 November 2026 rather than 30 November 2026. Bringing forward the payment by one month would enable the County Council to realise an additional £600,000 in treasury benefits, helping to maximise the value of this welcome investment for local residents at no additional cost to Government.

While this support is very welcome, it is important to recognise that these deficits have arisen as a result of a sustained mismatch between rising demand and insufficient national funding over many years, rather than local decisions. In West Sussex, despite substantial local investment in additional provision and placements, the DSG deficit is projected to reach around £500 million by March 2028. Under the Government's proposed approach, the Council would still face a residual liability of approximately £50 million. In addition, the accumulated DSG deficit is estimated to reduce treasury investment income by approximately £9.3 million in 2026/27, creating further pressure on the Council's financial position.

We therefore continue to believe that Government should meet 100% of accumulated deficits and address the ongoing treasury impacts created by historic deficits. Doing so would fully address the legacy impact of systemic underfunding, provide councils with a genuinely sustainable financial footing for the future and better reflect the national nature of the challenge.

Our ask of the Government is to:

1. Fully fund the costs incurred by local authorities in supporting unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and those arising from the operation of national immigration facilities, including those associated with the Gatwick immigration estate.
2. Remove the residual SEND deficit liability that remains with local authorities following the Government's commitment to address 90% of deficits and address the ongoing treasury impacts created by historic deficits.
3. Pay the SEND Reform Grant of approximately £183 million at the earliest opportunity on 1 November 2026.
4. Provide greater clarity on the future SEND funding framework to enable councils to plan their finances with confidence and reduce uncertainty in medium-term financial planning.
5. Accelerate the implementation of the Government's SEND reforms and ensure that they address the root causes of rising demand, improve outcomes for children and young people, and create a financially sustainable system for the future.

West Sussex remains committed to improving outcomes for children and young people and to working constructively with Government. However, lasting

improvement will require national solutions to challenges that extend far beyond any individual local authority.

I would welcome the opportunity to discuss these matters with you further.

I am copying this letter to the Home Secretary and, given the significance of these issues for children, young people and families across the county, to all West Sussex Members of Parliament.

Yours sincerely,