

BRIEFING	TO:	Schools Forum
	DATE:	18 th September 2026
	LEAD OFFICER:	Cary-Anne Sykes
	TITLE:	Special School Placement & Capacity

1. Background

- 1.1** Rotherham continues to experience significant growth in demand for Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) provision. The number of Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) continues to rise locally and nationally, creating sustained pressure on special school places and High Needs Block expenditure. Within Rotherham, special schools are operating at capacity. Regional benchmarking demonstrates that Rotherham has a higher proportion of EHCP pupils educated in special schools than neighbouring authorities and the national average, indicating a greater reliance on specialist provision.

Rotherham Special Schools

School	Type of Need	Capacity
Newman School	Complex SEND	185
Kelford School	SLD	165
Hilltop School	SLD	180
Abbey School	MLD	218
Willows School	MLD	197
Milton School	MLD/ASD	179

2. Key Issues

- 2.1 Regional Benchmarking**
Percentage of EHCP Pupils Educated in Special Schools
 Rotherham's special school placement rate is 7.8 percentage points above the national average.

England Average	25.0%
Local Authority	Percentage
Rotherham	32.8%
Sheffield	29.2%
Doncaster	26.5%
Barnsley	18.1%
Wakefield	18.4%

- 2.2 Import and Exports of pupils with SEND**
 Rotherham continues to experience a significant net increase in children and young

people with EHCPs moving into the authority.

- Total Imports: 176
- Total Exports: 77
- **Net Increase: +99 pupils**

This demonstrates that Rotherham remains a substantial net importer of children and young people with EHCPs.

2.3 EHCP Mobility Comparison by Provision Type 2025 to August 2026

Provision Type	Imports	Exports	Numerical Difference	% Difference (Imports vs Exports)
Mainstream Schools & Colleges	85	40	+45	+112.5%
Special Schools	27.5	16.5	+11	+66.7%
Independent Specialist Provision (ISP)	10	5	+5	+100.0%
Alternative Provision / Specialist Post-16	17.5	8	+9.5	+118.8%
NEET / EHE / Awaiting Provision / No Placement	37.5	14	+23.5	+167.9%

2.4 Out of Area Students in Rotherham Special Schools

Rotherham’s special schools have a strong regional reputation for quality and specialist expertise. As a result, 164 non-Rotherham pupils from neighbouring local authorities have placed children in Rotherham’s specialist settings.

Rotherham has placed 68 (1.68%) of Pupils in Other Local Authorities

School	Total Pupils	OOA Pupils	% OOA
Abbey	189	36	19.0%
Abbey HUB	+50	-	-
Elements	144	12	8.3%
Elevate	28	1	3.6%
Hilltop	178	24	13.5%
Kelford	169	10	5.9%
Milton	177	14	7.9%
Newman	148	6	4.1%
Newman NAR	38	2	5.3%
Willows	197	9	4.6%
TOTAL	1,268	114	9.0%

	Drivers include: • parental preference • proximity for border families • specialist curriculum not available locally • lack of local place availability at the time of need
3. Local Sufficiency under Pressure	
3.1	The inflow of 164 out of borough pupils reduces local availability and can lead to: • pressure on mainstream schools • increased use of independent placements • constrained flexibility during Annual Review driven changes of placement
3.2	Parental Preference (Inward and Outward) Parental preference is a key factor for both: • families from neighbouring LAs choosing Rotherham schools, and • Rotherham families choosing schools in Sheffield, Doncaster, or Barnsley. The statutory framework means LAs must comply with a parent's preferred school unless certain legal criteria are met.
3.3	Cross Border Commissioning Variation Differences in SEND banding models, top-up rates, and decision pathways create administrative and financial complexity for both inward and outward placements.
3.4	Financial Pressure on the High Needs Block • Outward placements for 68 Rotherham pupils—particularly when specialist or independent—carry higher costs. • Inward placements can also lead indirectly to increased spend if Rotherham must commission alternative or independent placements for displaced local pupils.
3.5	SEND Sufficiency Programme Rotherham has already taken steps to increase specialist provision through capital investment and expansion programmes.
3.6	EHCP Assessment and Annual Review Activity The demand for specialist placements is directly linked to increasing activity within the EHCP Service. The EHCP Team continues to manage: • A sustained increase in requests for Education, Health and Care Needs Assessments. • Rising volumes of annual reviews and phase transfer reviews. • Increased complexity of needs identified through assessment processes. • Growing requests for specialist placements and specialist provision naming within EHCPs. • In-year placement changes resulting from annual review processes and changes in need. The EHCP Team plays a critical role in balancing parental preference, professional advice, available provision and statutory duties. As local specialist capacity becomes increasingly constrained, identifying appropriate placements within statutory timescales becomes more challenging and can contribute to increased placement negotiations and escalation activity.

3.7	SEND Tribunals and Dispute Resolution The authority continues to experience increasing levels of challenge through mediation and SEND Tribunal activity, reflecting national trends. The SEND Tribunals Team manages: • Appeals relating to placement decisions and parental preference. • Appeals concerning EHCP assessments and amendments. • Tribunal-directed requests for specialist and independent provision. • Preparation of legal evidence and representation at hearings. • Resolution activity aimed at avoiding formal tribunal proceedings where appropriate. Tribunal outcomes can have a direct impact on sufficiency planning and High Needs expenditure, particularly where independent specialist placements are sought. The increasing demand for specialist placements and limited local availability can contribute to a higher risk of legal challenge where parental preference cannot be met.
4. Risks	
4.1	Without continued sufficiency investment, the authority faces: Increased Independent Placement Costs A shortage of local specialist capacity increases dependency on independent specialist placements at significantly higher costs. Transport Pressures Greater use of out-of-borough provision increases home-to-school transport expenditure. Placement Delays Demand exceeding available places can delay placement decisions and increase tribunal risks. High Needs Block Pressures Continued EHCP growth without increased local capacity places further pressure on High Needs funding. These risks are particularly relevant given Rotherham's specialist placement rate already exceeds national comparators.
4.2	Future Place Planning Priorities The Local Authority should continue to focus on: - Development of specialist resource provision and enhanced mainstream pathways. - Strengthening autism and communication-focused provision to reflect the primary need profile. - define post-16 specialist capacity and preparation-for-adulthood pathways. - Reducing reliance on independent and out-of-authority placements. - Supporting financial sustainability of the High Needs Block through investment in local provision.
4.3	Statutory Compliance and Tribunal Pressure Increasing demand for EHCP assessments, annual reviews and specialist placements creates additional pressure on the EHCP and SEND Tribunals Teams. Without sufficient local specialist capacity, the authority faces: • Increased levels of parental dissatisfaction. • Growth in mediation and tribunal appeals.

	• Greater legal and administrative costs. • Increased risk of independent specialist placements being directed through tribunal proceedings. • Additional pressure on statutory timescales for assessment, review and placement processes. These pressures have both financial implications and workforce implications for SEND services and further reinforce the need for continued investment in local provision.
4. Summary	
4.1	Rotherham's special school system is experiencing significant and sustained demand. Benchmarking data demonstrates that Rotherham places a greater proportion of pupils with EHCPs in specialist settings than both regional comparators and the national average. Current occupancy levels show that existing provision is operating at, or beyond, planned capacity. Demand pressures are particularly evident within SLD provision, where 41 KS1 and KS2 pupils are currently awaiting a special school placement. At the same time, 111 pupils are being supported within SEP provisions in mainstream schools, underlining the growing requirement for specialist support across the continuum of provision. Rotherham's specialist schools are also educating 114 out-of-area pupils, representing 9.0% of the total specialist population. Within the borough's SLD, ASD and complex needs schools, approximately 93 places are occupied by pupils from neighbouring authorities. Were these places available for Rotherham children, the authority would have sufficient capacity to accommodate the current waiting list and create additional capacity for future demand. However, the authority's continued growth in EHCP numbers, combined with inward migration of children with EHCPs, means that even this additional capacity would be unlikely to provide a sustainable long-term solution. Alongside the pressure on specialist school places, increasing EHCP assessment activity, annual reviews and tribunal appeals continue to place significant demand on both the EHCP Team and the SEND Tribunals Team. These services are required to manage complex placement decisions, statutory processes and parental expectations within an increasingly constrained specialist provision system. The relationship between placement sufficiency, statutory compliance and tribunal activity means that investment in local capacity remains a key factor in supporting both service sustainability and positive outcomes for children and young people. The evidence therefore strongly supports the continuation of the SEND Sufficiency Programme and the strategic expansion of specialist inclusion bases across the borough in line with the Governments Inclusion Strategy. Ensuring sufficient local specialist places will improve outcomes for children and young people, reduce reliance on independent and out-of-authority placements, decrease transport costs and support the long-term sustainability of the High Needs Block.
	Schools Forum is asked to: 1. Note the current sufficiency position. 2. Note the regional and national benchmarking information.

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| | 3. Support ongoing SEND Sufficiency planning to meet projected EHCP growth and future placement demand. |
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