

Schools
Forum

The Guardian



'Devastating' cuts hit special educational needs

Many local authorities are plunging into the red to meet their obligations as spending trebles in three years

'It's hard to watch your child struggle. All you can do is chase people'

Chaminda Jayanetti and Michael Savage

Sat 10 Nov 2018 19.53 GMT

A crisis in funding for children with special educational needs is plunging councils across the country deeper into the red and forcing parents into lengthy legal battles to secure support, according to an *Observer* investigation that reveals a system at breaking point.

Council overspending on children's special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) has trebled in just three years and is continuing to increase, with councils having to raid hundreds of millions from their overall schools budget to cope. The *Observer* has identified 40 councils that have either cut special needs funding this year, are considering making cuts or are raiding other education budgets to cope next year.

Data from freedom of information requests and council reports shows that the combined overspend on "high needs" education budgets among councils in England soared from £61m in 2015-16 to £195m in 2017-18. It is already expected to hit £200m this year. The figures cover 117 of England's 152 councils, meaning the true figures will be higher.

It comes with legal action being threatened across England against councils considering cuts to SEND funding, which supports children with conditions such as autism, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and physical disabilities. Cases have already been launched in London and Surrey after a successful challenge to proposed cuts in Bristol. Campaigns are also being planned in Portsmouth and Yorkshire, while a case is being drawn up against central government for failing to properly fund the system.

By the end of this financial year, councils will have raided nearly £315m from mainstream and early years schools' budgets since 2015 in order to plug gaps in special needs funding. However, recent rule changes have cut their flexibility to do so.

Ministers have hinted that a cash injection may be needed as the system struggles. Nadhim Zahawi, the children's minister, said the government recognised "that local authorities are facing cost pressures on high needs" and that overall funding was being kept under review.

Attempts by struggling councils to turn down requests for support are regularly being overturned. Almost nine in 10 cases taken to a tribunal find in favour of parents.

The emerging crisis will be debated at a conference of education and council figures this week. Antoinette Bramble, chair of the Local Government Association's children and young people board, said the new figures "emphasise the significant financial challenges councils are facing".

"We urge the government to address this in the local government finance settlement next month," she said. "Unless councils are given the funding they need, they may not be able to meet their statutory duties, and children with high needs or disabilities could miss out.

"We are also concerned about the extent to which schools use informal exclusions to remove vulnerable pupils, particularly those with SEND, from mainstream education."

Robert Halfon, Tory chair of the Commons education committee, said: "Parents have told our inquiry that they are simply not getting the support that their children need ... Local authorities have a duty to provide support - and they need to be financially supported to be able to meet this duty. We do have concerns about how SEND money is spent but it is clear there are significant financial pressures on the system."



Shadow education secretary Angela Rayner has spoken of 'devastating cuts'. Photograph: Gareth Fuller/PA

Angela Rayner, the shadow education secretary, said there were now "devastating cuts" being imposed on both schools and local authorities. "It has brought services for children with special educational needs and disabilities to a dangerous tipping point," she said. "Despite the

prime minister's promises, it is clear that austerity is not over for our most vulnerable children."

The crisis stems from rising demand for special needs places that has not been matched by the necessary funding. Many councils blame a 2014 reform that extended their responsibilities for special needs children without providing sufficient resources.

Analysis by the *Observer* found that four of the five councils with the largest forecast overspends this year are counties, with Hampshire top of the list. It is considering reducing top-up funding for special needs students and raiding £3.7m from mainstream schools funding - with the schools' agreement - in order to tackle its expected £10.5m overspend.

A council spokesperson attributed the overspend to a rise in the number of pupils with special needs: "The high needs block funding has increased year on year, but not sufficiently to meet rising demand for support."

Other councils have seen their finances dramatically worsen. Southwark's high needs overspend has more than quadrupled since 2015, while Lancashire has gone from a £5.6m underspend in 2015-16 to an £8.5m overspend this year. Southwark councillor Jasmine Ali said the council would "not turn our backs on those who need our support but unfortunately the funding we receive from central government doesn't come close to paying for the support that is needed".

Zahawi said: "In 2018-19 councils will receive £6bn of funding specifically for children with complex special educational needs and disabilities, up from £5bn in 2013."

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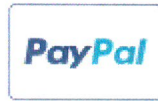
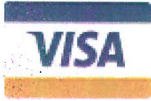
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Society needs to decide the kind of education service it is prepared to pay for

Schools Forum

By Geoff Barton 09 November 2018



Picture credit: Tes/Russell Sach

Cuts are at odds with rising expectations of what schools should offer, stripping education down to the bare bones

This week in Parliament the chair of the [Education Select Committee](#) asked a very good, very simple question: "So how much money do schools and colleges need?"

In response, he got a range of answers.

And that tells us something very important – namely that beneath the current debate about education, funding is a far bigger issue: what kind of education service do we wish to provide for our children and young people? What do we think they are entitled to?

Because unless we know that, how can we possibly know how much it will cost?

On the evening that Robert Halfon's committee met, we saw on BBC2 a documentary about education that didn't do what most documentaries about education do. It didn't trivialise; it didn't glamorise; it didn't caricature the pupils or the staff. Instead – in the great tradition of fly-on-the-wall journalism – [School](#) allowed viewers to see what life in one school is like, warts and all.

And what we saw was something that those of us who inhabit education's echo chamber have long known: that schools and colleges do far more than most people probably realise.

Here were hard-working, committed professionals doing all they could to teach young people, to nurture them, to calm them down when needed, to motivate them before exams, nudging them to think harder, to behave better, to aim higher.

And these staff were doing it against a backdrop of devastating financial cuts in buildings that looked worn and battered.

It was a documentary that showed just how the expectations on schools and colleges have exponentially developed over the past 20 years.

These days we don't just teach children to read, write and learn a few academic subjects, but also provide extensive pastoral support, counselling, [SEND support](#), safeguarding, PSHE, and increasingly fill the gaps left by the depletion of services beyond the school gates.

Back in 2003 – in an age when education was a publicly-espoused prime ministerial priority – we saw the way joined-up services were intended to support children from every background, including their physical and mental health needs. It was the era of "Every Child Matters".

I remember as a head for 15 years how we would have a community police officer on a weekly visit to the school, how support workers could help to head off poor behaviour habits that in some youngsters were spiralling out of control, and how we were able to provide high-impact teaching assistants to work with youngsters who might otherwise have been left on the margins.

I remember the after-school clubs we could put on for children whose home lives might be too chaotic to get homework done in peace, and the extra resources for textbooks and support for trips and visits.

It meant that we could live the reality that every child mattered.

In recent years, we have seen the erosion of both the funding levels for schools and colleges and vital services in the community. The reality is that we are in danger of being reduced to a core provision of reading, writing and a small range of academic subjects.

The problem with this is not only the dispiriting lack of ambition which is implicit in such a constrained funding model. The really pernicious effect will be on the many young people who desperately need the additional support that schools provide in order to be able to fully access the curriculum and fulfil their potential. It is the most vulnerable learners who are most at risk from the funding cuts.

So, we need to start by defining what it is that we want our education service to provide. Because, as a country, we surely cannot allow ourselves to sleepwalk into a situation where every child doesn't matter.

Ministers will, of course, insist that there's enough money to keep the plates spinning if only we tighten our belts a bit more. But it is quite a gamble to ignore the voices of the thousands of headteachers, teachers and parents who are telling them otherwise.

What I do know is that the underfunding of the education system comes with a huge social cost. Diminished life chances mean more [poverty](#), more physical and mental health problems, more strain on social services, and a weaker economy. Education should be seen as a vital strategic investment, not a cost to be trimmed.

Robert Halfon's question was a good one: how much money *do* we need?

But we won't get anywhere near an answer until as a society we are clearer about what we expect for every child.

Our arcane and often arbitrary funding system isn't built from the ground up on what we need but from the top down on how much we want to spend. It's upside down, and any government which seeks to work with the education sector to put it the right way up would be doing an invaluable service for children long into the future.

Geoff Barton is general secretary of the Association of School and College Leaders

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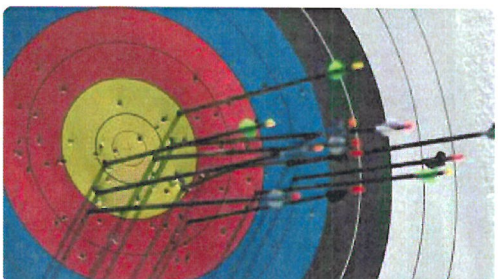
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5 reasons the school funding crisis will continue

Schools Forum

By Martin George 06 November 2018



MPs hear concerns about the national funding formula, minimum funding guaranteed for schools and the pupil premium

As many as 2,000 schools will still be underfunded in seven years' time, despite the government's school funding reforms, MPs have been warned.

Concerns about the implementation of the government's flagship [national funding formula](#) (NFF) were raised at a Commons Education Select Committee hearing on school funding today.

The MPs also heard [criticism of the money for "little extras"](#) announced by the chancellor in last week's Budget.

Here are five key points from the evidence of education unions and headteachers:

1. Schools will be underfunded for years to come

Kevin Courtney, joint general secretary of the NEU education union, raised concerns about rules that limit the annual funding increases that schools can receive under the NFF.

The system limits the yearly cash increase that an individual school can receive to 3 per cent, meaning that some schools that are due a big increase will not receive the full amount for many years.

He said: "By 2025 there will still be 2,000 schools that haven't reached their national funding formula level, so it's far too slow, and that's because there isn't enough money in there."

His concerns were echoed by Valentine Mulholland, of the NAHT headteachers' union.

She said her organisation welcomes a national funding formula, but added: "The issue is that at a time of funding shortage, we can't get people to where they should be quick enough."

2. Minimum funding for schools 'not enough'

Ms Mulholland told MPs that the minimum per-pupil funding for primary schools is currently set at £3,500.

Ms Mulholland said: "What we see is schools that are only receiving that minimum funding are not sustainable, absolutely not sustainable."

She said the minimum funding level for schools was the one area of the NFF that needed looking at again, adding that anything below £4,000 is "really, really not viable".

Julia Harnden, of the Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL), said its research concluded that secondary schools need £5,800 per pupil, compared with the current [£4,800 minimum guarantee](#) from the government.

3. Schools need 'up to £6 billion' extra a year

Darren Northcott, of the NASUWT, said overall education funding should be 6 per cent of GDP.

Stephen Tierney, of the Headteachers' Roundtable, called for a £4 billion annual increase in the schools budget.

Ms Harnden said it was not possible to give a figure because there was currently no agreement about what is expected of the education system.

Jules White, headteacher at Tanbridge House School in West Sussex, and founder of the WorthLess? School funding campaign, called for a 15 per cent increase in the school budget, which he said amounted to £6 billion more a year.

He said this was made up of £2.7 billion "to reverse the real-terms cuts", £1.5 billion to £2 billion to support high-needs funding, and £1.3 billion to "prime the national funding formula properly so we can begin to close the gaps between the very lowest and the best-funded areas and address some of the real-terms costs".

4. Pupil premium 'propping up core school budgets'

Pressures on schools' budgets mean many are using the pupil premium, which is designed to target support at disadvantaged children, to plug holes in their core budget, MPs heard.

Mr White said: "We did a survey of 1,700 heads up and down the country and 90 per cent said they were spending at least a proportion of pupil premium funding on propping up their core budgets, and about 50 per cent said they were spending over half."

"I'm certainly doing that in my school. Apparently, I'm breaking the law doing that but I have got to make ends meet."

Mr Courtney said that "schools are in practice sometimes [moving] money from the pupil premium because they do not have enough money in the rest of their budget, and I would not like to get involved in talking down those schools".

The witnesses had mixed views about whether pupil premium funding should be ring-fenced.

Mr White said it should not be, while Mr Northcott said it should, "because then you make sure it is spent on the purposes for which it is intended".

Ms Mulholland added that "it would be really difficult to ring-fence pupil premium".

5. Lack of clarity about what society expects of schools

Ms Harnden told MPs that clarity about what is expected of schools is needed before their funding levels are discussed.

She said: "We need a very clear understanding of what the national ambition for education is, because if we are in schools and colleges being asked to broaden our remit, and the breadth of expectation is broadening quite significantly, we need to be very clear on what that actually is, and then we can start to think about what are the appropriate levels of investment that will meet the cost of those services.

"There is no doubt that cuts or shrinking of other services around schools are impacting significantly."

Her view was echoed by Mr White, who asked: "Why are we responsible for all of society's other ills?"

Witnesses supported calls from committee chair Robert Halfon for education to have a 10-year funding plan, similar to the NHS.

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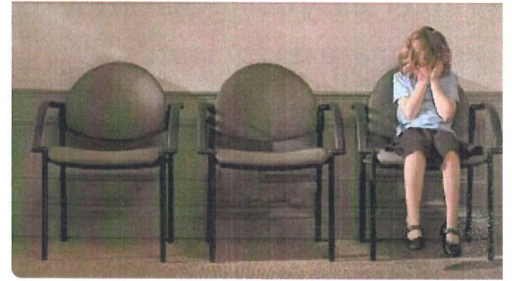


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