Vulnerable Children's Grant Annual Report 2025/26

Report being considered by:	Schools' Forum
Date of Meeting:	12 October 2026
Report Author:	Melissa Perry, Interim Lead for Inclusion
Item for:	Discussion/Comment **By** All Forum Members

1. Purpose of the Report

1.1 This report provides Schools' Forum with:

- An update on the use and impact of the Vulnerable Children's Grant (VCG) during 2025/26.
- An overview of the revised Early Support & Intervention Funding (ESIF) model approved by the SEND Improvement Board in July 2026.
- The rationale for consolidating multiple funding streams into a single framework.
- The anticipated benefits for schools, children and young people and the wider SEND and Inclusion system.
- The potential future direction of inclusion funding arrangements from 2027/28.

2. Recommendations

2.1 Schools' Forum is asked to:

- Note the impact of Vulnerable Children's Grant funding during 2025/26.
- Note the School's Forum approval for the ESIF for 2026/27
- Note the approval by the SEND Improvement Board in July 2026 of the revised ESIF model with immediate effect
- Note the strengthened governance, accountability and decision-making arrangements introduced through ESIF.
- Receive future impact, expenditure and outcome monitoring reports through established governance arrangements.
- Note the potential future considerations of ESIF from 2027/28, including exploration of delegating Band 1 and Band 2 inclusion funding directly to schools in support of the Inclusion Strategy, subject to further evaluation, consultation and financial modelling.

Is the Schools' Forum required to make a decision as part of this report or subsequent versions due to be considered later in the meeting cycle?	
Yes: ☐	No: ☒

3. Executive Summary

3.1 In July 2026, the SEND Improvement Board approved a revised Early Support & Intervention Funding (ESIF) model to strengthen equity, transparency and effectiveness across early intervention funding arrangements. The revised model consolidates a number of established funding streams into a single pathway, introducing clear threshold criteria, strengthened governance arrangements, multi-agency decision-making and enhanced monitoring of outcomes and impact.

3.2 The revised arrangements build upon the success of the Vulnerable Children's Grant (VCG), which has supported inclusion, attendance, emotional wellbeing and exclusion prevention across West Berkshire schools. During 2025/26, 38 applications were received, with the available categorised data indicating that Social, Emotional and Mental Health (SEMH) was the most frequently recorded primary need. A total of £83,901 was allocated from an available budget of £179,400. Outcome status was supplied for 16 of the 38 applications; the remaining records require reconciliation before final publication.

3.3 The combined ESIF model for 2026/27 provides a more consistent, transparent and equitable approach to the allocation of early intervention funding and supports the objectives of both the SEND Improvement Programme and the developing Inclusion Strategy.

3.4 The report also highlights a potential future development of the ESIF model from 2027/28. Subject to evaluation, consultation and financial modelling, consideration is being given to delegating ESIF Band 1 and Band 2 funding directly to schools or via clusters to manage early intervention through this model, remain as is or top-slice for the PEX aversion fund which requires a more reactive approach. We would like to support schools to respond more flexibly to emerging inclusion needs, reduce unnecessary applications and minimise delays in accessing support. Funding linked to permanent exclusion prevention and placement sustainability remains under consideration and no decisions have yet been taken regarding future arrangements.

Issue Identification

3.5 The Vulnerable Children's Grant (VCG) was established to provide short-term funding for pupils facing significant barriers to learning, attendance, engagement and inclusion where schools experience unexpected additional costs associated with SEND, SEMH, medical needs or transition arrangements. The fund was designed to:

- Prevent exclusion and placement breakdown.
- Support attendance and reintegration.
- Reduce escalation to specialist provision.
- Enable schools to respond rapidly to emerging needs.
- Promote inclusion within mainstream settings.

3.6 Evaluation of the grant has consistently demonstrated positive outcomes for pupils and schools, with schools reporting improvements in attendance, engagement, emotional regulation, relationships, access to learning and successful reintegration into education. Approximately 90% of supported pupils were reported as making either "some" or "a lot" of progress following intervention.

3.7 Whilst the impact of the funding has been positive, review activity undertaken through the SEND Improvement Programme identified a number of challenges across early intervention funding arrangements, including:

- Multiple access routes.
- Variable thresholds.
- Inconsistent decision-making.
- Duplication across services.
- Limited strategic oversight of expenditure and impact.

3.8 The SEND Improvement Board therefore approved further proposals in July 2026 to immediately strengthen the single Early Support & Intervention Funding framework (as approved by School's Forum for 2026/27) designed to improve consistency, transparency and effectiveness across the system for the remainder of the financial year.

Figure 1: Development of 2026/27 Early Intervention Funding

Established funding stream	Revised pathway
Vulnerable Children's Grant	**Single ESIF Framework**
Therapeutic Thinking Fund	
Autism Limited Fund	
EBSA Support Fund	

4. Vulnerable Children's Grant Performance 2025/26

4.1 Activity Summary

During 2025/26:

- 38 applications were received.
- Applications were submitted by both primary and secondary schools.
- Within the 14 applications for which a primary need category was supplied, SEMH was the most frequently recorded need.
- Funding was predominantly requested to support attendance, prevent exclusion and maintain educational placements.

Table 1: Application Outcomes

Outcome	Number	Share of recorded outcomes
Approved	11	69%
Pending	3	19%
Refused	2	12%
Applications with recorded outcome	**16**	**100%**
Outcome not supplied / to be reconciled	22	—
Total applications received	**38**	—

4.2 Profile of Need

Table 2: Primary Area of Need

Primary area of need	Number
SEMH	11

Learning	2
Medical	1
Applications with need category supplied	**14**
Need category not supplied / to be reconciled	24
Total applications received	**38**

The predominance of SEMH requests reflects increasing pressures associated with emotional wellbeing, behaviour, attendance and inclusion across mainstream schools.

4.3 Phase Distribution

Table 3: Applications by Key Stage

Phase	Number
Foundation	1
Key Stage 1	13
Key Stage 2	7
Key Stage 3	7
Key Stage 4	6
Applications with phase supplied	**34**
Phase not supplied / to be reconciled	4
Total applications received	**38**

Applications are concentrated within Key Stages 1 to 3, highlighting the importance of early intervention before difficulties become entrenched.

4.4 Reasons for Application

Applications were commonly linked to sudden changes in need, transition issues and emerging risks to attendance, engagement and inclusion.

4.5 Financial Position

Table 5: Financial Position

Measure	Value	Share
Total budget available	£179,400	100%
Funding allocated	£83,901	47%
Budget remaining	**£95,499**	**53%**

The budget position reflects the transition from traditional VCG arrangements towards implementation of the wider ESIF model.

5. Approval of the Revised ESIF Model

5.1 In July 2026, the SEND Improvement Board approved a revised and strengthened integrated ESIF model that consolidates multiple funding streams into a single coherent framework.

Table 6: Funding Streams Integrated Within ESIF

Existing funding stream	Position in revised model
Vulnerable Children's Grant (VCG)	129400
Therapeutic Thinking Support Fund	50000
Autism Limited Fund	52690
Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA) Fund	43950
Combined annual funding	**£276,040.00**

6. Rationale for Change

6.1 The revised model was approved by School's Forum for 2026/27 to address identified inconsistencies and create a more efficient and equitable funding system.

Table 7: Existing Arrangements Compared with ESIF

Existing arrangements	ESIF model
Multiple funding routes	Single application pathway
Variable thresholds	Defined threshold framework
Different decision-makers	Multi-agency panel
Inconsistent decision-making	Scoring matrix and moderation
Limited oversight	Structured governance and reporting
Fragmented monitoring	Standardised outcome monitoring
Multiple datasets	Centralised oversight and analysis

7. Key Changes Approved by the SEND Improvement Board in July 2026

Table 8: Approved Changes and Intended Benefits

Change	Intended benefit
Single referral route	Simplified access and reduced duplication
Defined threshold framework	Improved consistency and transparency
Funding bands	Better alignment between need and funding
Group applications	Earlier preventative intervention
Exclusion prevention route	Timely intervention for high-risk pupils
Multi-agency panel	Improved accountability and consistency
Scoring matrix	Transparent decision-making
Appeals process	Stronger governance
Impact monitoring framework	Improved evidence of effectiveness

Table 9: Current ESIF Funding Bands

Funding band	Maximum allocation
Band 1	Up to £3,000
Band 2	Up to £5,000

7.1 Governance and Accountability

The revised ESIF model introduces significantly strengthened governance and quality assurance arrangements, including:

- Standardised application processes.
- Formal scoring and moderation arrangements.
- Recorded decision-making rationale.
- Mid-point review and monitoring processes.
- End-point impact evaluations.
- Appeals arrangements.
- Annual audits.
- Monitoring of equity across schools.
- Regular reporting through SEND governance arrangements.

Governance Structure
School Application
↓
ESIF Panel
↓
Service Lead
↓
SEN Improvement Board
↓
Schools' Forum

7.2 Anticipated Impact

The SEND Improvement Board concluded that the revised ESIF model will:

- Improve equity of access across all schools.
- Strengthen early intervention.
- Support attendance and inclusion.
- Reduce the risk of suspension and exclusion.
- Improve transparency and accountability.
- Reduce duplication across education services.
- Improve value for money.
- Ensure resources are targeted towards children and young people with the greatest need.

8. Future Development of ESIF (2027/28)

8.1 As part of the ongoing development of the West Berkshire Inclusion Strategy and SEND Improvement Programme, consideration is being given to the future evolution of ESIF from 2027/28.

8.2 Whilst no decisions have been taken, officers are exploring whether Band 1 and Band 2 ESIF funding could be delegated directly to schools through an agreed and transparent methodology. This would represent a move from an application-based funding model towards a more devolved approach to inclusion funding, placing greater responsibility and flexibility directly with schools.

8.3 This approach would support key objectives of the Inclusion Strategy, including:

- Strengthening mainstream inclusion.
- Promoting earlier intervention.
- Reducing bureaucracy.

- Reducing drift and delay in accessing support.
- Supporting preventative action.
- Enabling schools to respond more strategically to local need.
- Increasing ownership and accountability for inclusion outcomes.

8.4 The intention would be to provide schools with greater autonomy to deploy inclusion funding according to local priorities whilst retaining clear expectations regarding impact and outcomes.

8.5 It is recognised that some elements of ESIF may require continued central oversight. In particular, funding linked to permanent exclusion prevention, rapid intervention and placement sustainability may not be appropriate for full delegation. The future position of these funding streams remains under consideration and has not yet been determined.

8.6 Any future proposals will be informed by:

- Evaluation of ESIF outcomes during 2026/27.
- Financial modelling and affordability assessments.
- Analysis of attendance, exclusion and inclusion outcomes.
- Consultation with schools and stakeholders.
- Alignment with the Inclusion Strategy and SEND Improvement Programme.
- Ongoing oversight through established governance arrangements.

8.7 In addition to the exploration of delegating Band 1 and Band 2 funding directly to schools, consideration is also being given to whether funding could be distributed at a locality or cluster level to support earlier intervention, collaborative practice and inclusive provision across groups of schools operating within a shared framework. A cluster-based approach could enable schools to respond collectively to emerging needs, share resources and expertise, and strengthen local inclusion capacity whilst maintaining accountability through agreed governance arrangements. This would be aligned to the objectives of the Inclusion Strategy and the principle of intervening at the earliest possible stage to prevent escalation of need.

8.8 Alongside these options, officers are also considering whether a proportion of the funding could be top-sliced and retained centrally to enable a rapid response mechanism for children and young people at immediate risk of permanent exclusion, placement breakdown or significant attendance concerns. This could provide greater flexibility to deploy support swiftly where urgent intervention is required. Alternative approaches to the use of this funding are also being explored as part of ongoing policy development.

8.9 It is important to note that no decisions have been taken regarding future arrangements. Consideration will also be given to maintaining the current ESIF model without further structural changes, should evaluation demonstrate that existing arrangements are delivering the desired outcomes. Discussions with schools and stakeholders will continue throughout 2026/27 to assess the relative benefits, risks and affordability of the various options before any recommendations are brought forward through the appropriate governance process.

8.10 Should proposals be developed, they will be presented to Schools' Forum and the appropriate governance boards as part of future planning discussions.

9. Implications

9.1 Financial Implications

The revised ESIF model consolidates available early intervention funding into a single budget of £276,000.40, providing improved transparency, oversight and accountability for expenditure and outcomes. Future proposals regarding delegation would be subject to detailed financial modelling and consultation.

9.2 Legal Implications

The revised arrangements support the Local Authority's statutory responsibilities relating to SEND, inclusion, attendance and exclusion prevention. Any future delegated funding arrangements would continue to operate within these statutory frameworks.

9.3 Equality Implications

The revised ESIF model is intended to improve consistency, transparency and equity of access to support. Future delegation of funding may further improve access to early intervention by reducing delays in accessing support.

9.4 Strategic and Operational Risks

The model seeks to mitigate risks associated with exclusion, attendance concerns, placement instability and increasing demand on specialist provision through earlier, targeted intervention.

Any future delegated funding model would require appropriate accountability and monitoring arrangements to ensure resources continue to be directed towards children and young people with the greatest levels of need.

10. Conclusion

10.1 The Vulnerable Children's Grant has demonstrated a positive impact in supporting inclusion, attendance and educational stability for vulnerable children and young people. Schools continue to report positive outcomes and significant progress for pupils receiving support.

10.2 The SEND Improvement Board has therefore approved a revised ESIF framework which builds on these strengths whilst introducing greater consistency, transparency, governance and accountability across early intervention funding arrangements.

10.3 The revised model is expected to improve equity of access, strengthen early intervention, reduce exclusion risk and provide greater assurance that resources are directed towards children and young people with the highest levels of need whilst delivering measurable impact and value for money.

10.4 Looking ahead, the ESIF framework also provides an opportunity to explore a more school-led approach to inclusion funding. Subject to further evaluation and consultation, this could support greater flexibility, reduce administrative burden and further embed the principles of the West Berkshire Inclusion Strategy, whilst maintaining appropriate oversight of funding linked to exclusion prevention and placement sustainability.

11. Appendices

NONE