

30 July 2019

Dear Mr Williamson

Congratulations on your new role as Education Secretary.

As I am sure you realise, one of the most immediate challenges you face is the growing funding crisis in special needs education.

I met with your predecessor in June to discuss this and felt that I must reiterate this issue to you at the earliest opportunity as the urgency and severity of this crisis is growing every day. At the meeting with Mr Hinds, we offered to contribute to ongoing work led by the Department for Education to review ways in which the current system can be improved. And, I would like to extend that offer to yourself.

As you are new to the post, I thought it would be useful to summarise the extremely difficult financial situation that we face.

In Richmond, in 2018/19 there was a £4.2m deficit on the high needs block account. Tight control of expenditure elsewhere in the schools block reduced the net deficit on the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) account to £3.0m.

The Council was already carrying forward a deficit of £8m at the end of 2017/18 and so by the end of 2018/19 this deficit has increased to £11m. This position is not sustainable and, with only modest reserves locally, this is already impacting the Council's overall financial position and ability to fund wider Council services.

In the current financial year, the latest forecast is for a deficit on the high needs block of between £4m and £5m despite a series of actions being undertaken to improve efficiency. DfE officials have visited the Council on several occasions and confirmed that the action we are taking is in line with expected best practice and that the growth we are experiencing is similar to other parts of the country. We are in a worse position simply because our overall school funding starts at a lower base – as the SEND demand continues to rise across the country many other Councils are and will find themselves facing the same crisis in funding (indeed your officials will be able to share with you data recently sent the Department from Treasurer Societies representing all tiers of local government providing education support).

Earlier this year, Richmond's deficit recovery plan was discussed with our Schools Forum. Our SEND Futures Plan is forecast to help mitigate growth in costs through a focus on early intervention, mainstream inclusion, a widened further education offering and promotion of independence on the transition to adult services. We will also be investing in local special school place provision.



However, despite these actions, in the absence of improved funding we forecast that the in-year high needs deficit will increase to £7m by 2021/22 with an accumulated DSG deficit of £25.7m by the end of that financial year.

I'm sure you will appreciate that this is a burden that a council like Richmond, whose reserves total £42.1m excluding the DSG deficit, simply cannot shoulder and that the sooner the real funding needs are met the better.

Over the next few weeks and months as you are briefed on all areas in your portfolio, I am sure that you will realise that this situation is untenable. And I hope that it will be a priority moving forward.

To help you understand these issues, I would like to invite you to come and visit the borough. I would like to show you the excellent work that we are doing to support our most vulnerable children, and give you an opportunity to hear from our staff and families on why a more sustainable funding approach is needed urgently.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads 'Robin Brown'.

**Cllr Robin Brown**  
Lead Member for Finance and Resources  
London Borough of Richmond upon Thames