

Hertfordshire's Top Up High Needs Funding (HNF) for mainstream schools' system

HNF is the “top up” system in place in Hertfordshire for distributing high needs funding to mainstream schools to enable them to support children with significant special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). Each Local Authority has their own arrangements in place, agreed with mainstream schools, for passing this additional “top up” funding to them and HNF is unique to Hertfordshire. This arrangement commenced in April 2020 and is replacing the previous system called Exceptional Needs Funding (ENF).

There are two sections to HNF – one for children with Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) and one for children with emerging needs that require short term local support called Local HNF (LHNF).

The Department of Education (DofE) states in their guidance that a child has “high needs” if their education costs more than around £10,000 per year. Funding is given to schools in three ways for children with high needs. Element 1 is the annual weighted pupil unit (AWPU) which schools receive for every pupil on roll (a minimum of £4,000 pa for primary schools and £5,150 pa for secondary schools), element 2 is in the school’s notional SEN budget (from which schools are expected to meet the next £6,000 of costs for each child with high needs), element 3 in Hertfordshire is HNF. The DofE states that if the cost of providing for a pupil is more than £10,000 the local authority will allocate additional funding. It states that top up funding rates should reflect the costs of additional support to meet an individual pupil’s needs.

HNF is allocated to children and young people (CYP) in mainstream nurseries and schools with EHCPs where the needs of the child are assessed as requiring additional funding (above the £10,000 pa). Hertfordshire’s mainstream Banding Tool is used to determine the amount of funding to be allocated based on the level of need described in a CYP’s EHCP. The Banding Tool includes a description of need for each area of SEN that a CYP may have, such as cognition and learning, speech language and communication needs, physical and sensory impairments etc. The draft EHCP and accompanying professional advice is used by nurseries/schools together with parents, the SEN Team and the relevant lead professional to assess the CYP’s level of need. The level of need is recorded in the Banding Tool which then creates an overall banding number that determines the amount of funding that will be paid by the Local Authority to the nursery or school to enable them to deliver the provision set out in the EHCP. Where a CYP’s needs are at band 0 or 1 their support can be delivered using the school’s own budget. When needs fall into bands 2 to 5 this will result in the nursery or school receiving top up funding called HNF. CYP with funding allocated under the previous ENF system will be transitioned to the new HNF system as part of their 2021 annual review.

LHNF is distributed to schools through a local panel system managed by each of the nine local DSPL Managers. Nurseries and schools can make an application, with the parents' consent, to the panel when they need additional top up funding to support the child for a short period of time. LHNF is for children that do not have an EHCP. The panel uses the same Banding Tool to assess the child's level of need and to determine the amount of funding needed to support them. The panel membership includes representatives from local schools and nurseries and local authority professionals.

Herts Parent Carer Involvement (HPCI) were strong critics of the previous ENF system in the belief that it did not adequately support mainstream nurseries and schools to include children with high needs. HPCI has been fully involved in the design of the new HNF system and continues to have an oversight role by providing parental representation in the ongoing HNF Business Monitoring Group.

HPCI's view is that the HNF system:

- has ensured, through the review that has been undertaken by the Local Authority, that an increased level of funding will be provided to mainstream settings to enable them to better include children with high needs.
- supports the local authority to fulfil their legal obligations to make the provision specified in children's EHCPs (section 42(2) of the Children and Families Act 2014) by ensuring that funding is given to schools where the cost of provision exceeds the national threshold.
- provides a system which delivers funding in a transparent way linked to the needs of the CYP described in their EHCP.
- HPCI expects that the new system will help improve the quality of EHCPs by encouraging all contributors to specify the needs of the CYP more clearly so that they can be properly compared to the banding descriptors.
- the system encourages joint working between parents, schools and the local authority to understand a CYP's needs by reference to the Banding Tool.
- provides a mechanism, through a one stage process, for delivering additional funding when needed for CYP without an EHCP. This will enable their needs to be met in the short term while longer term plans can be developed if needed.

HNF and LHNF are new systems introduced in 2020. Any new system will take time to embed and it is likely there will be some teething problems. HPCI believes that the new system goes a significant way to address the problems with the previous ENF system and are well placed to play a role in the ongoing monitoring of the system to ensure that CYP's needs are properly met in mainstream settings.