

# Parents tackle MP over autism funding

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PARENTS of children with autism met disabilities minister Jonathan Shaw at a specialist school and told him: "This is what we need in Medway."

Medway Council spends £2 million a year sending children with autism to specialised schools outside Kent.

But Gaynor Simmonds, who has two children with autism, says this is very disruptive to their family and social lives.

"At the moment children are

being sent to residential schools in Sussex and as far away as Devon," said Gaynor, from Rochester, who is development consultant for Medway Autistic Group Information Centre - MAGIC.

"It would be far better, and probably cheaper in the long run, to spend the money providing education locally.

"We have good communications with Medway Council and I think they agree with us on this, but they just don't have the money."

The meeting with Mr Shaw, who

is also Labour MP for Chatham, took place at TreeHouse, a special school in London founded by parents of children with autism.

Mr Shaw said: "There are facilities for children with autism in Medway. But they are in mainstream education."

The meeting gave him the opportunity to reassure the parents about a proposal for new methods of funding for people with disabilities. Money would be provided for individuals to purchase the social and health-care services that best suit them,

rather than relying on packages of care.

Disability groups have expressed fears that this could reduce the level of funding available.

Mr Shaw denied this, and said the new arrangements would give people with disabilities more choice and control over the services provided for them.

Ms Simmonds said the meeting with Jonathan Shaw had been very useful and constructive.

Almost 1,000 children in Medway have autism, around twice the national average.