



CHILDREN AND FAMILIES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE:
3 MARCH 2026

BUILDING EDUCATION SERVICES TOGETHER: PROGRAMME PLAN

REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF EDUCATION, INCLUSION AND
ADDITIONAL NEEDS

Purpose of report

1. The purpose of this report is to provide the Committee with an overview of the Building Education Services Together (BEST) programme plan and provide information relating to the development of a Belonging in Education Strategy.

Policy Framework and Previous Decisions

2. The programme outlined within the report will adhere to corporate policies and plans.
3. The Children and Families Act 2014 sets out the legal duties that local authorities and Integrated Care Boards must fulfil for children and young people with SEND aged 0-25. This includes a duty to identify and assess the SEND of children and young people in their area when they become aware that they have or may have SEND, and to provide special educational provision where this is identified in an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP).
4. The SEND Code of Practice 2015 sets out the statutory guidance for supporting children and young people with SEND. This includes the legal framework for making decisions around requests for Education, Health and Care Needs Assessments (EHCNAs).
5. The financial framework for pupils with High Needs and the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) are outlined within the School and Early Years (Finance) Regulations and associated guidance issued by the Department for Education.

Background

6. In March 2022, the Government outlined its ambitions for changes to the SEND system and opened a period of consultation on the proposals which the Council responded to. The Green Paper, 'SEND review: Right support, Right place, Right time' proposed some fundamental changes to the SEND system. In response, the national SEND and Alternative Provision Improvement Plan was published in March 2023, outlining a vision for a more inclusive, consistent, and financially sustainable system. The national Change Partnership Programme (CPP) was then established to

test and refine the proposed reforms in real-world settings before rolling them out nationally.

7. Local Authorities are due to be consulted on revised Education/SEND Reforms from the Department for Education, that may lead to changes in the statutory duties for Local Authorities. The Department understands the focus of the reforms will be on 'mainstream inclusion', which have been subsequently embedded within the programme plan.
8. The Upcoming SEND Reforms will focus on five key areas:
 - Early: Children should receive the support they need as soon as possible. Intervening upstream, including earlier in children's lives when this can have most impact, will start to break the cycle of needs going unmet and getting worse.
 - Local: Children and young people with SEND should be able to learn at a school or college close to their home, alongside their peers, rather than travelling long distances from their family and community. Special schools should continue to play a vital role supporting those with the most complex needs.
 - Fair: Every school education setting should be resourced and able to meet common and predictable needs, including as they change over time, without parents having to fight to get support for their children. Where specialist provision is needed for children and young people in mainstream, special or alternative provision, the Service will ensure it is there, with clear legal requirements and safeguards for children and parents.
 - Effective: Reforms should be grounded in evidence, ensuring all education settings know where to go to find effective practice that has excellent long-term outcomes for children and young people.
 - Shared: Education, health and care services should work in partnership with local government, families, teachers, experts and representative bodies to deliver better experiences and outcomes for all children and young people.
9. Challenges presented within the Medium-Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) 2026/27-2029/30 report in relation to increasing demand for Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCP) and subsequent decisions on placements that that child or young person attends, including high-cost placements, was presented to the Committee on 20 January 2026. The priorities identified within the BEST programme plan is as a result of the challenges presented within the MTFS report to support financial mitigations and sustainability.
10. In 2025, the Education, Inclusion and Additional Needs services within Children and Families Department, launched a refreshed brand for all of the services. The new identity of BEST unifies services under one recognisable look, making it easier for families and partners to connect with those services.

11. The BEST programme aims to support the 2026–2030 departmental plan, helping to make Leicestershire a place where every child is safe, feels they belong, builds strong foundations, and can enjoy and achieve.
12. The Department is currently developing a new Belonging in Education strategy for Leicestershire, in order to support all Children and Young People to have a sense of belonging in their school and provision environment as well as in their community. This is due to go live in April 2026. The Strategy aims for partners to work together in order to ensure a commitment to belonging, where all Children and Young People feel a sense of belonging in Education, so they can live their best lives and be the authors of their own life stories. The Strategy will serve as the Department's overarching strategic framework for education, under which will be all subsequent development and improvement initiatives.
13. In 2021, the Department embarked on a programme plan previously titled 'Transforming SEND (Special Educational Needs and Disabilities) and Inclusion in Leicestershire'. This was supported by a third-party partner, Newton Europe, which was commissioned to support the programme, provide external challenge to the system, and to ensure effective, child-centred delivery. Newton Europe were the Department for Education's delivery partner for the Delivering Better Value programme and had detailed understanding of Leicestershire's SEND system as a result. Using the evidence and data from the diagnostic, the delivery of the programme was structured around four key workstreams where positive improvements could be made:
 - Inclusive Practice;
 - Service Transformation;
 - Accurate Information;
 - Communication and Engagement.
14. Reports relating to a summary of the work and impact of this programme were presented to the Committee regularly between 2022 and 2025, including achieving its annual financial targets. To ensure continued progress and enhancement, the implementation of a revised programme is required to initiate the next phase of service development, quality assurance, and mitigation strategies.
15. A unified BEST programme plan will offer clear visibility into priorities, implementation, and cost savings. The Plan also incorporates governance measures to ensure that risks, issues, and progress are effectively monitored and progressed. The existing governance structures from the Transforming SEND and Inclusion in Leicestershire programme will remain for the revised programme.
16. The Programme aims to strengthen inclusive practice by improving service performance and ensuring a sense of belonging in all educational settings. It also focuses on early support for children and young people with Social, Emotional and Mental Health (SEMH) needs to prevent escalation, improve outcomes and seek to enhance the financial sustainability of the High Needs Block by achieving MTFs savings and reducing long-term costs.
17. To achieve its objectives, the Programme will introduce and implement new initiatives within mainstream schools to provide enhanced early support, particularly for students with SEMH needs and Communication and Interaction needs, and to

increase the effectiveness and consistency of internal services. This will involve establishing high standards and ensuring alignment across processes, decision-making, and support pathways. Additionally, the Programme is committed to delivering sustainable, system-wide improvements by capitalising on opportunities identified in previous programmes and by aligning with national reforms targeting inclusive education, as detailed above. The new initiatives that we are proposing as part of this, have been designed following feedback from school leaders and fed back to schools as part of informal consultation.

18. For long-term financial viability, six BEST strategic priorities have been identified as key drivers for change. The six strategic priorities project a savings target of £48m over the next four years, with a stretched target of £66m, based on further mitigations aligned to the placement mix of children and young people. Calculated savings range from £15m to be achieved by March 2027, rising to a stretched target of £66m by March 2030. Details regarding the £66 million mitigations are outlined below against the cumulative High Needs Funding gap.

High Needs Financial Forecast - January 2026				
	2026/27 £,000	2027/28 £,000	2028/29 £,000	2029/30 £,000
Annual Funding Gap Pre Mitigations	87,880	111,799	141,251	174,182
Total Planned Mitigations	-15,363	-33,403	-49,634	-66,146
Annual Revenue Funding Gap Post Mitigations	72,517	78,396	91,617	108,036
2019/20 Deficit Brought Forward	7,062			
2020/21 High Needs Deficit Brought Forward	10,423			
2021/22 High Needs Deficit Brought Forward	11,365			
2022/23 High Needs Deficit Brought Forward	6,683			
2023/24 High Needs Deficit Brought Forward	5,650			
2024/25 High Needs Deficit Brought Forward	23,215			
2025/26 High Needs Deficit Brought Forward forecast	47,482			
Cumulative High Needs Funding Gap	184,397	262,793	354,410	462,446

19. This Programme is designed to improve financial forecasts while maintaining consistently high performance across all services within the Education, Inclusion, and Additional Needs directorate. It seeks to realign resources in support of early intervention wherever feasible, in alignment with the National Government's priority of Mainstream Inclusion. The initiatives will systematically measure the impact of designated workstreams whilst ensuring that sustainability is integrated throughout design and implementation stages, including embedding robust financial mitigations

Summary of Six Strategic Priorities

20. As part of the programme plan, the Department is establishing six initial priorities that are aligned with the aims and objectives outlined above. These priorities will continue to evolve as the programme develops, ensuring they effectively support early intervention, uphold quality of service delivery, and contribute to financial mitigation efforts. The priority areas are outlined below:

- **Enhanced Graduated Offer with Outreach Support (Early Intervention):** This focuses on strengthening SEMH provision within mainstream schools through a

graduated response supported by outreach services. The intention is to promote school retention, improve attendance and behaviour, and cultivate a sense of belonging, thereby reducing escalation to statutory EHCPs.

- **Ceasing EHCPs Where Provision Ceased:** The introduction of a systematic review process designed to identify and cease EHCPs for children no longer accessing education, ensuring that resources are allocated efficiently.
- **Expansion of Specialist Provision and Resource Bases:** This involves utilising data to assess needs and planning for additional special school places and enhanced resource bases, aiming to decrease reliance on high-cost Independent Specialist Provision and sustain local placement options where feasible.
- **Review of the Early Years SEND Support Offer:** A further priority involves analysing national developments in the childcare market and determining an appropriate local response. This will include evaluating optimal methods to support the increasing number of Early Years children accessing provision, as well as those known to the Early Years Service, as part of Leicestershire's Early Years Service Review and Commissioned Early Years Provisions.
- **Reviewing the Educated Other Than at School (EOTAS) Policy,** ensuring implementation of the policy is consistent in every current and new EOTAS Package: This is to ensure that EOTAS packages align with educational outcomes and exploring the potential to bring delivery in-house where possible, with the goal of improving outcomes, quality, safeguarding, and cost efficiency.
- **Advancing Smarter Commissioning, Procurement, and Demand Management:** This includes collaborating with Leicestershire mainstream schools to reduce direct transitions to Independent Specialist Provisions and conducting regular reviews to ensure placements remain suitable and cost-effective.

Proposal

21. Details for each workstream will be explored as part of the Programme development and in line with national announcements. From initial programme planning, there are 24 workstreams which are being explored, feeding into the delivery of the six priorities detailed above. A considerable amount of the workstreams are ready to report on. However, further development is needed for some of the workstreams to ensure adequate reporting is in place. These will likely take up to six months to be in a position to start reporting on in the second quarter of 2026/27 financial year.

Resource Implications

22. Resource implications will be developed as part of the ongoing development of the Programme. Information will be included in reports which will be presented to the Committee as the programme develops.

Conclusions

23. It is the considered view of Children and Family Services that the BEST programme, aligning to the six priorities detailed in this report, will embed quality assurance of the

service areas within the directorate, improving outcomes for Children and Young People, whilst also providing the £66m mitigations against the combined High Needs Block deficit.

Background papers

24. Medium Term Financial Planning, Children and Families Overview and Scrutiny Committee, 20 January 2026:
<https://democracy.leics.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=1043&MId=8410&Ver=4>
25. 'Transforming SEND (Special Educational Needs and Disabilities) and Inclusion in Leicestershire' Programme, Children and Families Overview and Scrutiny Committee, 2 September 2025:
<https://democracy.leics.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=1043&MId=7892&Ver=4>

Circulation under the Local Issues Alert Procedure

26. None

Equality Implications

27. The Council will develop this as part of the ongoing Programme development and will be included in future iterations presented to Overview and Scrutiny Committee. However, the programme actively seeks to reduce inequality and improve outcomes for all.

Human Rights Implications

28. Human rights implications will be considered as part of the ongoing Programme development. This will be included in future iterations presented to Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

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