



**CHILDREN AND FAMILY SERVICES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY
COMMITTEE: 2 JUNE 2026**

SCHOOLS WHITE PAPER AND SEND REFORM

REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF CHILDREN AND FAMILY SERVICES

Purpose of report

1. The purpose of this report is to update the Committee on the Government's Schools White Paper Every Child Achieving and Thriving and the associated SEND Reform proposals. The report summarises the national policy direction, outlines the implications for the County Council and its partners and highlights key risks and opportunities.

Policy Framework and Previous Decisions

2. The Schools White Paper and SEND Reform proposals form part of a national 10-year programme of education reform led by the Department for Education. Locally, the proposals align with:
 - a. The County Council's Strategic Plan priorities relating to children's outcomes, inclusion and early intervention.
 - b. Existing SEND improvement and inclusion strategies.
 - c. Work undertaken through the Department for Education Change Partnership Programme.
3. The reforms do not currently require changes to the Council's Budget and Policy Framework, though future financial and governance considerations will arise as national legislation and funding arrangements are confirmed.
4. The Committee has previously received updates relating to SEND pressures, High Needs funding and inclusion.

Background

5. The SEND system nationally is under significant pressure. Since 2019, the number of active Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) has almost doubled, leading to large assessment backlogs and increasing parental appeals. Local Authorities continue to face substantial financial pressure, particularly within the High Needs Block, with SEND transport costs alone nearing £2bn nationally. Nationally, the accumulated deficit in 2024/25 was £12.2 billion and is estimated to rise to £16.8 billion by 2028/29.

6. The Government has published a Schools White Paper and a parallel SEND Reform consultation setting out the most significant changes to education and SEND since 2014. Together, they aim to raise standards, strengthen inclusion and rebalance investment towards prevention, early intervention and family support.
7. The Schools White Paper is structured as a phased programme:
 - a. Phase 1 (2025/26–2026/27): Attendance, behaviour, workforce and system improvement.
 - b. Phase 2 (2026/27–2027/28): Preparation for SEND and curriculum reforms.
 - c. Phase 3 (from 2028/29): Full implementation of new SEND and curriculum frameworks.
8. SEND Reform proposals introduce a redesigned 0–25 framework with a stronger universal offer in mainstream education, meeting commonly occurring needs without reliance on diagnosis. As part of the proposal, there are three tiers of support, Targeted, Targeted Plus and Specialist. Individual Support Plans will replace EHCPs for most children, with EHCPs reserved for those accessing nationally defined Specialist Provision Packages.
9. Local authorities are positioned as system leaders and convenors, with responsibility for inclusive mainstream practice, place sufficiency, joint commissioning and partnership governance across education, health and social care.
10. A key requirement is the submission of a Local SEND Reform Plan by mid-June 2026, supported by data and demand analysis and a Partnership Maturity Assessment.
11. The Partnership Maturity Assessment is underpinned by seven nationally defined pillars:
 - a. Co-production with parents, carers and young people
 - b. System leadership and governance
 - c. Understanding needs through robust data
 - d. Quality of inclusion at universal, targeted and specialist levels
 - e. Effective partnership working
 - f. A skilled and sustainable workforce
 - g. Strategic and targeted use of resources, including sufficiency planning
12. Approval of the Plan is a pre-condition for access to High Needs Stability Grant funding, covering up to 90% of historic dedicated school grant (DSG) deficits accrued to March 2026.
13. The SEND Reform plan will be presented to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee at a future date, to outline the detail of the approved plan for Leicestershire.

SEND Reform Plan

14. The Local SEND Reform Plan will be the primary mechanism through which national reforms are implemented locally. This includes proposals relating to:

- a. Governance and partnership arrangements
 - b. Experts-at-Hand and early intervention models
 - c. SEND sufficiency and place planning
 - d. Financial sustainability of the High Needs system
15. **Governance** - Officers are delivering planning through identified workstreams to ensure all stakeholder views are represented and proposing a SEND Reform Implementation Board as the primary governance route.
16. **The Experts at Hand** model aims to implement a new offer of expert advice and support from education, health and social care for educational providers (0-25). The model brings together education specialists, clinical health professionals and specialist outreach as well as whole-setting support and training. Working groups have been set up to identify specific needs across the children's partnership to ensure local areas are able to provide the right support, in the right place, at the right time.
17. The Experts at Hand model will be developed to align with existing plans from across the partnership, including the Education Belonging and SEND and Inclusion Strategies, the Families First Partnership Programme, Leicestershire's Best Start in Life plan and the NHS 10-year plan, including the Neighborhood Health Framework.
18. It is proposed that the Experts at Hand model will be delivered using a localities model, supporting early years settings, schools and post-16 provisions within defined locality areas across Leicestershire.
19. Leicestershire has received £3.8m funding for the direct delivery of the Experts at Hand initiative for the 2026-27 financial year. The indicative funding for years two and three is due to rise to £6.8m and £7.6m respectively.
20. **The SEND sufficiency and place planning** aims to ensure sufficient, high-quality SEND places in mainstream and specialist settings, and that physical environments are accessible. The workstream is utilising data to understand trends and needs to plan SEND Sufficiency. This will support the Department for Education's ambition for the delivery of Inclusion Bases across all local areas. These will be identified as Support Bases and Specialist Bases.
- a. Support Bases are school or trust funded, whereby schools or trusts are responsible for placing children and young people within the provision, who are most likely to be supported through an Individual Support Plan rather than an Education, Health and Care Plan.
 - b. Specialist Bases are Local Authority commissioned places. Local Authorities will place children and young people within these provisions, and this cohort is likely to have an Education Health and Care Plan.
21. The Department for Education has outlined their expectation that every secondary school and an appropriate number of primary schools will have access to Inclusion Bases.

Consultation

22. Nationally, the Department for Education's consultation on SEND Reform closed in May. Leicestershire provided feedback on the SEND Reforms through formal consultation and focus groups with the Department for Education.
23. There is a requirement for all plans to be co-produced and represent the local area, with a key focus over the developmental phase being to engage with partners and stakeholders.

Resource Implications

24. Approval of the Local SEND Reform Plan is critical to securing High Needs Stability Grant funding to address historic DSG deficits. For Leicestershire this represents up to circa £100m.
25. Financial, legal and workforce implications will continue to be assessed as national funding and legislative detail is confirmed.

Timetable for Decisions

26. The below details the timetable for key decisions and submissions that have been released by the Department for Education thus far:
 - a. May 2026: Closure of national SEND Reform consultation
 - b. Mid-June 2026: Submission of Local SEND Reform Plan to the Department for Education
 - c. 2026–27: Preparatory implementation and partnership readiness activity
 - d. From 2028/29: Anticipated phased legislative implementation

This is a 10-year implementation plan, and the Department for Education expect numbers of Education Health and Care Plans to continue to rise and be at the figures of today by the end of the 10-year plan.

Conclusions

27. Whilst Leicestershire is well positioned due to strong partnership working developed through the national Change Partnership Programme, successful delivery will depend on sustained co-production and robust locality-based delivery.
28. The Schools White Paper and SEND Reform present a significant opportunity to reshape inclusion, outcomes and financial sustainability. They also carry material delivery and partnership risks during the transition period.

Background papers

[Schools White Paper: Every Child Achieving and Thriving](#)

[SEND Reform consultation: Putting Children and Young People First](#)

Circulation under the Local Issues Alert Procedure

29. None

Equality Implications

30. The Council has had due regard to its public sector equality duty under the Equality Act 2010. The Schools White Paper and SEND Reform proposals are intended to improve outcomes for children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities and other disadvantaged groups.
31. An Equality Impact Assessment will be undertaken as proposals and implementation plans are developed locally. At this stage, the direction of travel is expected to have a positive impact through stronger mainstream inclusion, earlier intervention and reduced reliance on statutory processes. No adverse equality impacts are identified at this stage, but further work will be undertaken.

Human Rights Implications

32. Consideration has been given to the potential human rights implications, particularly the rights of children to education and support. There are no identified human rights implications arising from the matters set out in this report at this stage.

Other Relevant Impact Assessments

33. Health implications: addressed through partnership working with health and early intervention models described in the background section.
34. Partnership working, outlined in sections on governance and consultation.
35. Risk assessment: key risks are summarised in the background and resource implications sections.

Officer(s) to Contact

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