



SCHOOLS FORUM

SEND REFORM APPROACH AND EXPERTS AT HAND MODEL

24th June 2026

Content Applicable to;		School Phase;	
Maintained Primary and Secondary Schools	x	Pre School	x
Academies	x	Foundation Stage	x
PVI Settings	x	Primary	x
Special Schools / Academies	x	Secondary	X
Local Authority	x	Post 16	
		High Needs	X

Purpose of Report

Content Requires;		By;	
Noting	X	Maintained Primary School Members	
Decision		Maintained Secondary School Members	
		Maintained Special School Members	
		Academy Members	
		All Schools Forum	X

1. Purpose of report

1.1 This paper provides Schools Forum with an update on the national SEND Reform Programme and Leicestershire's Local SEND Reform Plan, including the key data underpinning the plan and the implications for schools, settings and the High Needs Block.

1.2 The reforms are intended to address significant pressures across the SEND system, including rising demand, increasing costs, and variable inclusion in mainstream provision. Local Areas are required to submit a partnership-agreed SEND Reform Plan to the Department for Education (DfE), supported by a detailed data return, with a strong emphasis on early intervention, mainstream inclusion, and financial sustainability.

2. Background

2.1 Nationally, the SEND system is under severe strain. Since 2019, the number of pupils with Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) has grown significantly, with rising tribunal

appeals, increasing reliance on specialist and independent provision, and escalating transport and placement costs.

2.2 The Government's reform programme sets out a shift towards:

- Earlier, preventative support in mainstream settings
- Clearer national thresholds and expectations
- Reduced reliance on statutory processes
- Better value for money and improved outcomes

2.3 Local Areas are expected to manage a transition period, operating both the existing SEND system and emerging reform arrangements in parallel.

3. Proposal

3.1 Leicestershire's Local SEND Reform Plan consists of three inter-related elements:

1. Data and Forecasting. A comprehensive dataset covering High Needs Block expenditure and forecasts and workforce capacity.
2. Partnership Maturity Assessment undertaken by partners against seven national pillars
3. A Strategic Reform Plan setting out the local vision for inclusion, priority workstreams, and what "good looks like", while explicitly addressing known system pressures and risks.

3.2 High Needs Block expenditure is forecast to rise from £131.2m (2024/25) to £208.3m by 2027/28. The fastest-growing areas of spend are independent and non-maintained special school placements and alternative provision. Without reform, these trends are not financially sustainable and increase the risk of further DSG deficits.

3.3 There are two main building blocks within the SEND Reform plan, 'Experts at Hand' and sufficiency of inclusion and specialist provision. For this paper, we will focus on the Experts at Hand model.

3.4 The aim of Experts at Hand is to embed a multi-disciplinary 'experts' directly into mainstream settings (0–25), supporting early intervention and inclusion. There has recently been year 1 guidance produced for Experts at Hand, which highlights the need to include educational psychologists, specialist teachers, speech and language therapists and occupational therapists within proposed modelling. It also references the need to also include outreach for AP, which aligns to the Oakfield Outreach offer.

3.5 The 2026/27 Experts at Hand allocated budget is designed so that the vast majority (c.80%+) is invested in front-line multi-disciplinary support for settings, with defined and separately controlled allocations for enabling functions (admin/training/comms) and time-limited transformation capacity to implement reform and strengthen inclusion at scale. This structure supports Schools Forum assurance that the grant is predominantly deployed to operational impact, while maintaining separate, capped overhead and transformation allocations.

3.6 The proposal for the Experts at Hand Direct Delivery commitments are primarily staffing and outreach capacity. The proposal that is being presented to Schools Forum is for the Oakfield Outreach to be funded through the Experts at Hand budget envelope. The Oakfield Outreach had previously been funded through School Block Transfer (academic year 25/26) and proposals had been presented to future fund this through a per pupil costs from schools. It is now being proposed for the costs to be covered as part of the Experts at Hand budget envelope for the next three financial years (25/26-27/28).

4. Governance

4.1 The SEND Reform Plan and Implementation is a local area partnership plan. Leicestershire County Council has collaborated with all partners to ensure a partnership approach and that the plan is meeting the current concerns across the system. The SEND Reform Plan will be initially agreed by a Partnership Board and implementation will be monitored through this governance.

4.2 The SEND Reform Plan must, as a minimum, be formally signed off by the Local Authority Chief Executive (CEO), the Integrated Care Board (ICB) Chief Executive, the Local Authority Director of Children's Service (DCS), the Integrated Care Board NHS Place Director, and the Local Authority Chief Financial Officer (CFO/Section 151 Officer).

5. Conclusions

5.1 Schools are central to the success of SEND reform. The emerging direction implies:

- Greater emphasis on inclusive practice as standard
- Earlier access to expert advice without escalation to EHCPs
- More consistent expectations through national inclusion standards (once published)
- Clearer arrangements for how specialist and support bases operate
- Continued engagement with schools as partners in design and delivery

5.2 Importantly, reform is intended to support schools, not transfer unfunded responsibility. However, it will require sustained collaboration, culture change, and shared ownership across the system.

6. Equal Opportunity Issues

6.1 There are no equality issues arising directly from this report.

7. Officer to Contact

Liv Dale:

Head of Service, Education Strategy and Transformation

Email: olivia.dale@leics.gov.uk

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