

**CABINET – 8 SEPTEMBER 2026****LEICESTERSHIRE SEND REFORM PLAN****REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF CHILDREN AND FAMILY SERVICES****PART A****Purpose of the Report**

1. The purpose of this report is to advise the Cabinet on national Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) Reform proposals and to set out the draft Leicestershire's SEND Reform Plan. This draft Plan, which was submitted to the Department for Education (DfE) on 19 June 2026, includes the Council's proposed use of national grant funding, workforce arrangements, governance, delivery priorities, and expected outcomes for children and young people with SEND. An executive summary is appended to this report.
2. The report also outlines the implications for the County Council and its partners as local authorities are positioned as system leaders and convenors for inclusive mainstream practice, place sufficiency, joint commissioning and partnership governance across education, health and social care.
3. Once the DfE has agreed Leicestershire's SEND Reform Plan, the final version will be submitted to the Cabinet for approval.

Recommendations

4. It is recommended that
 - a) The national SEND Reform policy direction and the submission of the Local [Leicestershire] SEND Reform Plan to the DfE be approved in principle;
 - b) That the delivery approach to the Local SEND Reform Plan - via the Experts at Hand and SEND Sufficiency and Inclusion Bases - be supported;
 - c) That it be noted that the final SEND Reform Plan will be submitted to the Cabinet later in 2026.

Reasons for Recommendation

5. The SEND Reform Plan is the primary local mechanism for implementing national SEND Reforms in Leicestershire and for strengthening early support, mainstream inclusion, local specialist provision and financial sustainability.
6. Approval of the Local SEND Reform Plan by the Department for Education, is a pre-condition for access to High Needs Stability Grant funding, covering up to 90% of historic dedicated schools grant deficits accrued to March 2026.
7. The draft Plan sets out a three-year programme to create a more inclusive, confident and financially sustainable 0-25 SEND system where children and young people receive the right support, at the right time, as close to home as possible.
8. The proposed workforce model has been developed through partnership governance and is funded through ringfenced grant funding to 31 March 2029.

Timetable for Decisions (including Scrutiny)

9. A report was presented to the Children and Families Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 2 June 2026 regarding the Schools White Paper and SEND Reform. A further report will be presented to the Committee (date to be confirmed) regarding the approved Plan and local implementation arrangements.
10. The Local SEND Reform Plan was required to be submitted to the DfE by mid-June 2026. The DfE has indicated that feedback will be provided by the end of September 2026.
11. A further report will be submitted to the Cabinet following feedback from the DfE to seek approval to adopt and implement the Plan and subsequent spend proposals of the grant funding.

Policy Framework and Previous Decisions

12. The Government has published a 10-year programme of education reform aimed at raising standards while rebuilding confidence in inclusion, early intervention and partnership with families. SEND Reform is a central pillar of the programme and represents the most significant redesign of the SEND system since 2014.
13. The Schools White Paper, “Every Child Achieving and Thriving”, and associated SEND Reform proposals form part of this wider national reform programme. Locally, the proposals align with the County Council’s strategic priorities on children’s outcomes, inclusion and early intervention, existing SEND improvement and inclusion strategies, and learning from the DfE Change Partnership Programme.

Resource Implications

14. The SEND Reform Plan, upon Cabinet approval, will be implemented with the additional reform grant funding provided by the DfE Reform Grant.
15. 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. Financial implications will require ongoing monitoring, particularly in relation to the grant period, future sustainability, capital assumptions and any permanent growth beyond March 2029.
16. The Chief Legal Officer and Monitoring Officer and the Director of Corporate Resources have been consulted on this report.

Circulation under the Local Issues Alert Procedure

17. This report has been circulated to all Members of the County Council.

Officer(s) to Contact

Tim Browne, Interim Director of Education, Inclusion and Additional Needs
 Telephone: 0116 3057429
 Email: Tim.Browne@leics.gov.uk

Olivia Dale, Head of Service, Education Strategy and Transformation
 Telephone: 0116 3050287
 Email: olivia.dale@leics.gov.uk

PART B

Background

18. The SEND system nationally and locally 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. The accumulated national deficit in 2024/25 was £12.2 bn and is estimated to rise to £16.8 bn by 2028/29.
19. The Schools White Paper set out plans for a reformed and improved SEND system, with local SEND Reform Plans being the primary mechanism through which national reforms are implemented in each local authority area. 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.
20. Local authorities were required to submit a Local SEND Reform Plan by mid-June 2026, supported by data and demand analysis and a Partnership Maturity Assessment. This assessment was underpinned by seven nationally defined pillars: co-production with parents, carers and young people; system leadership and governance; understanding needs through robust data; quality of inclusion at universal, targeted and specialist levels; effective partnership working; a skilled and sustainable workforce; and strategic use of resources, including sufficiency planning.
21. Local Authorities were required to work with all strategic partners (Integrated Care Board, Leicestershire Partnership Trust, Schools and Educational Providers, Parent/Carers and Children and Young People) to draft a plan to deliver the SEND Reforms. There were significant constraints on time given to complete the plan with partnership engagement, and majority of the national guidance documents were delivered within the last two weeks of the eight-week information gathering and plan writing period.
22. Leicestershire's SEND Reform Plan responds to rising demand for EHCPs and specialist provision, workforce capacity constraints, inequitable access to specialist expertise and over-reliance on independent specialist placements. It sets out Leicestershire's shared ambition to create a more inclusive, confident and financially sustainable 0-25 SEND system. The Plan is built around early intervention, stronger mainstream capacity, local specialist sufficiency, partnership accountability and confidence among families, schools and providers.
23. The Plan supports preparation for anticipated legislative and policy changes expected to take effect during 2029/2030.

24. The SEND Reform Plan for Leicestershire runs to March 2029. This is in line with the national timetable and for preparation for proposed legislative and policy changes.

Leicestershire SEND Reform Plan: Main Delivery Priorities

25. The Plan is focused on two linked delivery strands, Experts at Hand and SEND sufficiency and place planning, supported by governance, data and partnership arrangements.

Priority	Purpose	Cabinet-level implications
Experts at Hand	A locality-based model providing expert advice and support from education, health and social care for educational providers supporting those aged 0-25. It brings together education specialists, clinical health professionals, specialist outreach, whole-setting support and training.	Builds capacity in mainstream and local settings, supports earlier intervention and reduces reliance on escalation to statutory or specialist pathways where this is not necessary.
SEND sufficiency and place planning	A programme to increase sufficient, high-quality SEND places in mainstream and specialist settings and improve the accessibility and quality of physical environments.	Supports more children and young people to receive the right support in their local community and reduces reliance on independent specialist placements and long-distance travel.
Governance, monitoring and partnership assurance	A partnership delivery model with strategic and operational boards, measurable key performance indicators and regular review of data, finance and lived experience.	Provides assurance that implementation, spend, workforce, risk and impact are monitored transparently and escalated where required.

Experts at Hand Model

26. The Experts at Hand model is central to Leicestershire's response. It aims to embed specialist expertise within localities, enabling earlier intervention and building capacity within mainstream and local provision. The model will support early years settings, schools, alternative provision and post-16 providers within defined locality areas across Leicestershire.
27. The model primarily will provide access to locality SEND navigators. These staff work within localities, providing initial support and advice and further access to specialist support provided by experts. These positions will provide easy access to advice and support, without extensive referral forms, long wait times or delays in moving between services.
28. The experts at hand model will also provide access, through the locality SEND navigators, to specialist teachers and practitioners, educational psychology, speech and language support, occupational therapy, alternative

provision outreach, assistive technology, early years support, post-16 support and communication and engagement capacity. The model is designed to support “coach and grow” approaches, whole-setting workforce development and practical problem-solving with providers.

29. The roles outside the County Council workforce also form part of the wider partnership model. These additional roles predominately sit within commissioned Health services (Leicestershire Partnership Trust).

SEND Sufficiency and Inclusion Bases

30. The SEND sufficiency workstream aims to develop sufficient, high-quality local provision so that more children and young people can remain connected to their communities. The workstream will use data to understand trends and needs and to plan specialist provision across Leicestershire.
31. The programme includes work with schools, trusts and partners to provide Inclusion Bases; dedicated physical spaces inside mainstream schools to provide targeted support, adapted curricula and specialist teaching for children with SEND. These will operate under two main frameworks: Support Bases and Specialist Bases. Support Bases will be funded and overseen by schools or trusts, while Specialist Bases will be commissioned by the Local Authority. The DfE has outlined an expectation that every secondary school and an appropriate number of primary schools should have access to Inclusion Bases.
32. The Local SEND Reform Plan identifies a significant shortfall in specialist capacity. It refers to waiting lists for special school placements and unit or resourced provision, a high number of young people placed in independent specialist provision, and a need to address geographic inequity. Planned activity includes specialist bases, partner-led additional places, permanent accommodation for Oakfield Short Stay School and a new all-needs area special school in Harborough District.
33. An executive summary of the draft Leicestershire SEND Reform Plan is appended to this report.

Expected Outcomes and Success Measures

34. The Plan, after Cabinet approval, will measure success through a combination of quantitative data, lived experience and partner feedback. Key outcome areas include:
 - (a) Improved attendance and participation in education for children and young people with SEND.
 - (b) Reduced suspensions, permanent exclusions, part-time timetables and children missing education.
 - (c) Reduced reliance on independent specialist placements driven by local sufficiency gaps.

- (d) Improved access to specialist advice and earlier intervention, including speech and language, occupational therapy, educational psychology and specialist teaching input.
- (e) Reduced waiting for specialist support and specialist placements where local provision can meet need.
- (f) Improved post-16 outcomes, including reductions in young people who are not in education, employment or training (NEET).
- (g) Increased confidence among parents, carers, children and young people, schools, settings and providers.
- (h) A stronger sense of belonging for children and young people in their educational setting and local community.

Governance and Accountability

35. The Plan will be overseen through a strengthened governance model. This is intended to respond to adviser feedback that governance, operational accountability, monitoring and benefits realisation should be clear and explicit.

Mechanism	Role	Membership
Joint Strategic Reform Implementation Board	Strategic oversight of both SEND Reforms and the Families First Partnership Plan, ensuring alignment across major reforms.	Children's Social Care Adults Social Care Public Health Integrated Care Board Leicestershire Partnership Trust Education Provider representatives LA Education/SEND Service Managers Parent Carer Forums
SEND Reform Implementation Partnership Workstream Leads	Oversight of workstream delivery, grant spend, workforce deployment, KPI monitoring, modelling changes and future planning.	Children's Social Care Integrated Care Board Leicestershire Partnership Trust Education Provider representatives LA Education/SEND Service Managers Parent Carer Forums
Operational workstream group: Experts at Hand	Delivery of the Experts at Hand model, monitoring operational KPIs, gathering feedback and ensuring locality consistency.	Leicestershire Partnership Trust Wide range of Education Providers LA Education/SEND Service Managers and practitioners Parent Carer Forums
Operational workstream group: SEND Sufficiency	Delivery of Inclusion Bases, specialist place planning, quality assurance and capital programme alignment.	Wide range of Education Providers LA Education/SEND Service Managers and practitioners Parent Carer Forums

36. The governance model will include representation from education, health, social care, the Parent Carer Forum, Leicestershire Partnership Trust, children and young people's voice arrangements, early years, schools, post-16 and specialist provision. Escalation of issues will be through the Joint

Strategic Reform Implementation Board and existing Local Area SEND and Inclusion governance as required.

Consultation, Engagement and Co-production

37. The Plan has been developed through partnership working with all strategic partners, as outlined within this Cabinet Report, and will continue to be co-produced during implementation. Engagement will include maintained schools, academies, multi-academy trusts, early years providers, alternative provision, further education and post-16 providers, parents and carers, children and young people and health and social care partners.
38. The partnership will use existing and developing mechanisms, including headteacher and SEND networks, locality meetings, phase-specific groups, Parent Carer Forum engagement, Leicestershire Young Voices, thematic workshops, surveys, focus groups and representation on partnership boards and task-and-finish groups.

Monitoring and Evaluation

39. Monitoring and evaluation will use a mixed-method approach combining performance data, delivery milestones, financial monitoring, partner feedback and lived experience. This will allow the partnership to track impact and meaningful improvement.
40. Monitoring arrangements will include local authority business intelligence, the SEND Data Dashboard, relevant health dashboards, quarterly DfE returns, school confidence surveys, parental and child or young person feedback, focus groups and operational workstream reporting. The partnership also intends to explore the potential for shared data agreements and a child-level dashboard to improve cross-agency monitoring over time.
41. Priority measures will include access to Experts at Hand, waiting times for specialist input, attendance, exclusions, elective home education, alternative provision, post-16 and NEET outcomes, specialist provision sufficiency, travel distance, confidence data and the number of children and young people supported in local provision.

Risks and Mitigations

Risk	Summary of issue	Mitigation
Workforce capacity and associated funding	Specialist recruitment is challenging and future funding beyond 31 March 2029 is not confirmed.	Use fixed-term contracts where appropriate, retain or extend existing capacity where possible, consider permanent recruitment only for hard-to-fill posts, use locum or commissioned capacity where necessary and monitor through the formal risk register.

Cultural change	Reform requires changes in partnership behaviours, mainstream confidence and practice while two systems may operate in parallel.	Use communication and engagement capacity, locality working, workforce development, lived experience feedback and regular KPI review to adapt delivery.
Parental confidence in reforms and local provision	Families may remain anxious about revised pathways, Inclusion Bases and reduced reliance on statutory routes.	Work closely with the Parent Carer Forum, SENDIASS (SEND Information Advice and Support Service), schools and providers; use co-production, engagement sessions and confidence surveys to shape implementation.
National guidance and policy uncertainty	Some elements of the Plan are developed ahead of full national guidance.	Maintain an iterative Plan, review assumptions through governance and adapt the model as further guidance is published.
Wider system dependencies	NHS change, local government reorganisation, children's social care reform, curriculum and assessment changes and capital funding may affect delivery.	Align through strategic boards, locality arrangements, data sharing, LLR collaboration and ongoing dependency management.

Consultation

42. Nationally, the DfE's consultation on SEND Reform closed on 18 May 2026. Leicestershire provided feedback on the SEND Reforms through formal consultation and focus groups with the DfE.
43. 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.

Children and Families Overview and Scrutiny Committee

44. The Children and Families Overview and Scrutiny Committee reviewed the SEND Reforms and Leicestershire's initial approach to delivery on 2 June 2026.
45. Initial discussions with the Children and Families Overview and Scrutiny Committee covering all aspects of the Leicestershire SEND Reform Plan, with a particular focus on the Experts at Hand offer. Members agreed to be updated through frequent monitoring reports on the impact of the work undertaken through this plan.
46. A further report will be delivered to the Committee later in the autumn, following feedback from the DfE.

Equality Implications

47. No adverse impacts are identified. The direction of travel is expected to have a positive impact through stronger mainstream inclusion, earlier intervention, improved local specialist sufficiency and reduced reliance on statutory escalation through earlier intervention. The Plan supports the Council's ambition that children and young people with SEND can thrive, fulfil their potential, belong and live their best lives within their communities.
48. The Council will continue to have due regard to its public sector equality duty under the Equality Act 2010 as proposals and implementation plans are developed. Further equality impact assessment work should be updated as detailed delivery proposals, workforce arrangements and sufficiency schemes progress.

Human Rights Implications

49. No adverse human rights impacts are identified at this stage, but further work will be undertaken. Consideration has been given to the potential human rights implications, particularly the rights of children to education and support.

Other Implications and Impact Assessments

50. Health implications are addressed through partnership working with health, the Experts at Hand model and early intervention arrangements.
51. Partnership working is central to delivery and is reflected in the governance, consultation and co-production arrangements.
52. Risk assessment will be maintained through the formal risk register and monitored by the relevant governance boards.

Appendix

Leicestershire SEND Reform Plan Executive Summary

Background Papers

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

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

Report to the Children and Families Overview and Scrutiny Committee Report, 2 June 2026 and minutes of that meeting -

<https://democracy.leics.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=1043&MId=8412>