Leicestershire SEND Reform Plan

Executive Summary

June 2026

Leicestershire's Local SEND Reform Plan sets out a partnership-wide ambition to create a more inclusive, confident and financially sustainable 0 to 25 system in which children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities belong, achieve and thrive in their local communities. The plan represents a shared civic commitment across education, health, social care, the voluntary sector, providers, parents and carers, and children and young people. Its central purpose is to ensure that needs are identified earlier, support is easier to access, mainstream settings are better equipped to respond, and specialist provision is available locally for those who need it.

The case for change

Leicestershire begins this reform from a position of credible but uneven progress. Through the Change Programme Partnership and initiatives including ELSEC, PINS and alternative provision reforms, the local partnership has strengthened governance, improved collaboration and cleared the backlog of Education, Health and Care needs assessments while maintaining 20-week assessment outcomes. It has an established Parent Carer Forum, developing arrangements for children and young people's participation, improving data infrastructure and strong examples of inclusive practice. However, these strengths are not yet consistently embedded across every locality, service and education setting. The partnership maturity assessment therefore describes the overall system as developing, with the ambition of becoming maturing through greater consistency, integration, co-production and shared accountability.

The most immediate pressure is insufficient and geographically uneven specialist capacity. At the point described in the plan, 340 children were waiting for a special-school placement, a further 150 were awaiting a unit or resourced provision place, and more than 600 children were attending independent specialist provision. The local review found that approximately 90% of those independent placements may have resulted from insufficient local capacity rather than needs that could only be met in the independent sector. Existing area special schools and specialist units were at capacity, and Harborough remained the only district without an area special school.

Demand and cost pressures are expected to continue. The submitted modelling projects the total number of EHC plans increasing from 8,527 in 2025 to 13,151 in 2029. Forecast net High Needs expenditure rises from £131.230 million in 2024/25 to £206.285 million in 2027/28, while expenditure on non-maintained and independent school placements rises from £29.106 million to £53.423 million over the same period.

These figures are forecasts rather than commitments and several demand measures carry amber-red data confidence because of uncertainty about parental demand, national reform and future placement patterns.

Leicestershire’s reform response

The reform strategy is built around three mutually reinforcing system shifts:

1. Earlier intervention and reduced escalation, so that needs can be met before they reach crisis or require statutory intervention.
2. Greater mainstream inclusion and local sufficiency, so that children and young people can learn closer to home in the most appropriate setting.
3. Stronger system leadership and co-production, with education, health, social care, providers and families sharing responsibility for outcomes and continuous improvement.

The principal delivery mechanism is Experts at Hand, built around the “Coach and Grow” philosophy of growing expertise within the system rather than creating dependence on specialist services. Seven locality SEND navigators will provide a more accessible front door for education settings across the 0 to 25 pathway, linking with health care navigators, social care information and support coordinators, third-sector provision and locality networks. Schools and providers will be able to access multidisciplinary advice through locality forums and targeted clinics, supported by professionals including speech and language therapists, occupational therapists, educational psychologists, specialist teachers, behaviour and outreach practitioners, early years and post-16 specialists, family support and mental health practitioners.

This model will replace an overly reactive, referral-led approach with earlier consultation, coaching, modelling, cohort-based support and practical problem-solving. It will be reinforced by bitesize workforce development, peer learning, clinical supervision, assistive technology, parent-in-partnership approaches and structured quality assurance for specialist bases. The intention is that support becomes easier to navigate, schools build sustainable capability, and children receive the right help more quickly without unnecessary escalation.

Alongside Experts at Hand, the partnership will deliver a major sufficiency programme. Specialist bases in mainstream schools will be expanded and supported through a quality-assurance framework, special-school outreach and workforce development. The plan provides for 70 new primary places annually, a secondary expansion programme, partner-led satellite provision and a new 250-place all-needs area special school in Harborough, expected to open in September 2028. The specialist-place forecast shows school-based specialist-base capacity growing from 495 places in 2025 to 825 in 2029, with special-school capacity increasing from 2,050 to 2,300 places.

The capacity programme materially moderates, but does not remove, reliance on independent specialist provision. The comparison in the appendices shows a projected independent specialist placement position of 1,311 in 2028/29 without mitigation, compared with 861 after allowing for additional local places. This illustrates both the potential impact of the capital programme and the scale of the residual pressure.

Outcomes and measures of success

By March 2029, Leicestershire intends inclusion and belonging to be standard practice, with strong and accountable partnerships, greater family confidence and more effective use of resources. Success will be judged through outcomes rather than activity alone. Headline measures include improved attendance and participation, fewer suspensions, exclusions and part-time timetables, reduced waiting for specialist support and places, a reduction in young people who are not in education, employment or training, improved access to employment pathways, and lower reliance on independent provision caused by local sufficiency gaps.

Specific ambitions include:

- Experts at Hand reaching 40% of schools in year one, 80% in year two and 100% by year three.
- A 25% reduction in suspensions among children and young people on the SEND register.
- A 30% reduction in both the number waiting and the length of waits for early specialist speech and language support.
- A 30% reduction in children travelling beyond the stated primary and secondary distance thresholds for education, excluding independent specialist provision.
- All secondary schools having an inclusion base, with an equivalent number of primary places, by the end of year three.
- A 20% reduction in starts at independent special schools arising from sufficiency constraints or loss of confidence in mainstream provision.
- A 30% increase in children and young people reporting a sense of belonging in their education setting.

Progress will be monitored through Tableau, the local SEND Data Dashboard, health dashboards, quarterly Department for Education returns, workstream-level KPIs, confidence surveys, feedback from parents and children and young people, and monthly partner focus groups. The partnership also intends to develop integrated data-sharing arrangements and explore a child-level dashboard by the end of year three. This approach will allow implementation to be adjusted as evidence and lived experience emerge.

Financial strategy and investment

For 2026/27, the Experts at Hand budget totals £4.853 million, of which £4.712 million was recorded as committed, leaving £141,438. The majority is allocated to direct delivery, with smaller allocations for administration and transformation. The Experts at Hand budget for years 2 and 3 will be iterated and confirmed following impact measures set out in year 1.

Governance, assurance and principal risks

Delivery will be overseen through a joint strategic reform structure linking the SEND reforms with Families First, supported by a SEND Reform Implementation Partnership Board, a named Senior Responsible Officer, operational workstreams for Experts at Hand and SEND sufficiency, and locality groups. The partnership board will oversee outcomes, KPIs, grant expenditure, staffing and changes to the delivery model, while operational groups will monitor implementation and escalate barriers.

The principal risks are workforce availability and future funding, the pace of cultural change, parental confidence in the reforms and the new inclusion offer, incomplete national guidance, and wider structural change across the NHS and local government. Mitigation centres on active risk management, clear governance and escalation, proactive communication, continued co-production, recruitment flexibility, regular monitoring and maintaining an iterative delivery model.

Overall, the plan presents a coherent transition from a reactive and capacity-constrained system to one that is preventative, locality-based and inclusive. Its success will depend on disciplined delivery across all seven localities, sustained workforce capacity, credible measurement of impact, meaningful co-production and the timely creation of local provision. If these conditions are secured, the reforms provide a credible route to better outcomes and experiences for children and families, improved confidence among schools and partners, and a more sustainable use of High Needs resources.

Leicestershire are now awaiting feedback and approval of the SEND Reform Plan for the Department foe Education and NHS England.