

CABINET
16 June 2026

SEND reform plan

Report by Director of Children's Services

RECOMMENDATION

1. Cabinet is RECOMMENDED to

- a) Approve the draft special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) reform plan for Oxfordshire to support submission to the Department of Education by 19th June.
- b) Delegate authority for delivery of the SEND reform plan , subject to business cases and appropriate governance for specific initiatives, to the Director of Children's Services and the Section 151 Officer, overseen by the SEND Executive and Local Area Partnership.
- c) Delegate authority to the Director of Children's Services and the Section 151 Officer to make any necessary minor amendments to the SEND reform plan prior to the final submission deadline to the Department of Education.
- d) Delegate authority to the Director of Children's Services and the Section 151 Officer to utilise Year 1 of the Experts at Hand Department of Education grant in line with the direction outlined in this report. This will include recruitment of roles required and through procuring external services in accordance with the grant conditions and Procurement Regulations 2024.

Executive Summary

- 2. This paper outlines the work that has been carried out to date to prepare a local SEND reform plan for Oxfordshire, in line with the latest Government plans for SEND reform. Oxfordshire is required by the Department for Education to prepare and submit its SEND reform plan by 19 June 2026 to access a High Needs stability grant which may fund up to 90% of Oxfordshire's County Council Dedicated Schools Grant deficit.
- 3. The SEND reform plan has been developed with partners including health and education alongside input from children , young people and families. It responds to the Government criteria in full and aims to create a local SEND system which both improves outcomes for children and young people and is financially sustainable into the future.

4. The SEND Reform plan does not change the current statutory duties in relation to the Children and Families Act 2014.

Oxfordshire's SEND reform plan

Context

5. In February 2026, the Government published its Schools white paper 'Every child achieving and thriving' ([Every child achieving and thriving \(HTML version\) - GOV.UK](#)) and proposals for SEND reform ([SEND reform: putting children and young people first - GOV.UK](#)). These publications go alongside existing change programmes set out in the Best Start in life, Families First reforms and Post-16 and Skills.
6. These two recent publications set out major changes to the way we support children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), including how schools will take a lead role. Delivering the reforms will require wholesale system transformation, working in close partnership with schools and all education settings, health services, our parent carer forum, and other partners across Oxfordshire and are estimated to take up to 10 years to fully implement. The Local Authority is responsible for convening and leading partners through this transformation, including co-design, pilot and implementation.
7. The schools white paper sets out transformation across early years and schools, where schools will serve their local community of children through developing a wider inclusion offer. This includes all secondary schools hosting inclusion bases, working together through cluster arrangements, widespread workforce training to upskill teachers and requiring local school leaders to focus collaboration and partnership. The Department for Education (DfE) have commissioned changes to the Ofsted framework which will further set out expectations of school leaders on how inclusion will form part of inspection regulation and have signalled the start of Multi-Academy Trust inspections.
8. Under existing statutory duties, Local Authorities have responsibilities for place planning and sufficiency and now have new duties to convene and support the development and establishment of new working arrangements and pathways. The white paper further sets out the expectation all schools to be part of a Trust, whether an existing Multi-Academy Trust, or a newly formed Local Authority Trust.
9. The SEND consultation (which closed on 18 May) proposed fundamental changes to the current SEND system, seeking to reduce the number of children who may require an Education, Health and Care plan, through an enhanced inclusion offer where children have their needs met earlier and locally, introducing Experts at Hand, and changes to mediation and appeal rights. Following consultation, the Government are expected to seek and mandate changes to legislation, which are not expected to be complete until 2029-2030. Funding to schools is expected but as yet unannounced.

10. Government expectations have been further clarified that the implementation of the white paper must begin immediately to provide the building blocks and infrastructure for new legislation, supported by planned changes to Ofsted and Multi-Academy Trust inspections and success will be judged on a range of outcomes including the experience and confidence of parents in seeking additional support for their children through a reduction in Education, Health and Care plans, alongside Local Authority transformation.
11. Collectively these signal the largest change to the education system in decades and require Local Authorities to maintain current compliance with the existing SEND legal frameworks and implement transformation concurrently. Government have laid out the need for this transformation to be planned, implemented and monitored through the development of a local SEND reform plan to be submitted on 19 June 2026.
12. This is a comprehensive plan involving in-depth data analysis, financial information and forecasting, as well as our proposed mitigations to alleviate pressure on our high need's deficit, details of how we will deliver the reforms locally, including how the Local Area Partnership plan to utilise the Experts at Hand three-year grant and a self-assessment maturity index to be completed.
13. We will be required to report quarterly on delivery of the plan, including KPIs and financial information for the next three years. If the Government is satisfied that our SEND Reform plan meets the requirements and we make appropriate progress, we will be eligible for funding to repay up to 90% of Oxfordshire's dedicated schools grant deficit as at end March 2026 and the Government will consider additional High Needs Stability Grant funding to reduce in-year overspend on the High Needs budget.
14. Like most upper-tier authorities across the county, since the pandemic and rising inflation, Oxfordshire County Council has overspent on its High Needs component of the Dedicated Schools Grant. In Oxfordshire, this has resulted in a deficit of £149.3m at 31/03/2026. The High Needs stability grant is expected to fund 90% of that balance, meaning that if successful, the brought forward net deficit would be £16.3m instead of £149.3m and rising.
15. If we get this right, this is an opportunity to place Oxfordshire County Council and its successor authorities on a sustainable financial footing and deliver whole system SEND and education reform which achieves better life outcomes for children, young people and their families prior to Governments further planned changes to the relevant legislation from 2029, the details of which are not yet known.

Our local SEND reform plan

16. Since the Government announcement in February, work has been carried out at pace to develop a local SEND reform plan for Oxfordshire. In doing so, we have drawn on the learning from our SEND improvement journey to date, the work of our SEND local area partnership and our new Oxfordshire Education Partnership. As a local area partnership, we undertook a maturity assessment

against Government criteria which has also shaped this plan and is a requirement.

17. Our SEND reform plan is designed to align with the strategic direction set out in our SEND strategy, which is currently out for consultation. The same vision and eight commitments have been adopted at the heart of the SEND reform plan.

(a) Our vision: As a Local Area Partnership, we are committed to taking accountable and purposeful action to ensure that children and young people with SEND, along with their families, are valued, respected and empowered to thrive in an inclusive and supportive community.

Together, we embrace a holistic approach that celebrates individuals' strengths, aspirations and achievements. Through partnership, involvement and collaboration, we support children and young people with SEND, their families and carers to fulfil their wishes and aspirations.

(b) Our eight commitments:

- Inclusive Culture: Recognise and value diversity so that every child and young person with SEND feels included, respected, and supported.
- High-Quality Provision: Deliver person-centred, high-quality inclusive provision that is flexible, ambitious and continuously improves outcomes and experiences for children and young people with SEND
- Proactive Engagement: Consistently seek, hear and respect the views of children, young people with SEND, and their families to inform and enhance how we do things.
- Early Intervention: Ensure early identification so that timely intervention leads to better outcomes for children and young people with SEND.
- Working Together Effectively: Ensure that all partners who work in SEND collaborate effectively and transparently - with other agencies, and with the children and young people, and the families they serve.
- Sense of Belonging: Ensure that children and young people with SEND experience a sense of belonging in their local community through accessible activities, inclusive environments, supportive peer groups, and health services that are welcoming and easy to access.
- Preparing for Adulthood: Empower young people with SEND to transition into adulthood with confidence, supported to build the skills and opportunities that are meaningful to them.
- Skilled Workforce: Recruit, develop and retain a high-quality, skilled and confident workforce to deliver excellent services, drive innovation and improve outcomes for CYP with SEND and their families.

18. Workshops have been carried out including with education and health partners and parent carer representatives to develop the SEND reform plan. Our SEND Improvement and Assurance Board has reviewed the plan, and we have also received and incorporated feedback from our DfE advisers.

19. In line with the guidance from the Department for Education, our plan has been structured around four key building blocks and four system enablers.

Four key building blocks:

- (a) **Strengthening inclusion across education settings:** Organising places and provision to meet as many needs as possible, as close to home as possible, with all settings and providers moving towards a shared understanding and consistent practices around inclusion.
- (b) **Access to specialist support and local placements:** Improving collaboration between settings and deploying expertise from a range of specialist and expert sources, to support schools and settings to meet the needs of children and young people earlier and locally.
- (c) **System leadership, local partnership collaboration and co-production:** Putting in place the enabling conditions across a local area that ensures planning and provision reflects the local area & is joined up, including strategic co-production with parent carers and children and young people.
- (d) **Encouraging inclusive culture & behaviours:** Using funding and shared accountability towards a system that works for children and families while achieving value for money.

Four system enablers:

- (e) Capital
- (f) Workforce
- (g) Data/digital systems
- (h) Communication.

- 20. The plan sets out how we will build a 0-25 system where children and young people receive support early to achieve and thrive through more inclusive settings and stronger local partnerships. We will improve capacity and capability of the mainstream and specialist workforce to identify and meet need, and improve confidence of children, families, and stakeholders in reform and readiness of the system
- 21. The plan includes detail about how we will implement some of the key new elements of SEND reform, including new working arrangements for schools through locality clusters, Experts at Hand and inclusion bases.
- 22. It also sets out how we will stabilise finances and improve value for money. More children will be supported to have their needs met in high-quality, inclusive mainstream settings. Children who need additional support will receive early, targeted interventions, and children who need specialist provision will be supported locally with sufficient and sustainable high-quality services.
- 23. The plan is underpinned by in-depth demand forecasting and cost modelling. Key mitigations have been identified to make our local SEND system financially sustainable, as follows:

1. Additional Special School Places – as set out in our deficit management plan (DMP)
 2. Resource Bases - Specialist Units in Primary and Secondary - DMP
 3. Specialist Units - Secondary Schools
 4. Inclusion Support Bases in Secondary Schools
 5. Specialist Units - Post 16 (Further Education Colleges)
 6. Financing for Clusters
 7. Experts at Hand
 8. Enhanced Pathways
 9. Contract Management Efficiencies
 10. Reintegration into Mainstream - Long Term Alternative Provision
 11. Increasing Access to Therapy
24. In addition to these mitigations, we know that a core part of our plan being successful is the improved inclusion outcomes for children, young people and families through a focus on attendance in mainstream schools: local schools will meet needs of most children. We will track these through qualitative feedback from our children, young people and families as well as the key performance indicators aligned under the following core objectives:
- a) More inclusive mainstream settings
 - b) Improved confidence in mainstream settings
 - c) Meeting children's and young people's needs locally
 - d) Meeting children's and young people's needs earlier
 - e) Using the views of children, young people and families to inform system transformation.

Governance and next steps

25. This plan is due to be submitted to the Department for Education on 19 June 2026. The DfE will review the plan and identify whether it meets the criteria, providing their formal response by November 2026. Quarterly reporting will be required and assessed to determine whether Oxfordshire is eligible for the High Needs stability grant to assist with our Dedicated Schools Grant deficit.
26. The plan has been developed by a SEND reform planning group, chaired by the Deputy Director of Education and Inclusion as the Senior Responsible Officer (SRO) and including finance, commissioning, data, property operational and health colleagues. This will become the SEND reform delivery group, with task and finish groups established beneath it for key workstreams as required.
27. The SEND Executive will act as the most senior governing body for the SEND reform plan, with the SEND reform delivery group escalating key risks, issues and decisions as required. This group is formed of the Oxfordshire County Council's Chief Executive Officer, Section 151 officer, Director of Children's Services and Deputy Director for Education and Inclusion, as well as senior leaders in the Thames Valley Integrated Care Board, education leaders and the independent Chair of our SEND Improvement and Assurance Board.

28. Other partners will be engaged in the successful delivery of this plan, including through our SEND Improvement and Assurance Board and existing SEND local area partnership governance, as well as Schools Forum and our Oxfordshire Education Partnership.
29. Although timescales have been challenging, we have sought to engage with relevant stakeholders as much as possible in the development of this plan, including partners in education, health and Oxfordshire Parent Carer Forum as outlined above. We will continue to work closely with partners to further develop, design and implement our response to SEND reforms and to give wider stakeholders, including the voluntary and community sector, providers, children and young people and families, opportunities to learn more about SEND reform and shape delivery in Oxfordshire.
30. Robust programme management will be key to the success of our SEND reform plan, and an approach is already being established for clear project planning, risk and issue management, and tracking of progress.
31. The Department for Education is making available a grant of £4,945,966 to Oxfordshire to deliver SEND reform, for year one of a three-year transformation grant. Of this, 80% must be spent on direct delivery of Experts at Hand. 10% can be spent on administrative costs for delivering the Experts at Hand offer, and 10% (£495,967) has been allocated to local authority transformation.
32. This funding is not sufficient to deliver the large-scale system change required to successfully achieve SEND reform. As such, a business case has been approved to access the Oxfordshire County Council transformation reserve to fund additional officer capacity. This element will be monitored by the new Portfolio Board, reporting to the Senior Leadership Board. In addition to this, we will draw on the expertise and capacity of existing officers to realise this generational opportunity to make local SEND services sustainable and deliver the best possible outcomes for children, young people and families.
33. A proportion (28% of the direct delivery funding) of the Experts at Hand grant will be used to fund additional Speech and Language Therapists and Occupational Therapists in accordance with the DfE grant conditions. It is proposed that the Section 75 of the NHS Act 2006 is used to transfer the allocated Experts at Hand funding to the Thames Valley Integrated Care Board (ICB) to pass through the funding to Oxford Health Foundation Trust. The Trust will recruit to additional therapy roles to encompass the Experts at Hand offer into the Children's Integrated Therapy Service. This will ensure a seamless continuum of support across universal, targeted and specialist provision, so that children and young people do not fall between gaps in service delivery. A schedule of the S75 will detail the specification of the Experts at Hand funding, outcomes to be achieved and any payment schedules based on recruitment of roles.

Corporate Policies and Priorities

34. The Oxfordshire SEND reform plan aligns with the vision, values, objectives and priorities in the County Council's Corporate plan, particularly in relation to fairer and healthier. It promotes health and education outcomes for children and young people with special education needs and disabilities – from early years to post-16. Getting this right means that children, young people and families will receive support earlier, in a joined-up multi-agency way, that enables them to thrive in their local communities and achieve the best possible life outcomes.

Financial Implications

35. The proposals set out in this report have significant financial implications. The local SEND reform plan is intended to support both delivery of SEND reform and the long-term financial sustainability of the High Needs block of the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG). On 31 March 2026, Oxfordshire's cumulative DSG deficit was £149.3m. Subject to approval of the local SEND reform plan and satisfaction of the grant conditions, the Government's High Needs Stability Grant is expected to fund up to 90% of the eligible DSG deficit balance at that date, which would reduce the residual deficit to be managed locally to around £13.5m. This funding can only be used to extinguish eligible historic DSG deficit and should not be treated as available to fund ongoing expenditure. The grant remains subject to Department for Education approval of the SEND Reform plan, confirmation of eligibility and continued satisfactory progress against required delivery and reporting arrangements.
36. The Department for Education have not yet provided details of the level of DSG deficits that will be funded by High Needs stability grant for the 2026/27 and 2027/28 financial year, but it is expected to be a higher percentage for robust SEND reform plans.
37. In addition, the report identifies estimated Experts at Hand grant funding of £4,945,966 in 2026/27 to support delivery of SEND reform. In line with grant conditions, 80% of this funding must be spent on direct delivery of the Experts at Hand offer, 10% may be used for administration of that offer, and 10% (£495,967) is available to support local authority transformation activity.
38. The report also notes that this funding is not sufficient to deliver the full scale of system change required. Additional capacity has therefore been approved through the Council's transformation reserve. Any further financial commitments arising from implementation of specific initiatives within the plan, including new provision, specialist bases, capital schemes or service changes, will be subject to separate detailed business cases, governance and approval processes. These will need to identify the full revenue and capital implications, affordability, funding sources, deliverability and any impact on the medium-term financial position.

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Legal Implications

39. No legal comment required.

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Staff Implications

40. A specialist, in-house team drawing on the expertise and capacity of existing officers will be put in place on a fixed term contract basis, to deliver the SEND reform plans. This additional officer capacity will be funded by the Oxfordshire County Council transformation fund. This approach provides the most cost-effective option for delivering the necessary SEND reform and white paper education transformation securing the high needs stability grant, while managing spend and prioritising upskilling in-house.

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Equality & Inclusion Implications

41. This SEND reform plan is designed to have a positive impact on equality and inclusion and is in line with the latest Government guidance. Children with special educational needs and disabilities will be supported to have their needs met earlier, in their local communities, and to achieve the best possible life outcomes.
42. Detailed business cases will be developed for specific initiatives outlined in this plan (for example Experts at Hand, or new inclusion bases) and this will include in-depth equalities impact assessment.

Sustainability Implications

43. This paper does not have sustainability implications. Detailed business cases will be developed for specific initiatives outlined in this plan and this will include in-depth climate impact assessments where relevant, for example in relation to work to increase local school place sufficiency.

Risk Management

44. The SEND reform plan (Annex 1) includes a section analysing the key risks as relevant to this programme. These include sufficiency of specialist provision and workforce. Mitigations are in place, including targeted recruitment, workforce development and use of alternatively qualified staff, and our place planning sufficiency strategy.
45. There will be a proactive and robust approach to risk management as part of the overall programme, including risk logs, regular discussion and review at thematic groups and the SEND delivery group, and escalation as required to the SEND Executive.

Lisa Lyons, Director of Children's Services

Annex: Annex 1: Oxfordshire's local SEND reform plan

Background papers: UK Government's plans for SEND reform [SEND reform: putting children and young people first \(HTML version\) - GOV.UK](#)

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