

DELEGATED DECISIONS BY CABINET MEMBER FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

24 February 2026

Enhanced Pathways Business Case – Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) Strategic Early Intervention Team

Report by Director of Children's Services

RECOMMENDATION

The Cabinet Member is **RECOMMENDED** to:

- a) **Approve the Council to fund a further 20 Enhanced Pathways to triple the reach of the project to enable the Council to offer a more equitable offer across the county to meet the increasing numbers and complexities of children and young people with Special Educational Needs in mainstream schools and to realise probable savings through this spend to save model.**
- b) **Approve the Council's budgetary commitment for a period of 3 years for each Enhanced Pathway (barring significant changes to central government funding of SEND during that period).**
- c) **Commit to consider and review opportunities to upscale the Enhanced Pathways programme over the coming years in line with the impact evidence provided.**

Executive Summary

1. In February 2025 the Council approved the decision to continue to fund 20 existing Enhanced Pathways and to expand the offer to a further 20 schools. This is with the aim of supporting the Council to meet the increasing numbers and complexities of children and young people with Special Educational Needs in mainstream schools and to realise probable savings through this spend to save model.
2. The latest Area SEND monitoring inspection from Ofsted and the CQC highlighted that as a result of Enhanced Pathways, many children's and young people's needs are being more effectively met in mainstream settings. This business case seeks to once again expand the project further to ensure more children and young people can have their needs met successfully.

3. This report is to obtain approval for the council to expand the Enhanced Pathway project which forms part of the SEND Transformation Programme (Theme 1: Right Support, Right Time) and Oxfordshire's commitment to supporting early intervention. Special Educational Needs & Disability (SEND) in Oxfordshire are subject to a Local Area SEND Priority Action Plan.
4. The Enhanced Pathways initiative, developed within schools, provides a teacher led space to support some of the most vulnerable SEND students across local schools, offering a bespoke and specialised curriculum that meet their social, emotional, communication, sensory and academic needs whilst remaining at their local mainstream school. Thus, supporting children who may need specialist beyond the offer that the Council can typically expect in a mainstream school. The model is designed to be a cost avoided model where likely savings are made by children and young people not needing an escalation of support such as Independent Non-maintained Special School (INMSS) placements or alternative education provision (AEP).
5. To date the average cost to support an Enhanced Pathway in a setting per year is £57,233.65 The cohort size of an Enhanced Pathway is around 10 students. Therefore, the average cost of an Enhanced Pathway per child is £6,206.06 depending on the amount of top up of element 3 funding from their Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) (if applicable). If a student can be stabilised and maintained within mainstream despite having been agreed provision other than mainstream is needed to meet their needs, the cost avoided would range from £23,790 (maintained Special School) to upwards of £70,000 (the average cost of an Independent Non-maintained Special School, INMSS placement, is £23,000 - £121,000 depending on need), plus transport costs. If one pupil within a pathway avoids going onto an INMSS placement, then this offers significant value for money when this is scaled up for all pupils across the 40 current pathways.
6. Other costs avoided include the Education Health Care Needs Assessment (EHCNA) process, full 32.5 hours funding requests, and tribunals and alternative education provision packages (on average £13,658 annually) not being necessary.
7. Rapidly escalating need and demand on specialist services and requests for specialist placements highlight a need to further develop the mainstream offer and this forms part of the Council's sufficiency strategy. Data indicates that elevating needs will unlikely dissipate and schools and the local authority will continue to need to be increasingly innovative in meeting the needs of children and young people with SEND.
8. An Enhanced Pathway offers a hybrid model between mainstream and resourced or specialist provision. Thus, Enhanced Pathways will allow the council to increase its capacity and therefore contribute to the continuum of

provision going forward whilst enriching the sufficiency strategy. The aim is to ensure that children and young people's needs are met at the earliest opportunity by doing things differently so that children and young people can thrive in their local communities.

9. Over time the Council should see reduced parental requests for 'provision other than mainstream' as parents will see that their children's needs are met in Enhanced Pathways from the outset.
10. The proposal is that the council would commit to this financial and ideological proposal for meeting the needs of children with SEND in their local mainstream school.

Background and Local Context

11. Special Educational Needs & Disability (SEND) in Oxfordshire are subject to a Local Area SEND Priority Action Plan. This project is managed under the governance of the Local Area Partnership SEND Improvement & Assurance Board (SIAB).
12. Increasing SEND needs, in both numbers and complexity, in the County's children and young people is well recognised. Specialist placements across the county are at capacity and establishing more provision is a lengthy process. The Enhanced Pathways allow children and young people's needs to be met at the right time. The Enhanced Pathway programme can be established more quickly than other sufficiency strategies underway and if agreed can be operational for the following academic year, stabilising the placement and meeting need rapidly.
13. The number of EHCPs issued per year in Oxfordshire, continues to grow at a rapid rate from 232 (2019) to 1192 (2024) and 1485 (Jan – Nov 2025). The percentage of pupils with EHCPs in mainstream schools continues to increase which corresponds to the decline in the number of pupils with EHCPs in special school and INMSS placements. National figures from the latest census, January 2025, shows that 56% of pupils with EHCPs are now educated in mainstream schools, a number that has increased year on year.
14. The Code of Practice January 2015 Section 9.49 states that local authorities should consider reasonable steps that can be taken for mainstream schools and mainstream post-16 institutions generally to provide for children and young people with SEN and disabled children and young people.
15. The project was originally established in 2020/21 as a 3-year seed funded model but due to national funding constraints for schools, it became clear that the seed funded to self-funded model was not achievable for them. For other schools this model was a deterrent to them applying for local authority

Enhanced Pathway funding as they knew they couldn't sustain its existence beyond 3 years based on their budget forecasts.

16. By extending the reach and duration of local authority funded Enhanced Pathways the Council will be able to incorporate more schools and therefore more children and young people into the programme, increasing the equitability of the offer across the county and enabling the Council to quality assure the delivery.
17. The Delivering Better Value (DBV) Programme diagnostic which took place in Autumn 2022 identified that over the next 5 years, the deficit position will increase to £167.2m. This is primarily due to an increase in spend in the following provision areas:
 - Independent Non-Maintained Special Schools (INMSS), due to moves from mainstream settings,
 - Mainstream, due to an increase in Children & Young People (CYP) with an EHCP

The diagnostic identified that the drivers for the increase in spend as the following areas:

- Lack of confidence in the mainstream system from parents, especially at points of transition
- Variation in the mainstream offer

Case reviews with practitioners and professionals suggested that 75% of CYP in Oxfordshire could have had a more ideal outcome, with significant opportunities to support CYP in mainstream settings more often.

This evidence confirmed the need to continue with initiatives that could:

- improve outcomes for children in SEND,
- increase parental confidence,
- provide the opportunity for children with SEND to remain in mainstream, setting,
- close the variation in the mainstream offers.

The Enhanced Pathways initiative has been a response to these needs.

18. In Oxfordshire, from 22/23 to 23/24 there was a 12.7% increase in the proportion of school arranged alternative education provision for pupils with EHCPs (mirrored nationally). Creating Enhanced Pathways in schools is a more cost-effective way of funding provision for a group of pupils compared to individual alternative education provision packages which will be more costly. On average the cost of alternative education provision per child, per year is £12,354.55. This model also enables the pupil to remain within and part of the school community, developing a sense of belonging and success that alternative education provision doesn't afford.

19. In academic year 2024 - 25 £1,194,718 has been spent on 20 Enhanced Pathways benefiting 292 children and young people, this would be compared to the same value potentially benefiting only 17 children placed at INMSS at an average cost of £70,000 or 96 pupils accessing alternative education provision packages at an average cost of £12,354.55.
20. Other costs avoided include Education Health Care Needs Assessment (EHCNA), full 32.5 hours of EHCP funding requests, tribunals and alternative education provision packages not being necessary. It is also anticipated that the Enhanced Pathways will also produce soft savings, such as time spent dealing with complaints by senior leaders and councillors, as well as generating a reduction in legal costs arising from tribunals.
21. Communications from mainstream schools with Enhanced Pathways indicate that if Enhanced Pathways cease it will significantly increase the risk of:
 - a. Schools saying that they can no longer meet the needs of the students in their Enhanced Pathway
 - b. Parents requesting provision other than mainstream be explored
 - c. Parents pursuing tribunal if panel do not agree that provision other than mainstream be explored
 - d. School submitting increased requests for top up funding to fund alternative education provision offsite for the students who were in the Enhanced Pathways
22. The SEND Strategic Early Intervention Team is approached regularly by schools wanting to investigate and discuss the possibility of setting up an Enhanced Pathway in their setting and currently has a list of 76 schools that have expressed interest. This ensures that the initiative is scalable if further funding is secured.
23. The funding per school will be calculated by using M6 teacher pay grade (25-26) £64,412 and TA rate of £25,862 (25-26), both including oncosts, **£90,274 minus any element 3 top up funding** pupils in the cohort are already in receipt of from their EHCPs.
24. An addendum has been added to the original business case to address gaps in the original funding formula for Enhanced Pathways, ensuring schools with high-need cohorts or exceptional circumstances receive adequate financial support. There is a minimal funding level agreement of £32,459 for pathways where collective need would otherwise result in little or no funding after deductions – this covers an additional teaching assistant and an increase in teacher salary to UPS3, including on-costs. Additionally, in cases where a student has been approved for specialist provision (education other than mainstream), and meets other criteria outlined in the addendum, element 3 funding will not be deducted.
25. Equity will be ensured by:
 - e. An application process that is open to all Oxfordshire mainstream schools

- f. A clear threshold and criteria each application has to reach to be considered
- g. Consideration of both local needs and geographical distribution
- h. Establishing a board of professionals to decide each case based on published criteria which will include the quality of provision proposed and the likely forecasted savings
- i. Existing pathways need to reapply and undergo the same process
- j. Equality Climate Impact Assessment has been completed

Priorities

The creation, continuation and expansion of Enhanced Pathways, incorporates key priorities set out in the Council's Strategic Plan, as below:

Priorities of the Strategic Plan 2023-2025.

- Priority 2 – Tackle inequalities in Oxfordshire.
- Priority 3 – Prioritise the health and wellbeing of residents.
- Priority 7 – Create opportunities for children and young people to reach their full potential.

Priorities from the Oxfordshire SEND Local Area Partnership Priority Action Plan

- Priority area 5b – there is clear alignment between strategic thinking and operational practice that supports the partnership's ability to support transformation and make sustainable change.
- Priority area 5c – early intervention support in place to provide support to children young people and families before an EHC Plan has been produced.

The KPIs for the project are:

- Outcomes for children and young people are met
- Increased parental confidence in mainstream offer
- Child or young person's placement at school stabilises
- Child or young person's enjoyment of school increases
- Improved attendance
- The level of funding for the child or young person is stabilised
 - Reduction in school requests seeking high needs funding through EHCNA and top up funding
 - For the CYP without an EHCP did the school escalate to a request for an EHCNA
 - For the CYP without the highest level of funding for their EHCP did the school request additional funding
 - For the CYP with an EHCP did the school escalate to a request for change of placement

- For CYP where panel have agreed to “explore something other than mainstream”, has the parent/carer and school pursued this?

Financial Implications

26. The Enhanced Pathway project is fully funded from the Dedicated School Grant allocation, from the High Needs block.
27. The project promotes early intervention in the mainstream school sector, providing opportunities for children and young people with Special Educational Needs to reach their potential. It is evidenced in the sector that early intervention, identifying and providing effective early support enables the mainstream sector to continue to meet the needs of pupils for as long as possible. Thus, preventing increased levels of support that may be needed by a child or young person later in their education.
28. The model is designed to be a cost avoided model where likely savings are made by children and young people not needing an escalation of support such as Independent Non-maintained Special School (INMSS) placements or alternative education provision (AEP).
29. The Enhanced Pathway project funds schools on an academic year basis for the schools to commit to recruitment to align to the academic year. The cost of the pathways in place for the 2024/25 academic year are copied below. The financial impact for the current year 2024/25, as well as the proposed financial year impact for 2025/26 is as follows: -

Cost per Year		Academic Year 2023-24	Academic Year 2024-25	Academic Year 2025-26	Financial Year Impact
Model 1 Enhanced Pathways	Annex A Table 1	£ 481,842	£ 874,433	£ 1,748,866	
Model 2 Enhanced Pathways	Annex A Table 2	£ 243,764	£ 245,330	£ 320,286	
Total Academic Year Cost		£ 725,606	£ 1,119,763	£ 2,069,152	
Termly Cost		£ 241,869	£ 373,254	£ 689,717	
Financial Year 2024/25 Cost		£ 241,869	£ 746,509		£ 988,377
Financial Year 2025/26 Cost			£ 373,254	£ 1,379,435	£ 1,752,689
Financial Year 2026/27 Cost - Part year				£ 689,717	£ 689,717
Academic Year Saving					
Model 1 Enhanced Pathways	Annex A Table 1	-£ 703,645	-£ 915,412	-£ 1,830,824	
Model 2 Enhanced Pathways	Annex A Table 2	-£ 259,814	-£ 589,283	-£ 584,741	
Total Academic Year Saving		-£ 963,459	-£ 1,504,695	-£ 2,415,565	
Termly Saving		-£ 321,153	-£ 501,565	-£ 805,188	
Financial Year 2024/25 Saving		-£ 321,153	-£ 1,003,130		-£ 1,324,283
Financial Year 2025/26 Saving			-£ 501,565	-£ 1,610,377	-£ 2,111,942
Financial Year 2026/27 Saving - Part year				-£ 805,188	-£ 805,188
Financial Year 2024/25 Net Saving		-£ 79,285	-£ 256,621	£ -	-£ 335,906
Financial Year 2025/26 Net Saving		£ -	-£ 128,311	-£ 230,942	-£ 359,253
Financial Year 2026/27 Net Saving - Part year		£ -	£ -	-£ 115,471	-£ 115,471

30. The Enhanced Pathways budget for 2025/26 is already set at £796k for 2025/26 financial year, with savings of £1,000k. This Enhanced Pathways proposal will increase the 2025/26 financial year commitments from the High Needs DSG block by £583k and is forecast to avoid or delay a further £610k costs, which will have a net additional saving of £27k.
31. The current and proposed Enhanced Pathways are mitigations monitored within the Deficit Management Plan for the Dedicated Schools Grant that the council is required to submit to the Department for Education each term.
32. The Council has evidence that approximately 5% of students that have been previously approved for an educational setting other than mainstream, remain in the mainstream setting due to the current Enhanced Pathway projects. It is expected that there is a further 5% that, had they not had access to an Enhanced Pathway, would also have been approved and gone to an education setting other than mainstream, such as alternative education provision or INMSS place.
33. The forecast savings are based on a prudent assumption that 10% more pupils accessing an Enhanced Pathway, remain in the mainstream setting than would have had they not accessed the Enhanced Pathway, thus avoiding more costly places. This may be overly prudent, and data to prove that exhaustively is not

yet available but longitudinal tracking of the cohorts continues to be collected by the service as evidence to any further future phases of this project.

34. Each pathway is required to submit data and monitoring information to the Council to ensure that the provision is delivering the objectives as intended, including the mitigations and savings as laid out above.

Comments checked by:

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Legal Implications

35. The powers and duties of the Council in respect of children and young people with Special Education Needs & Disability (SEND) are set out in Part 3 of the Children and Families Act 2014 and associated regulations, The Special Educational Needs and Disability Regulations 2014 and The Special Educational Needs (Personal Budgets) Regulations 2014. The Council has the powers to take the actions set out in this report and should have regard to the statutory guidance.
36. The proposal is twofold. Firstly, to create a funding pot for the SEND support set out in the proposal, and secondly to distribute that funding via grant funding agreements into schools within Oxfordshire where a need has been identified. The Council is not purchasing a service here and is using grant agreements for the individual schools on a case-by-case basis to fund SEND support where there are needs. In that instance there is not a procurement aspect to this proposal and there does not need to be a consideration of either the Public Contracts Regulations 2015 or the Procurement Act 2023 as they do not apply. Similarly, the Contract Procedure Rules of the Council would not prevent this proposal because it will be operated as a grant funding opportunity on a case-by-case basis where the need arises. As such, the only considerations from a legal perspective are that a key decision has been obtained for the spend (anticipated circa £2m), and that legal team are involved in supporting the subsequent individual grant funding agreements with the relevant schools.

Paragraph 33 checked by:

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Staff Implications

37. To successfully expand the Enhanced Pathways project, dedicated Project Officer support is critical. The complexity of coordinating multiple stakeholders,

managing timelines, and ensuring compliance with SEND improvement objectives cannot be absorbed within existing capacity. Without this role, there is a significant risk of delays, inconsistent delivery, and reduced impact on outcomes for children and young people. Investing in a Project Officer will provide focused oversight, streamline communication, and maintain quality standards, ensuring the expansion delivers measurable benefits and aligns with strategic priorities.

Equality & Inclusion Implications

Positive Impacts

38. Children with SEND will be able to access the right support at the right time as there will be an increase in provision within mainstream schools to meet the needs of children and young people with more complex special educational needs.
39. The proposal does not discriminate disadvantaged, disabled children and young people in Oxfordshire.
40. The option to apply for an Enhanced Pathway will be open to all of Oxfordshire's mainstream schools and the 20 most eligible cases will be progressed alongside the existing 40.
41. Equality and Climate Impact Assessment (ECIA) completed September 2022.

Sustainability Implications

42. If children and young people are enabled to attend their local mainstream school, then both transportation costs and the impact on the local climate are negated

Risk Management

	Risk	Impact 0-5	Likelihood	Mitigation
1	Budget	5	medium	Budget implications included
2.	Quality of the provision provided by the school falls below expected standards	5	low	Termly quality assurance meetings and data collection points in place. Annual quality assurance visits
3	No or limited interest from schools to set up and run enhanced pathways	5	low	In the last application window there were over 80 applications for 40 spaces. There is also a waiting list of interested schools.
4	Some existing pathways are unable to continue with the new funding arrangements due to capped staffing costs.	5	medium	Equity across all Enhanced Pathways is necessary to ensure the validity of programme
5.	Changes in central government funding	5	low	Clause included in service level agreement to allow for any change in funding or ring-fenced use of funding

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