

Meeting:	Executive
Meeting date:	2 June 2026
Report of:	Maxine Squire, Assistant Director, Education and Skills
Portfolio of:	Councillor Bob Webb, Executive Member for Children and Education

The Local SEND Reform Plan

Subject of Report

1. This report provides Executive with information about the requirement to submit a Local SEND Reform Plan to the Department for Education (DfE) by 18 June 2026. This report asks Executive to approve the draft plan and to delegate the decisions about the use of resources to support the delivery of the plan to the Executive Member for Children and Education in consultation with the Corporate Director, Children and Education. The plan included as Annex A of this report is a copy of the draft plan which has been shared with the Department for Education's SEND Adviser for comment. Following receipt of the feedback in late May/early June the plan will be finalised and sent to the DfE for approval by the Secretary of State.
2. The timeline on the development and submission of the plan has been very tight. The plan requires Executive sign off as the council is receiving £2.3 million in SEND Capital and £1.3 million of revenue funding to implement Experts at Hand from central government in the financial year 2026-27. The allocation of this funding supports the delivery of the first year of the Local SEND Reform Plan and in order to ensure that timely allocation of the funding takes place this paper asks that Executive delegate decisions to the Executive Member for Children and Education in consultation with the Corporate Director, Children and Education.

Benefits and Challenges

3. Following the publication of the Schools White Paper and the SEND Reform consultation in February 2026 all local authorities in England are required to produce a Local SEND Reform Plan and submit this to the Department for Education by 18 June 2026. The benefits of the proposed reforms are the recognition that the current SEND system is not working and that there is a need to improve the lived experience of children, young people and families. Central to the delivery of the 10-year reform plan is the focus on an inclusive mainstream education system, specialist support for those that need it and efficient and effective local delivery.
4. Local Authorities received a copy of the commissioning pack providing the detailed information about the requirements for the SEND Reform plan from the Department for Education on 9 March 2026. The development of the plan has required the local authority to convene local partners to complete a maturity assessment to self-assess readiness to deliver the proposed SEND reforms and to take the lead in writing the plan. This has been a complex and challenging process to manage within a constrained timeframe.
5. The Department for Education recognise that this has created difficulties in aligning sign off processes within local democratic calendars, however the published timeline is being adhered to. Local areas have been asked to submit draft plans by mid-May with final plans being signed off by the council's Executive and the Chief Executive of the Integrated Care Board (ICB) before 18 June. Plans will then be assessed. If plans are not approved the first-round local authorities will be asked to resubmit their plans in Spring 2027. Ensuring that York's plan is approved in the first round is extremely important to ensure that there is no delay in delivering the change programme which supports the ambitions previously articulated through the city's Inclusion and Belonging Strategy.

Policy Basis for Decision

6. The policy basis for the 2026 SEND reforms is primarily established in the government's Schools White Paper, *Every Child Achieving and Thriving*, and the subsequent consultation document, *SEND*

Reform: Putting Children and Young People First, both published in February 2026.

7. The SEND reforms align directly with the council's vision, *One City for All (2023–2027)*. The council has reflected these national reforms into its own local Inclusion and Belonging Strategy (2025–2030) to ensure they meet the city's specific goals. The national priority for mainstream inclusion directly supports York's commitment to creating equal opportunities. As a designated Human Rights City, York's strategy uses the Social Model of Disability to remove environmental barriers in schools rather than focusing on a child's "deficits".
8. By investing in local Inclusion Bases and specialist training for mainstream teachers, the council intends to reduce the reliance on expensive out-of-area placements. Expanding "Targeted Plus" support within the city's schools reduces the need for long-distance travel to specialist schools outside the city. This aligns with the city's goal of cutting carbon emissions and reducing school-related traffic.
9. The Experts at Hand Model aligns with York's "Health in All Policies" approach by bringing therapists and psychologists directly into communities, ensuring the right support is available at the right time.

Financial Strategy Implications

10. Central government is investing £4 billion in overhauling the SEND system in England. This includes the allocation of High Needs capital to create more suitable places in specialist and mainstream settings, £1.6 billion inclusive mainstream fund for early years settings, schools and colleges and £1.8 billion to deliver the Experts at Hand programme which will provide access to specialists (including Educational Psychologists, Speech and Language Therapists and Occupational Therapists) without requiring an education, health and care plan.
11. York has received £2.3 million of High Needs capital for the financial year 2026-27 and £1.3 million to deliver Experts at Hand in 2026-27. Further funding will be allocated in the financial years 2027-28 and 2028-29. The 2026-27 funding is designed to support the delivery of Year 1 of the Local SEND Reform Plan.

12. Post Safety-Valve this funding is crucial to the local area to support the implementation of the reforms. Successful implementation of the SEND reforms is important to the council's financial strategy as future deficits would create pressures for the council's general fund.

Recommendation and Reasons

13. Executive is asked to approve the draft Local SEND Reform Plan and to delegate decisions about the use of government funding to support the delivery of the plan. This is to ensure that the use of funding in the financial year 2026-27 can be allocated efficiently and effectively to support the delivery of Year 1 of the plan. Use of this funding must be reported quarterly to the Department for Education.

14. Executive is also asked to delegate to the Corporate Director, Children and Education (in consultation with the Executive Member, Children and Education and Monitoring Officer) the power to negotiate, approve and enter into any related agreement(s) with the Department of Education for such funding.

15. **Reason:** The reason for this recommendation is to ensure that the government deadlines for the delivery of the plan can be met.

Background

16. The schools' white paper and SEND reforms consultation documents were published on 23 February 2026. Both documents set out the government's vision to support every child to achieve and thrive. The scale of the proposed reforms is significant and alongside the implementation of the Best Start in Life Plan and the Families First reforms represent the most significant period of change for children's services and education in over a decade.

17. The white paper sets an ambitious vision for a school system where standards and inclusion work together to enable every child to achieve and thrive. The full implementation of the reforms will involve the implementation of a 10-year plan for change which is designed to deliver higher standards with children leaving school achieving grade 5 or higher across their GCSEs and a plan to halve the disadvantage gap.

18. The SEND reforms emphasise the importance of early identification and intervention to reduce the need for education, health and care plans. Central to this will be the introduction of a statutory independent support plan (ISP) for children who need additional support. The levels of support will be described as targeted, targeted plus and specialist. Only those children identified as needing specialist support will require an education, health and care plan (EHCP) and their needs will be set out in one of the new nationally defined Specialist Provision Packages.
19. Implementing the proposed reforms is complex as local areas are working within the existing SEND legislation alongside implementing the programme of reform. The government has made clear that during the period of implementing the reforms there is likely to be a continuing rise in the number of education, health and care plans up to 2030. This will continue to place financial pressures on local authorities during this period of change. Government has recognised this and has agreed to right off 90% of the historic High Needs deficits that local authorities have accumulated at the end of the financial year 2025-26. However, there is an expectation that local government will produce local SEND Reform plans which are financially prudent to manage the on-going pressures and there is no guarantee that government will continue to make the same commitment to remove deficits that are acquired in future years. The financial modelling underpinning the local SEND reform plan will therefore be an important area of focus for York to ensure that we have our plan approved for autumn 2026 as funding being released in the autumn is dependent on the plan being approved.
20. In developing Local SEND Reform Plans local authorities have been required to complete a maturity assessment with local partners to benchmark the areas state of readiness to implement the reforms. This maturity assessment together with the data annex which support the SEND Reform Plan will be assessed by the Department for Education in June. Local authorities will receive feedback on their plans in the autumn and will know whether their plan has been approved or will need to be resubmitted in Spring 2027.
21. In developing York's SEND Reform Plan the focus has been on building the capacity to efficiently and effectively deliver the following aspects of the reforms in Year 1:

- Using £2.3 million of high needs capital to support inclusive mainstream schools working alongside high quality specialist provision.
- Expanding access to multi-agency support in mainstream by creating a new £1.3 million Experts at Hand service of speech and language therapists, Educational Psychologists and other professionals to provide early support to children.
- Encouraging collaboration between schools and other partners through full implementation of the neighbourhood cluster model.
- From September 2026, a national training programme will be available for all staff across early years, schools and post 16 to develop skills in building inclusive learning environments and early identification of needs so children receive timely support.

Consultation Analysis

22. Due to the constrained timeline, the plan has used the results of previous extensive stakeholder consultation which was used to develop the Inclusion and Belonging Strategy.
23. York Schools and Academies Board and School Forum have been briefed about the development of the plan and feedback has been sought from both bodies. There has been a stakeholder engagement event on 30 April which brought together representatives from across education, health and care, parent carer forum York and representatives from the community and voluntary sector. Feedback from this event has been used to support the Year 1 plan.

Options Analysis and Evidential Basis

24. **Option 1:** Executive do not approve the draft Local SEND Reform Plan. This would mean that the local authority would miss the deadline for submission to the Department for Education resulting in reputational and financial risk for the council.
25. **Option 2 (recommended):** Executive approves the draft plan and receive regular updates on the outcome of the assessment and delivery of the plan in 2026-27. This would allow the local authority to meet the deadline for submission of the plan and the SEND capital funding and funding for Experts at Hand can be allocated in 2026-27 to support the infrastructure to support an inclusive mainstream education system.

Organisational Impact and Implications

26. Financial:

The additional capacity referred to in the plan, including the Experts at Hand service of speech and language therapists, Educational Psychologists and other professionals to provide early support to children, will be funded from the £1.304m allocated to York from the DfE's £429m Experts at Hand & Local Authority SEND Transformation Fund in 2026/27.

Future years funding for individual local authorities has not yet been confirmed. However, the DfE have indicated that the national fund is expected to increase to total £750m in 2027/28 and £850m in 2028/29.

The DfE's intention is that the Local SEND Reform Plan helps support the future delivery of a balanced Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG). In 2025/26 there was an in-year DSG deficit of £1.2m. As a surplus balance of £0.6m was brought forward from 2024/25, this leaves a year end DSG deficit of £0.6m to carry forward into 2026/27.

However, the 2025/26 in-year deficit of £1.2m is net of the final DfE Safety Valve contribution of £2m, meaning an underlying in-year deficit of £3.2m. Future years' projections currently show the cumulative deficit rising to c£5m by the end of 2027/28, so the development of an effective local plan will be crucial in trying to manage this position.

Human Resources (HR):

No HR implications.

Legal:

If any resulting funding were proposed to be used to procure services, goods or works the Procurement Act 2023 (or other related legislation) may apply, as well as the Council's Contract Procedure Rules ("CPRs"). CYC Legal Services and Procurement should be consulted internally for analysis, support and advice.

Similarly, in the event any resulting funding were proposed to be used for grants or other related funding arrangements CYC Legal Services should be consulted (in conjunction CYC Procurement and Finance) for analysis, support and advice. Depending on the nature of any proposed

arrangements this could include review based upon the CPRs, Subsidy Control Act 2022 and/ or any other related legislation.

Procurement:

As detailed under legal section.

Health and Wellbeing:

The increasing number of children with a special education need or disability (including those both with and without any formal diagnosis) poses challenges to the health of our younger residents in York. Children with SEND often experience higher levels of health need, and challenges to participating in education and society which have long lasting effects, as well as posing challenges to health and education systems relating to increased demand for services. However, evidence shows that support, inclusion and specific therapeutic intervention, offered at the earliest appropriate point in order to ensure prevention, can make a real difference in lives, and so the positive health and wellbeing impacts of the work described in this report and plan are potentially large.

Environment and Climate:

The plan supports inclusive mainstream provision and the development of specialist places to ensure children's needs can be met close to home reducing use of out of area provision and promoting sustainability in home to school transport.

Affordability:

The plan focuses on supporting children in their local schools and pooling resources to achieve sustainable interventions.

Equalities and Human Rights:

Annex B refers.

Data Protection and Privacy:

Not required.

Communications:

The communication of the local SEND Reform plan is supported by the council's communication team.

Economy:

None identified.

Risks and Mitigations

Risk: Delays in delivery due to lack of delegated decision-making authority

Mitigation: Seeks approval for delegated authority to the Corporate Director, Children and Education (in consultation with the Executive Member, Children and Education and Monitoring Officer) the power to negotiate, approve and enter into any related agreement(s) with the Department of Education for such funding.

Wards Impacted

All wards.

Contact details

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Background papers

None identified.

Annexes

Annex A: Draft Local SEND Reform Plan

Annex B: Equalities Impact Assessment (EIA).