

Local SEND Reform Plans

Report to the Schools Forum 19 March 2026

1 SEND Reform Plan

- 1.1 On 9 March 2026, the government wrote to local authorities *'formally commissioning the development and implementation of Local SEND Reform Plan. These plans should clearly set out the actions that you will take to drive system reform locally'*. Rather than being just from the DfE, the letter came jointly from the DfE and the Department for Health & Social Care.
- 1.2 The letter itself is a significant document, which merits some analysis and is included as Appendix 1 to this paper.

2 Joint Ministerial Letter

- 2.1 Key elements of the letter are set out below, with a brief commentary following:
- *"We are commissioning each local area partnership to develop and submit a Local SEND Reform Plan in June 2026, underpinned by a Local Partnership Maturity Assessment. These documents should be used to clearly set out how you will improve and further strengthen your system, tilting provision towards stronger inclusive practice and early intervention..."*
 - *'For local areas with the most acute performance concerns, officials will be placing heightened scrutiny on the extent to which you are doing everything within your control to implement the reforms effectively. This includes a close examination of leadership capability, the pace and grip with which you act, and clear accountability through a named Senior Responsible Officer. The Department for Education will also use returned Local SEND Reform Plans to assess ongoing performance and delivery, in order to best allocate the support and challenge that we will offer throughout this period of reform.'*
 - *'As you develop and implement these plans, you will receive ongoing support and challenge from government officials, alongside your assigned SEND Advisers and Financial Advisers.'*
 - *'When failure is persistent, we will not hesitate to use the full range of intervention powers including removing the licence to deliver SEND services'*
 - *'All local authorities with a SEND deficit will be eligible in 2026–27 to receive a High Needs Stability Grant covering 90% of their High Needs related DSG deficit accrued up to the end of 2025–26. This grant will only be paid once each local authority has secured approval of their local area's Local SEND Reform Plan. Payments will be made from Autumn 2026 for local authorities whose local area plans are approved in the first round of assessment.'*
 - *'Where a local authority's plan does not meet the threshold for approval, they will be required to revise and improve their plans, with continued support from advisers, to ensure they meet the required standard. Where revised plans meet the required approval threshold, payments will be made in Spring 2027, within the 2026-27'*

financial year. Local authorities will not receive any payments until their Local SEND Reform Plan has been approved.'

- *'For deficits that arise in 2026–27 and 2027–28, local authorities can expect that we will continue to take an appropriate and proportionate approach, though it will not be unlimited. Future support will take into account LAs' successful delivery of their approved Local SEND reform plan, including appropriate use of investment to establish an Experts at Hand offer.'*

Comments

- 2.2 It is perhaps unexpected that this is a joint letter. Whilst the NHS plays a significant role in the whole system of support of children and young people, financially, DSG is an education grant paid to local authorities and educational institutions.
- 2.3 Financial details for 2026/27 and 2027/28 are notably vague. In terms of the financial sums available and to be paid, *'appropriate and proportionate'* tells us very little. This is a crucial gap in the information as – to take our local circumstances - not only is our high needs deficit increasing, but the trajectory of growth is also increasing, i.e. the in-year deficit is growing year on year. Given that the local reform plan will be being developed in 2026/27 and it is unrealistic to expect that existing educational provision can be unwound in a short time-scale it is difficult to foresee anything other than a very significant deficit in 2026/27 and beyond. This applies both locally and nationally.
- 2.4 As the government has committed to cover 90% of deficits accumulated up to March 2026, it is to be expected that it will increase the level of scrutiny on the system. The threat of removal of local authority powers is made very explicit in the document. However, there is a strong argument that the progressive diminution of local authority powers has been a contributor to the current situation and that an acceleration of this process (see also the renewed requirement for all schools to become academies) is unlikely to promote a coherent system for SEND support.

3 Local SEND Reform Plans

- 3.1 Accompanying the joint ministerial letter is a document entitled 'The Local SEND Reform Plan' which is designed to *"support local area partnerships develop a Local SEND Reform Plan"*. This document is included as Appendix 2 to this paper. The local authority is intended to be the *"system 'convenor', taking the lead to bring together all system partners and ensure they work together develop and deliver the....plan"*.
- 3.2 A Local SEND Reform Plan must be submitted to the government by 19 June 2026. In addition to describing local plans, it represents the gateway to government funding, notably the High Needs Stability Grant which will clear 90% of DSG deficits accumulated by 31 March 2026. This grant will only be paid once the government has approved the local plan. If the initial plan is not approved by government, then it will need to be redesigned and resubmitted. Funds will only be released once the government approves the plan, either in Autumn 2026 (for approved plans) or Spring 2027 (for resubmitted plans).
- 3.3. The plan will have to be organised around a defined structure, as follows:
- Vision & Goals: Aligned to national aims and measurable outcomes;

- Strategy: a three-year system blueprint covering inclusion, access to specialist support, partnerships and co-production, culture and behaviour, success metrics, baselines and target metrics, a 3-year roadmap and a Year-1 detailed delivery plan with spend profile
- Monitoring & Evaluation processes, covering the tools to do this, ‘feedback loops’, data reporting to the DfE;
- Governance: covering Partnership board structures, a named Senior Responsible Officer (SRO), accountability and escalation structures and links to Schools Forums and settings;
- Support Needed from Central Government, there is an opportunity to request workforce support, data tools, regulatory guidance and peer learning.

3.4 Funding to deliver the reform plans will be provided in two main categories, the Local Inclusion Partnership Grant and the Inclusive mainstream fund with sub-categories in each one. As noted in the previous paper, amounts for local authorities have yet to be announced, but extrapolating from the national totals, up to £2m could be available per annum for T&W in each of the two categories. This is however against the background of no like-for-like increase in the high needs block for 2026/27.

Local Inclusion Partnership Grant

3.5 Allocation amounts will be announced in April, with funds being paid, in June, to local authorities. Within this grant will be funding streams for:

- The ‘Experts at Hand’ Offer: this will fund multi-disciplinary (e.g. educational psychology, speech and language therapy, and occupational therapy) and outreach support;
- Transformation funding: supports local authority organisational capacity and capability, data and analytic, programme management, workforce planning and modernisation of services;
- Best Start Family Hubs: Funding to embed SEND inclusion specialists in Family Hubs.

Inclusive Mainstream Fund (Settings)

3.6 Paid directly to schools and FE institutions to enhance:

- Universal provision
- Targeted group-based interventions
- Evidence-based early intervention which is Intended to reduce the volume of EHCP-driven spend.

3.7 In addition, to support the revised provision, there will be a national amount of £3bn of capital over the four years 2026/27 to 2029/30. Again, applying extrapolation, this could mean around £10m for T&W over the four years, or about £2.5m per year. This is a sum sufficient to convert significant existing space to support high needs, or to build some additional accommodation, but not enough to (for example) build a new special school.

- 3.8 As part of the local reform process, councils/local area partnerships will have to provide government with regular detailed financial information:
- Clear investment strategies
 - Costed year-1 delivery plans
 - Quarterly financial monitoring
 - Governance that ensures transparent oversight of budgets
 - Joint financial accountability with ICBs
 - Strategic commissioning reducing high-cost placements
 - Consideration of transport cost implications for all sufficiency actions
- 3.9 Noteworthy again is the prominent role allocated to ICBs.
- 3.10 In addition there will be a requirement for quarterly data returns, monitoring attendance, exclusions, out-of-area placement volumes, EHCP trends, etc. A government template is required to be completed. The government will expect use of dashboards, KPIs and predictive analytics

4 Summary

- 4.1 Government oversight of high needs is about to significantly increase and it appears that the role of local partnerships will also gain much more prominence. It remains to be seen whether this major increase in bureaucratic oversight leads to a more effective system. The local partnerships that are mandated will include bodies with overlapping boundaries (ICBs, academy trusts)
- 4.2 The potential write-off of 90% of accumulated DSG deficits once government has approved the local plan is very welcome, but there remains substantial uncertainty over the government's approach to deficits in 2026/27 and 2027/28.

Tim Davis
Head of Business, Education & Care Finance
March 2026