

Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee

1 October 2026

Medway's Local Area SEND Reform Plan

Report from: Dr Lee-Anne Farach, Director of People and Deputy Chief Executive

Author: Celia Buxton, Assistant Director, Education and SEND

Summary

The report sets out Medway's Local SEND Reform Plan, approved jointly by Medway Council, NHS Kent and Medway Integrated Care Board and the wider Local Area Partnership. The Plan sets out the next stages of whole-system reform creating a sustainable, inclusive, and outcomes-focused 0-25 SEND system.

The reform programme responds to significant growth in demand, increasing Education Health Care Plan (EHCP) requests, increasing reliance on specialist placements and persistent gaps in outcomes for children and young people with SEND.

SEND is not solely an education issue. Poor outcomes for children and young people with SEND are closely associated with health inequalities, poorer mental health, reduced school attendance, increased family stress, and poorer preparation for adulthood. The reform programme therefore seeks to improve educational, health and wellbeing outcomes through earlier intervention, stronger inclusion, integrated support, and improved access to services.

The Plan is closely aligned to Family Hubs, Best Start in Life and wider Children's Services reforms, creating a single preventative system where needs are identified earlier and support is delivered closer to home. Health partners are central to delivery, particularly through community therapies, mental health support, integrated commissioning, and the development of the Experts at Hand model. The programme adopts an invest-to-save approach, shifting resources towards prevention and mainstream inclusion to reduce reliance on expensive independent placements and improve long-term financial sustainability.

1. Recommendations

- 1.1. The Committee is asked to note the Local SEND Reform Plan and associated delivery programme.

- 1.2. The Committee is asked to note the partnership vision for a high-quality, inclusive and financially sustainable 0-25 SEND system.
- 1.3. The Committee is asked to support delivery of the six strategic reform priorities.
- 1.4. The Committee is asked to champion collective responsibility across health, education and care partners for improving outcomes for children and young people with SEND.
- 1.5. The Committee is asked to note the governance, performance and reporting arrangements that will monitor delivery of the reform programme.

2. Budget and policy framework

- 2.1. The SEND Reform Plan strongly supports the One Medway Council Plan priorities by reinforcing the Council's focus on prevention, wellbeing and early help, whilst improving education standards.
- 2.2. The proposals are within the Council's policy framework and support strategic priorities to reduce inequalities, improve educational outcomes, strengthen inclusion and improve health and wellbeing outcomes for children and young people.

3. Background

- 3.1. Over the last three years Medway has undertaken significant work to improve SEND services through its Local Area Improvement Programme and Safety Valve agreement. Governance arrangements have strengthened, relationships with schools and health partners are improved, EHCP processes are timelier and mainstream inclusion has increased with more children with SEND having their needs met in their local school, than ever before.
- 3.2. Despite this progress, demand across the SEND system continues to rise. EHCP prevalence has increased to approximately 5.3% of the pupil population, with 4,448 children and young people holding plans. Requests for statutory assessment have more than doubled and continue to exceed previously forecast levels. Despite resolving the in-year deficit on the high needs block, this new surge in demand is placing increasing financial pressure and is likely to reverse that position.
- 3.3. In 2026, the Government launched a national SEND Reform Programme requiring all local area partnerships to develop and submit Local SEND Reform Plans setting out how they will create more inclusive, financially sustainable and outcomes-focused SEND systems. The reforms are supported through the High Needs Stability Grant programme and require local authorities and Integrated Care Boards to demonstrate strengthened partnership accountability, increased mainstream inclusion, earlier intervention, improved family confidence and a clear trajectory towards financial sustainability. Medway submitted its Local SEND Reform Plan to the Department for Education in June 2026 and is preparing for implementation

from September 2026, subject to approval and confirmation of associated funding arrangements, expected in September 2026.

- 3.4. The partnership's self-evaluation, external review activity and SEND Maturity Assessment identified several ongoing challenges:
- Inconsistent quality of inclusive practice across settings.
 - Variable understanding of the Ordinarily Available Offer.
 - Late identification and intervention.
 - Increasing tribunals and family dissatisfaction.
 - Rising levels of elective home education associated with SEND needs.
 - Workforce shortages across specialist services.
 - Fragmented pathways across education, health and care.
- 3.5. The Local SEND Reform Plan has therefore been developed with partners, schools, Medway Parent Carer Forum and health organisations to create a single improvement framework. Delivery of the plan will be monitored through quarterly reporting to the Department for Education against nationally prescribed SEND reform metrics, with annual review of progress against local outcome measures and financial sustainability objectives

4. Overview

- 4.1. The partnership has agreed four system goals:
- Improve outcomes for children and young people with SEND.
 - Increase confidence and trust among parents, carers and young people.
 - Strengthen system capability to meet needs earlier.
 - Secure value for money and long-term financial sustainability.

To achieve these goals, six reform priorities have been identified:

4.1.1. Outcomes-Driven Leadership and Accountability

Strengthen governance arrangements so that all partners are collectively accountable for measurable outcomes, using shared performance measures, data and lived experience.

4.1.2. Inclusion and Experts at Hand

The centrepiece of the reform programme is the Experts at Hand model, providing place-based multi-disciplinary support to schools, early years settings and post-16 providers. The model will improve access to specialist advice, increase workforce confidence and support early intervention without requiring statutory assessment.

4.1.3. Co-production

Embed co-production with children, young people and families throughout planning, commissioning, quality assurance and service transformation. The programme will introduce strengthened feedback arrangements including 'You Said, We Did and the Impact Is' reporting.

4.1.4. Commissioning, Sufficiency and Financial Sustainability

Align education, health and care commissioning with demand forecasting, place planning and value-for-money principles. The ambition is to reduce reliance on independent and out-of-area placements and increase local provision.

4.1.5. Workforce Development

Implement a workforce strategy to address shortages in Educational Psychology, Speech and Language Therapy, Occupational Therapy and wider specialist SEND services.

4.1.6. Alignment with Wider Children's Services Reform

Integrate SEND reform with Family Help, Best Start in Life, Family Hubs and wider children's services transformation to support earlier identification and intervention.

- 4.2. The reform programme will be delivered alongside Family Hubs, Best Start in Life, Family Help and wider Children's Services reforms. This creates a coherent system focused on prevention, earlier identification and coordinated family support. Experts at Hand teams will operate through locality arrangements and align with Family Hub delivery models to strengthen integrated support and ensure children receive help at the earliest opportunity.
- 4.3. Health partners are key delivery partners in the reform programme. NHS Kent and Medway ICB, Medway Community Healthcare and mental health services will contribute through integrated commissioning, community therapies, speech and language therapy, occupational therapy, mental health support and workforce development. Earlier access to advice, intervention and therapy is expected to improve child development, emotional wellbeing, family resilience and longer-term health outcomes whilst reducing pressure on specialist services.
- 4.4. The full plan is included in Appendix 1.

5. Expected Outcomes

- 5.1. By 2029, children and young people with SEND and their families will experience:
- Earlier support and reduced escalation of need, with annual EHCP requests reducing to 660 or below, reflecting improved early identification, intervention and confidence in mainstream support.
 - Greater inclusion in local communities, with 65% of children and young people with EHCPs educated in mainstream settings, enabling more children to learn alongside their peers, remain connected to their local communities and achieve positive outcomes close to home.

- Access to high-quality local provision, reducing reliance on independent special school placements to 230 or below, meaning fewer children will need to travel long distances or be educated away from their families and support networks.
- Improved attendance, wellbeing and participation, with attendance for children receiving SEND Support increasing to above 94%, demonstrating greater engagement in education and improved experiences within schools and settings.
- Timely access to specialist advice and intervention, with at least 85% of educational settings accessing the Experts at Hand model, enabling children and young people to receive support more quickly and reducing delays in accessing help.
- Greater confidence among parents, carers and young people, reflected in reduced complaints, mediation cases and tribunal activity, demonstrating a more transparent, responsive and trusted SEND system.
- Improved family resilience and wellbeing, through stronger partnership working across education, health and care, resulting in families feeling better supported and more involved in decisions about their child's support.
- Improved preparation for adulthood, with more young people successfully progressing into further education, employment, training and independent living, supported by coordinated planning and transition pathways.
- A financially sustainable SEND system, ensuring resources are targeted towards prevention, inclusion and early intervention so that better outcomes for children and young people can be achieved within available resources while reducing future reliance on high-cost specialist provision.

6. Risk management

Risk	Description	Action to avoid or mitigate risk	Risk rating
Demand continues to exceed projections	Prevention and early intervention don't reduce growth in EHCP demand and specialist provision	Enhanced forecasting and sufficiency planning, feeding into partnership governance so plan and resources can be adjusted/ re-allocated in a timely manner.	B1
Workforce shortages	Difficulty recruiting specialist staff	Joint Workforce strategy, new training routes and phased implementation. SaLT advanced Practitioner focused on	A1

Risk	Description	Action to avoid or mitigate risk	Risk rating
		workforce recruitment. Use of assistants, and trainees.	
Experts at Hand demand exceeds capacity	Schools become dependent on specialist support	Clear Ordinarily Available Offer and coaching model. EAH resource provided by education settings. Offer focused on building expertise in setting rather than individual child.	B2
Financial pressures	High Needs Block is not able to maintain an in-year positive balance.	High needs stability grant (pending approval of the reform plan). National SEND reform bring parity across areas. Continue Safety Valve activity improved commissioning, monitoring and value-for-money frameworks	B2

For risk rating, please refer to the following table:

Likelihood	Impact:
A Very likely B Likely C Unlikely D Rare	1 Critical 2 Major 3 Moderate 4 Minor

7. Consultation

- 7.1. The Local SEND Reform Plan is a live strategic document. Whilst the overarching vision, outcomes and direction of travel have been agreed by partners and submitted to the Department for Education, detailed delivery arrangements, workstreams, success measures and resource allocations will continue to evolve through ongoing co-production with children and young people, families, education settings, health partners and wider stakeholders.

- 7.2. As implementation progresses, the Plan will be regularly reviewed and refined to reflect learning, stakeholder feedback, emerging evidence, national policy developments and local need. Ongoing engagement, co-production and consultation with children and young people, families and system partners will continue throughout implementation and may result in refinements to delivery priorities, timescales, resource allocation and service design. Any changes will be reported through the established governance arrangements.

8. Health and Wellbeing Board

- 8.1. The report was considered by the Health and Wellbeing Board on 3 September 2026, the minutes of which are set out below.

8.2. **Discussion:**

The Board received the report which had been jointly produced with partners across the systems and sets out the vision for a high quality inclusive SEND system that represented a whole system approach.

Several challenges continued to be experienced across the system including high support needs, costs and increase in request for statutory assessments which had doubled in the last year. The growth of which threatened sustainability and as a result, the partnership agreed four main goals, with six priorities identified to achieve goals.

It was commented that extensive work had been undertaken by partners jointly working together. Utilisation of the family hubs was key to achieving goals as it was essential that families be able to access expert support in one place. The work being undertaken by mainstream schools was encouraging and it was crucial to continue to ensure that provision was in place to support staff working with SEND children.

The work of the Therapeutic Alliance services continued to provide vital support for families, the results of which would start to emerge and was being monitored closely.

Decision:

- a) The Board agreed to endorse the partnership vision for a high-quality, inclusive and financially sustainable 0-25 SEND system.
- b) The Board agreed to support the delivery of the six strategic reform priorities.
- c) The Board noted the governance, performance and reporting arrangements that would monitor delivery of the reform programme.

9. Climate change implications

- 9.1. There are no significant adverse climate implications arising from this report. Increased local provision and outreach support may reduce travel requirements for children and families.

10. Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) implications

- 10.1. Following the announcement of the pause on 7 September 2026, officers will monitor the ongoing situation and will consider any relevant impacts as they arise.

11. Financial implications

- 11.1. The financial rationale for reform is clear. Rising EHCP demand, increasing reliance on independent placements and escalating transport and High Needs expenditure are creating significant pressure across the SEND system. Without intervention, these trends are unlikely to be financially sustainable.
- 11.2. The programme seeks to shift investment upstream towards prevention, inclusion and earlier intervention, enabling more children and young people to have their needs met successfully within local mainstream and specialist provision. Over time, this is expected to reduce demand for costly independent and out-of-area placements, improve value for money and contribute to the long-term sustainability of the High Needs Block.
- 11.3. Financial benefits will be realised through strengthened mainstream inclusion, improved sufficiency of local provision, reduced escalation of need and more effective integration across education, health and care services.

12. Legal implications

- 12.1. The Council must continue to discharge its statutory duties under the Children and Families Act 2014, the SEND Regulations 2014, the SEND Code of Practice, the Equality Act 2010 and other relevant legislation. The proposals contained within this report support the Council and its partners in delivering these duties through a more inclusive, integrated and sustainable SEND system.
- 12.2. Delivery of the Reform Plan will require continued collaboration between the Council, NHS Kent and Medway Integrated Care Board, education providers and wider partners. Appropriate governance, data-sharing and commissioning arrangements must be maintained throughout implementation.
- 12.3. The Government's SEND Reform Programme may result in future legislative and regulatory changes during the lifetime of this Plan. The Local SEND Reform Plan has been developed to align with the anticipated direction of national reform; however, the Plan remains a live document and may require amendment to reflect any future changes to legislation, statutory guidance or national policy.

Lead officer contact

Celia Buxton, Assistant Director – Education and SEND
celia.buxton@medway.gov.uk

Appendices

Appendix 1 The Local SEND Reform Plan

Background papers

None