

09 June 2026

Name of Cabinet Member:

Cabinet Member for Education, Skills and Equalities

Director approving submission of the report:

Director of Children's & Education Services

Ward(s) affected:

All

Title:

Approval of the Draft Local Special Educational Needs & Disability (SEND) Reform Plan
Setting out how Coventry Local Area Partnership will deliver the National SEND Reforms.

Is this a key decision?

Yes – the proposals are likely to have a significant impact on residents or businesses in two or more electoral wards in the City.

Executive summary:

On 23rd February 2026, the government published its Schools White Paper, articulating a comprehensive and ambitious vision for the education system. The objective is to ensure that every child and young person is afforded the opportunity to achieve and thrive. This ambition is underpinned by a substantial national investment exceeding £7 billion over the next three years, which will promote inclusive practice within mainstream schools, facilitate access to expert support (including Educational Psychologists, Speech and Language Therapists, and Occupational Therapists) without the necessity of statutory assessments, and provide new school places for children and young people with special educational needs & disability (SEND) in both mainstream and special settings. Implementation of these reforms will commence from the 2026/27 financial year.

Each local area partnership is commissioned to develop and submit a Local SEND Reform Plan by the 19th June 2026, underpinned by a Local Partnership Maturity Assessment. These documents must outline proposals for improvement and consolidation of the local SEND system, prioritising inclusive practice and early intervention. The plan is designed as the central delivery and accountability framework for transforming SEND provision across

local area partnerships. It is expected that local authorities act as the system 'convener', taking the lead in bringing together Integrated Care Boards (ICBs), multi-academy trusts (MATs), schools, early years settings, health partners, and other stakeholders. The plan requires sign off from the Chief Executives of the City Council and ICB, and the Director of Finance and Resources (Section 151 Officer). The Local SEND Reform Plan and Local Partnership Maturity Assessment are included at Appendices A and B.

Educational provision for pupils with SEND is funded from the High Needs Block (HNB) within the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG), which supports pupils with complex needs and disabilities and is used alongside local authority core (general) funding resource to meet SEND statutory duties. Due to significant national demand increase since the implementation of reforms in 2014 the national High Needs Block deficit is estimated to reach £14bn by March 2028 posing a significant financial risk to local authorities. The DfE estimated that many local authorities had deficits exceeding or close to their level of reserves as of March 26. Coventry does not have a High Needs Block deficit as of 31st March 2026.

Alongside the reforms the government have introduced the High Needs Stability Grant, which will help to address SEND financial pressures covering 90% of local authorities HNB related DSG deficits accrued up to the end of 31st March 2026 subject to each local authority securing approval of their local area's plan. Coventry will not receive an allocation of High Needs Stability Grant, due to not being in deficit. However, it is expected that our ability to access future government financial support mechanisms, should they be needed to help manage deficits accrued up to the end of 31st March 2028, will be contingent on us having an approved plan and demonstrating sufficient progress to the Department for Education (DfE). The government has confirmed that from 2028/29 future funding implications will be managed within overall government spending, so where the system is being managed effectively local authorities will not need to use general funds.

Recommendations:

The Cabinet is recommended to:

1. Approve the draft Local SEND Reform Plan as attached as at Appendix 1 to this report.
2. Delegate authority to the Director of Children's and Education Services to make amendments to the Plan and submit it ahead of the deadline for submission on the 19th June 2026, following final sign off from the Chief Executive and the Director of Finance and Resources (Section 151 Officer).

List of Appendices included:

The following appendices are attached to the report:

Appendix 1 – Draft Local SEND Reform Plan
Appendix 2 – Local Partnership Maturity Assessment

Background papers:

[05 - Coventry One Strategic Plan and Education Capital Programme 2025 - 2029.pdf](#)

Other useful documents

[SEND Reform: Putting Children and Young People First](#)

Has it or will it be considered by Scrutiny?

No

Has it or will it be considered by any other Council Committee, Advisory Panel or other body?

No

Will this report go to Council?

No

Report title: Approval of the Draft Local Special Educational Needs & Disability (SEND) Reform Plan Setting out how Coventry Local Area Partnership will deliver the National SEND Reforms.

1. Context (or background)

- 1.1. Since the reforms introduced in 2014 the national SEND system has been under sustained pressure, and this has led to overstretched services, and unsustainable financial positions. Despite these challenges, it is recognised that many local area partnerships have shown leadership and innovation, improving local services. The government's commitment is to collaborate and scale what works, investing in inclusive and sustainable systems. Each local area must take full responsibility for robust action plans that demonstrate ownership, ambition, and accountability.
- 1.2. The Local SEND Reform Plan is expected to be revised annually as reforms are rolled out over a 3-year period initially. Delivery occurs within the current statutory framework, and no implementation of policies under consultation or awaiting legislative change is required in this first iteration. The plan must build on existing foundations and lay the groundwork for reform.

- 1.3. The 3 key components / expectations of the first iteration of the reform and local plan are:

Inclusive Mainstream System: Most children and young people with SEND should thrive in mainstream settings via high-quality teaching, inclusive practice, and targeted support. Multidisciplinary professional support will be commissioned efficiently at a group level.

Specialist Support: Specialist settings continue to serve those requiring individualised approaches or curricula not available in mainstream education.

Efficient Local Delivery: Investment in health, care, and education will support joined-up, place-based provision. This includes delivery of additional support called Experts at Hand. Collaboration with ICBs will commission multi-disciplinary support across all settings, easing pressure on school transport and ensuring children access education closer to home.

- 1.4. The Department for Education (DfE) will evaluate the submitted Local SEND Reform Plans to monitor ongoing performance throughout the reform period. In instances where acute performance concerns exist, officials will apply heightened scrutiny to ensure all available actions are undertaken for effective implementation of reforms. Throughout the development and implementation of these plans, continuous support and challenge will be provided by government officials, SEND Advisers, and Financial Advisers. Regular progress updates will be required including the potential to revoke the licence to deliver SEND services in cases of persistent failure.

Coventry Context

- 1.5. In line with the national position Coventry has also seen significant demand increase over the last 10 years. The number of children and young people with Education,

Health & Care (EHC) Plans has more than doubled and currently there are over 4,000 children and young people with EHC plans.

- 1.6. Coventry's HNB DSG allocation for the 2026/27 financial year is £81.5M and expenditure is projected to be £90.6M. This projected in-year overspend will be funded from our positive DSG reserve balance (which totalled £16.1M as of 31st March 2025).
- 1.7. Despite now facing financial challenge Coventry is well-placed to deliver on the Reforms as a result of well-established partnership working in place across the local area and work that is already in place, which aligns with the government direction of travel (e.g. continued investment in specialist provision across the city – specialist schools and enhanced resource provision, in the 3rd year of a significant SEND whole city workforce strategy, expanded statutory team supported through core budget resource, and a large SEND Support Service).
- 1.8. To accompany the Reforms the DfE have made funding available in 2026/27 - 2028/29 to the wider system including an Inclusive Mainstream Fund that will be allocated directly to schools to facilitate inclusive provision (on average £19k per primary school and £39k per secondary school). The Local Authority will receive a grant of ca. £3M in 2026/27 rising to an estimated £5.2M (2027/28) and £5.9M (2028/29) to deliver on SEND Reform including Experts at Hand, which is intended to be a new route for mainstream schools to access expert advice from education and health professionals. This allocation also includes up to 20% (£600K in 2026/27) to support transformation and administration. The DfE provides High Needs Capital Funding to local authorities to support the creation of inclusion specialist bases in mainstream settings to increase local capacity, and to consider these as a central part of their local sufficiency planning. The funding is intended to increase capacity across the 0–25 age range and can also be used to expand existing special schools and improve facilities for post-16 learners with SEND.
- 1.9. Allocations are made directly to local authorities using a national formula that takes account of factors such as the number of children and young people in the area, population growth, and existing levels of need. Local authorities are responsible for determining how best to use their allocation in line with their SEND sufficiency strategy and local priorities.
- 1.10. In the 2025/26 financial year, Coventry received an allocation of £5.2M; and in the 2026/27 financial year a further allocation of £5.1M. This funding is planned to be utilised to deliver specialist bases at primary and secondary schools and to support access and suitability within mainstream schools. The One Strategic Plan for Education sets out the capital strategy, including utilising basic need capital allocations to subsidise the High Needs Capital Allocations to deliver the school SEND sufficiency requirements.

2. Options considered and recommended proposal

- 2.1. Submission of the Local SEND Reform plan is a government requirement, so no other options are under consideration.

- 2.2. Producing and delivering a co-produced Local Area Partnership plan is a major requirement and involves considerable additional work. This includes providing updated 3-year pupil number forecasts using revised methodology and aligning this with financial forecasts, as well as designing how we will deliver the Expert at Hand offer. This requirement has been exacerbated by short timescales between receiving the plan and guidance (9th March) and expected submission of the plan (19th June), and delays to the operational guidance (e.g. Experts at Hand operational guidance is not expected until after submission of the plan). The DfE have been very clear that despite the deadline date the plan is iterative and will continue to change over time.
- 2.3. As a result of short timescales, we will continue to work on the plan up to the submission date, and there are some areas of the plan (particularly forecasts) that have not been included as they are still under development. The plan included at appendix A sets out vision, goals and the direction of travel. Further updates and information can be provided as required.

3. Results of consultation undertaken

- 3.1. The SEND Reform Plan has been developed through co-production and is grounded in an established understanding of Coventry's local SEND system. That understanding has been built over time with children and young people, parents and carers, schools and settings, and partners across education, health and care, and is reflected in the local area's SEND Self-Evaluation Framework (SEF) that is refreshed on an annual basis and our SEND Maturity Assessment (included at appendix B).
- 3.2. In addition, direct co-production activity has informed the development of the Reform Plan itself. Two workshops have been held to date, led by the Council and involving representatives from the Parent Carer Forum (PCF), education settings, the ICB, and Coventry and Warwickshire NHS Trust. Early drafts of the plan have also been shared electronically with stakeholders, and feedback has been used to strengthen the plan. Feedback from parents and carers has resulted in a stronger emphasis on co-production as a central theme throughout the plan and a greater focus on support for children who are not attending school full time.
- 3.3. The draft plan will now be considered through wider partnership arrangements, including the Headteachers' Inclusion Group, the Special School Group and the Specialist Base Group. Further focused workshops are also planned to test and strengthen key elements of the plan, including specific reform models such as Experts at Hand. This work will commence before the plan is finalised but will continue afterwards.

4. Timetable for implementing this decision

- 4.1. The SEND and Alternative Provision (AP) Partnership Board will have overall responsibility for delivery of the plan. Bringing together senior leaders from across the local area partnership, the Board will provide strategic oversight, challenge and decision-making to ensure delivery remains on track. The Board meets 6 times a year, on a half-termly basis, and will oversee progress against milestones, risks and priorities across the full programme.

- 4.2. Supporting this structure, a Reform Delivery Group will be established to maintain grip on the programme and ensure delivery is actively managed between Board meetings. The group will monitor implementation in detail, track progress against actions and milestones, identify slippage or emerging risks, and coordinate corrective action where needed. This will provide a clear line of sight from day-to-day programme management through to strategic oversight by the SEND and AP Partnership Board.
- 4.3. The plan will be implemented over a three-year period from 2026 to 2029. A first draft will be shared with Coventry's link Department for Education adviser on 19 May 2026, with the final version submitted to the Department for Education on 19 June 2026. Once agreed, progress against the plan will be reported to the Department for Education on a quarterly basis.

5. Comments from Director of Finance and Resources and Director of Law, Governance and Safer Communities

5.1. Financial Implications

Alongside the White Paper and SEND Reforms consultation the government has announced some new funding streams. The Inclusive Mainstream Fund and Inclusive Early Years Fund will be allocated to education settings either directly by the DfE or via the local authority. The local authority will receive an indicative allocation of £3M in 2026/27 from the Experts at Hand (EAH) and SEND Transformation Fund. Of this at least 80% must be spent on direct delivery of EAH, no more than 10% can be spent on administration costs associated with EAH and no more than 10% can be spent on local authority transformation costs linked to SEND Reforms. Our allocation is unconfirmed in future years; however, based on overall funding at a national level it is estimated to be ca. £5.2M in 2027/28 and ca. £5.9M in 2028/29.

Unlike many local authorities Coventry does not have a High Needs Block (HNB) deficit as of 31st March 2026. However, due to significant national demand increase since the implementation of reforms in 2014 the national High Needs Block deficit is estimated to reach £14bn by March 2028 when the current statutory override mechanism will end posing a significant financial risk to local authorities. In response the government has introduced the High Needs Stability Grant which will provide funding equivalent to 90% of deficits accrued up to 31st March 2026. Coventry will not receive an allocation of High Needs Stability Grant, due to not being in deficit.

Local authorities are required to provide a range of supplementary financial information when submitting their SEND Reform Plan. This includes, but not limited to, information on HNB DSG expenditure, both historic data and expenditure projections through to 2027/28. Following our original submission this information will need to be updated quarterly. There is a risk that the projected cost of meeting the educational needs of children and young people with SEND between now and the end of 2027/28 will exceed the combined level of funding received from the DfE and our existing DSG reserve balance. Currently, the potential impact on Coventry's financial position is unclear. This is because 2027/28 High Needs Block allocations have not been published by the DfE, and whilst the government has confirmed a financial support mechanism will operate for future deficits, they have not confirmed whether funding will continue to be based on 90% consistent with High Needs Stability Grant or a

different proportion. It is expected that our ability to access any future financial support mechanisms, should they be needed, will be contingent on the Local SEND Reform Plan being approved and the DfE being satisfied with progress on an ongoing basis. In the short to medium term there is a likelihood that all or part of any future HNB deficits will need to be met from the general fund.

The government has confirmed that from 2028/29 future funding implications will be managed within overall government spending, so where the system is being managed effectively local authorities will not need to use general funds.

5.2. Legal Implications

The SEND White Paper does not immediately change the current legislative framework as defined within the Children and Families Act 2014 (CFA 2014). The White Paper set out proposals for a 12-week consultation period which is open for submissions until 18 May 2026. The legislative framework as defined within Part 3 CFA 2014 remains unchanged and in full force and the Local Authority must continue to meet its current statutory duties contained therein. Whilst amendments to the CFA 2014 are anticipated, it is unlikely they will be in force before 2028.

6. Other implications

6.1. How will this contribute to the One Coventry Plan?

The proposals make a strong contribution to the Council Plan vision of working together to improve our city and the lives of those who live, work and study here by setting out a partnership-led programme of reform for children and young people with SEND. The plan is rooted in closer working between the Council, schools, health partners, families and children and young people, with co-production, shared governance and clearer accountability at its core.

Its main contribution is to improve outcomes and tackle inequalities within our communities through earlier intervention, stronger inclusion in mainstream settings, better access to specialist support, improved attendance and participation, and a greater proportion of children and young people being supported successfully in local provision close to home. In doing so, the proposals seek to reduce inequality in educational experience and life chances for a group of children and families who often face poorer outcomes and greater barriers to support.

The proposals support the enabling priority of the Council's role as a partner, enabler and leader, with the Council acting as the convening body that brings partners together around a shared reform programme, jointly owned outcomes and a transparent governance framework. This includes stronger use of data, lived experience and joint commissioning to drive system-wide improvement rather than isolated service change.

The proposals make a supporting contribution to economic prosperity by improving children and young people's engagement in education, attendance and preparation for adulthood, which are important foundations for longer-term independence and participation in the city's economy.

The proposals also support continued financial sustainability of the Council by focusing on earlier help, stronger local capacity and better value for money. Expanding local provision and reducing reliance on high-cost non-local placements is intended to improve outcomes while reducing pressure on transport, placement and high-needs spend over time.

The proposals also make a modest contribution to climate change objectives by helping more children and young people access provision closer to home, reducing the need for longer journeys.

6.2. How is risk being managed?

The principal risks relate to workforce capacity, partner alignment and data quality, which could affect delivery of the programme and the continuity of support for children and young people if not kept under effective review. These risks will be managed through strengthened governance, clear accountability and regular oversight of performance across the partnership. No specific health and safety issues have been identified. The risks do not currently require inclusion on the corporate risk register, but this position will be kept under review as implementation progresses. From a financial perspective in the short to medium term there is a likelihood that all of part of any future High Needs Block deficits will need to be met from the general fund. An approved SEND Reform Plan should enable access to any future government financial support mechanism if necessary.

6.3. What is the impact on the organisation?

The main implications are for staffing and workforce capacity, as delivery of the reforms will require additional specialist and programme resource, particularly to support implementation of the Experts at Hand model and wider system reform. These pressures are recognised within the plan and will be supported, in part, through the grant funding that accompanies the reforms. No material implications are identified at this stage in relation to the Council's ICT, accommodation, assets or corporate parenting responsibilities, beyond those already reflected in the programme's wider capital and delivery planning.

6.4. Equalities / EIA?

The proposals have been developed with due regard to the Public Sector Equality Duty and are expected to have a positive impact primarily on disabled children and young people with SEND, as well as on families who may experience disadvantage, barriers to access and unequal educational outcomes. The plan is intended to improve inclusion, strengthen access to local provision, reduce avoidable escalation, improve attendance and participation, and support children and young people with SEND to achieve, belong and thrive in their local communities.

The proposals also recognise that some groups may face additional barriers, including children and young people with complex needs, those educated outside school, and families who may be less well connected to services or underrepresented in traditional

engagement routes. There is also potential for differential impact where access to information, support or provision is less consistent across communities or settings.

These risks will be mitigated through co-production, targeted engagement, improved communication and digital access, stronger oversight of pathways and provision, and a continued focus on reducing variation in experience and outcomes across the city. This approach is intended to ensure that the benefits of reform are experienced as fairly and consistently as possible by those groups most affected.

6.5. Implications for (or impact on) climate change and the environment?

The proposals make a modest contribution to climate change objectives by helping more children and young people access provision closer to home, reducing the need for longer journeys.

Opportunities should be identified to improve the energy efficiency and climate resilience of existing buildings as part of any planned refurbishment. As part of this consideration should be given to using the capital programme to leverage additional grant funding to support decarbonisation projects on existing schools. The Council's Strategic Energy Partnership with E.ON will endeavour to support this programme through seeking to introduce more solar PV and Air Source Heat Pumps across Coventry schools

6.6. Implications for partner organisations?

The proposals will have a positive impact on partner organisations by strengthening joint working, shared accountability and clearer routes for engagement across the Council, health, schools, post-16 providers, the Parent Carer Forum and voluntary and community organisations. The plan places particular emphasis on co-production and partnership governance, which should support more consistent collaboration, clearer roles and a stronger local offer for children and young people with SEND. No specific adverse implications are identified at this stage for community safety or local neighbourhoods.

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