Cabinet
28 July 2026
SEND Reform Plan
For Review and Consultation

Cabinet Member:
Cllr C Sutton, Children, Families & Education

Local Councillor(s):

Senior Leadership Team:
P Dempsey - Executive Director, Children's Services

Report author and job title:
G Hayman – SEND Reform Programme Lead (Interim)

Statutory Authority:

Report status: Public (the exemption paragraph is N/A)

1. Executive summary

1.1 Dorset Council, working with partners across education, health and care, has developed and submitted a Local Area SEND Reform Plan (2026–2029) to the Department for Education (DfE) on 19 June 2026, in line with the national requirement for all local areas to set out a clear programme of SEND system reform.

1.2 This report presents the Reform Plan to Cabinet for endorsement. The plan sets the strategic framework for transforming Dorset's SEND system over the next three years.

1.3 Central government have advised that approval of the plan by the DfE will result in a write-off of 90% of Dorset Council's High Needs Block (HNB) deficit, which stood at approximately £150 million at the end of 2025/26. We have been told by the DfE that we will be notified in September 2026 as regards to whether our plan has been approved or not. If it is not approved, we will have a second chance to submit a revised plan in November 2026.

1.4 Alongside this financial reset, the plan sets out a clear pathway to improving outcomes for children and young people with SEND by enabling them to achieve their potential, experience greater inclusion, and access timely, effective education and support within their local communities.

1.5 Dorset enters this reform programme from a position of strength, with outstanding Children's Services, strong co-production with families, and established investment in inclusive provision. However, the system is under significant and growing pressure. Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) have increased by 136% since 2015/16 (compared with 93% nationally), alongside increasing complexity of need and continued reliance on high-cost independent and non-maintained specialist placements. The cost of supporting children and young people placed in independent and non-maintained special schools sits at a projected £34.1 million in 2026/27, representing approximately 25% of total High Needs Block expenditure. These pressures are impacting outcomes, parental confidence and the long-term financial sustainability of the system.

1.6 The SEND Reform Plan has been developed and formally approved through Dorset's established partnership governance arrangements, with sign-off from senior leaders across education, health and care. These include the Local Authority Chief Executive, the Director of Children's Services, the Section 151 Officer (Chief Financial Officer), the Integrated Care Board Chief Executive, and the NHS Place Director for Children and Young People and Maternity, alongside endorsement from the Chair of the Dorset Parent Carer Council and the Chair of the Alliance for Inclusion and Excellence in Education. The plan has been subject to review and challenge by the DfE SEND Advisor, and the DFE Finance Advisor, before submission of the final version, providing additional external assurance on its robustness and alignment with national expectations.

1.7 The Dorset model is built around three core system shifts:

I. Strengthening mainstream inclusion and workforce capability

II. Delivering earlier, locality-based support through the "Dorset Expertise Offer" (Experts at Hand model

III. Reconfiguring specialist provision, including expansion of Inclusion Bases in mainstream schools and repositioning Alternative Provision as a short-term intervention

These system shifts are designed to create a more inclusive and preventative model of support, reducing escalation into statutory processes and high-cost provision, while improving outcomes and experiences for children and young people.

1.8 Key outcomes expected by 2029 include:

- EHCP growth reduced to c.2% annually, equating to around 900 fewer plans than projected without reform
- Increased numbers of children supported without statutory plans
- Reduced reliance on independent and out-of-area placements
- Improved attendance, stability and outcomes for children and young people
- A more sustainable High Needs Block financial position

1.9 These outcomes directly support Dorset's ambition to improve educational attainment, reduce disadvantage, and ensure more children are supported successfully in their local communities.

1.10 The plan also delivers against key Dorset Council Plan priorities, including strengthening the local workforce, improving educational attainment and reducing disadvantage, expanding inclusive and early intervention support, and ensuring sufficient, sustainable local provision.

2. Recommendation(s)

2.1 Cabinet is asked to:

I. Note the content of Dorset's Local Area SEND Reform Plan (2026 2029).

II. Endorse the plan submitted to the Department for Education.

III. Support the proposed programme of reform and associate transformation activity.

IV. Agree that further updates on delivery, performance and financial impact are brought back to Cabinet at key milestones.

3. Reason for the recommendation(s)

3.1 The Reform Plan is a key area of our work and a very important responsibility for the council. Successfully delivering our plan, and approval of the plan by the DfE, will alleviate significant financial risk for the council and deliver improved outcomes for our children and young people, with more of them educated in local schools in their local communities. Without reform, demand and costs are forecast to continue rising and become unsustainable.

3.2: Submission of a local area Reform Plan is a mandatory requirement as part of the Government's drive to reform the SEND system nationally.

3.3 The Reform Plan sets out a clear ambition to move from a reactive, high-cost system to a more inclusive, preventative and locally responsive model. This includes a deliberate shift away from reliance on independent and out-of-area provision towards stronger mainstream inclusion and expanded local capacity.

4. The Report

4.1 Dorset's SEND system demonstrates strong performance and leadership. However, it faces significant structural challenges, including:

- Rapid growth in EHCPs
- Increasing complexity of need
- Variability in mainstream inclusion
- Rural pressures affecting sufficiency and transport
- High reliance on independent placements (£30k–£64k per pupil)

4.2 These pressures are impacting outcomes, parental confidence and financial sustainability.

4.3 The vision is for a coherent 0–25 system in which all children and young people with SEND are healthy, safe and included, achieve meaningful outcomes, and are supported earlier and closer to home through strong mainstream inclusion and integrated multi-agency working. This vision directly supports Dorset Council Plan priorities by enabling stronger local workforce capability, improving outcomes for disadvantaged children, and ensuring support is delivered earlier and closer to home through inclusive mainstream provision.

4.4 As part of this, the number of independent school placements is expected to reduce over time, with projections showing a decrease from 527 placements in 2026 to around 463 by 2029/30 as additional local provision comes online. This reduction is a key indicator of both improved local sufficiency and better outcomes for children and young people, who will increasingly be educated closer to home.

4.5 The plan will be delivered through a phased approach over three years, under strong multi-agency governance led by the Alliance for Inclusion and Excellence in Education. The programme also underpins Dorset's eligibility for significant national financial support linked to High Needs sustainability and system reform

4.6 Key Components of the Reform Model will include:

I. **Stronger Mainstream Inclusion,** including a shared Inclusion Charter and consistent standards, enhanced Ordinarily Available Provision, workforce development and training, and improved transitions between phases. This includes a sustained focus on workforce development and recruitment, recognising the critical role of a skilled and stable education workforce in delivering inclusive practice and improving outcomes.

II. **Earlier, Locality-Based Support,** involving the introduction of “Dorset’s Expertise Offer” (Experts at Hand), multi-disciplinary teams supporting schools without requiring EHCPs, strengthened early identification via Family Hubs, effective use of Valuing SEND and a clear focus on prevention and reducing escalation. The locality model aligns with the Council’s ambition for community-based services, including Family Hubs and early help, ensuring children and families can access support within their local communities.

III. **Reconfigured Continuum of Support,** featuring an expansion of Inclusion Bases across Dorset, Alternative Provision repositioned as a short-term intervention (3-tier model) and increased outreach from specialist services. Expansion of Inclusion Bases contributes to a more sustainable local estate, reducing reliance on distant placements and supporting children to remain within their communities.

4.7 In terms of expected impact, by 2029, the plan will deliver:

- Slower EHCP growth (to c.2% annually)
- Reduced EHC needs assessments over time
- Around 900 fewer EHCPs than projected without reform
- Reduction in independent school placements
- Improved attendance, attainment and placement stability
- Increased parental confidence and reduced disputes

4.8 The programme will be implemented over three years:

Year 1 (2026/27): Establish

- Launch Expertise Offer
- Agree Inclusion Charter

- Begin expansion of Inclusion Bases
- Introduce AP 3-tier model

Year 2: (2027/28) Embed

- Scale early intervention
- Strengthen mainstream capability
- Demonstrate early impact

Year 3: (2028/29) Sustain

- Fully embedded inclusive system
- Measurable improvements in demand and finance

4.9 Governance of the programme will be delivered through:
- the Alliance for Inclusion and Excellence in Education (providing strategic oversight)
- the ECAT Partnership Group (overseeing delivery)
- Dorset Expertise Offer Group (overseeing development of the offer)
- ultimate oversight of the Executive Director Children's Services as Senior Responsible Officer (SRO).

5. Alternative options considered

5.1 The option to maintain the current system with incremental improvements would not have addressed rising demand and cost pressures, nor delivered required national reforms or secured long-term financial sustainability.

6. Legal considerations

6.1 The plan responds to national SEND reform expectations and statutory duties under the Children and Families Act 2014. It reflects partnership responsibilities across education, health and care and will inform future statutory and legislative changes expected through the national reform programme.

7. Financial implications

7.1 The SEND system is currently under significant financial pressure, particularly within the High Needs Block (HNB), where sustained growth in Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs), increasing complexity of need, and reliance on high-cost independent placements have resulted in a substantial accumulated deficit.

7.2 The Department for Education (DfE) has indicated that, subject to approval of Dorset's SEND Reform Plan, 90% of the Local Authority's High Needs

Block deficit will be written off. This represents a significant financial reset and provides a critical opportunity to move towards a sustainable system.

7.3 The financial strategy underpinning the plan is based on a fundamental shift in investment from reactive, high-cost provision to earlier intervention, mainstream inclusion and locally delivered support. Central to this is the implementation of Dorset's Expertise Offer ("Experts at Hand"), supported by an initial investment of approximately £2.2m in 2026/27. The confirmed Year 1 allocation totals £2,212,875, with the majority directed to frontline delivery through multi-agency teams, alongside funding for programme delivery and administrative support.

7.4 This investment enables the recruitment and deployment of a strengthened specialist workforce, including Educational Psychologists, Speech and Language Therapists, Occupational Therapists and Specialist Teachers, providing earlier, locality-based support directly to mainstream settings. The model is designed to intervene earlier, build capacity within schools, and reduce escalation to statutory processes and specialist provision.

7.5 The plan also aligns with national proposals for an Inclusive Mainstream Fund, which will provide direct funding to schools to meet additional needs without reliance on EHCPs. This will strengthen Ordinarily Available Provision, support inclusive practice, and enable more children and young people to be successfully supported in mainstream education.

7.6 Central to the plan is a fundamental shift in how resources are used, moving investment from reactive, high-cost provision to earlier intervention, mainstream inclusion and locally delivered support. This is expected to reduce cost pressures within the High Needs Block over time by slowing EHCP growth, reducing demand for statutory intervention and avoiding escalation into higher-cost school placements.

7.7 Early modelling indicates that reductions in independent placements alone will deliver cost reductions of around £1 million per annum by 2028/29, with further cost avoidance achieved as the model embeds and local capacity increases. This will support a transition from a system where costs are rising rapidly to one that is more stable, sustainable and better able to deliver value for money over the medium term. We are projecting that the growth in spend in the High Needs Block will reduce from £21m in 25/26 to £3m in 28/29

7.8 These financial benefits will be realised alongside improved outcomes, not instead of them. The plan is designed to ensure that children and young people with SEND are supported earlier, more consistently and more inclusively, enabling them to achieve their potential and experience greater stability in education. By strengthening mainstream provision and expanding local specialist capacity, more children will be supported successfully within their communities, improving outcomes while reducing reliance on high-cost placements.

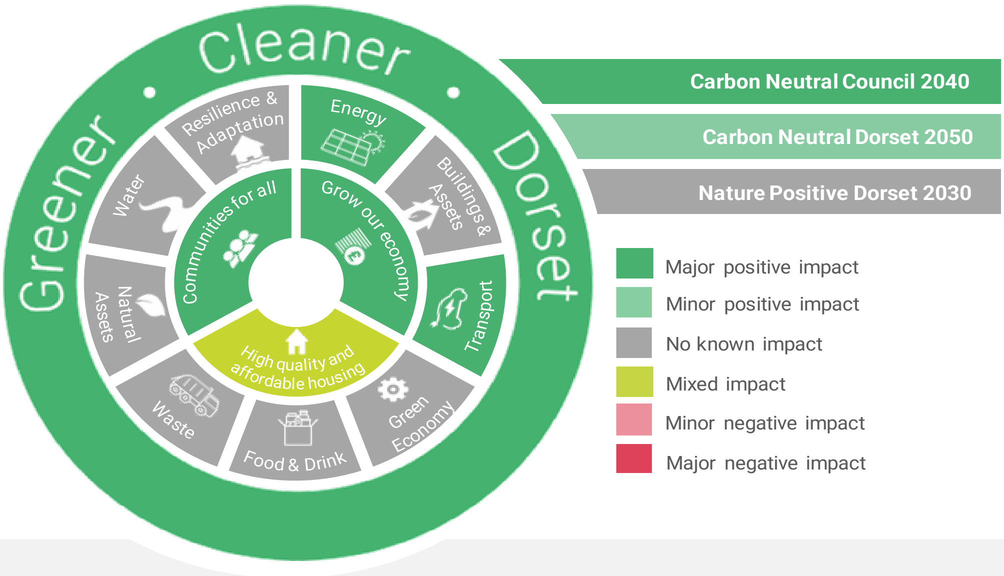
7.9 Over time, the combined impact of these reforms is expected to reduce reliance on high-cost independent placements, slow the growth in EHCPs and associated costs, and shift expenditure towards more sustainable, locally delivered provision. This supports the Council's objective of improving outcomes while delivering better value for money and strengthening long-term financial sustainability.

7.10 Delivery of these financial benefits is dependent on successful implementation of the reform programme, including workforce recruitment, system-wide adoption of inclusive practice, and continued alignment with national policy and funding. While there is a risk that demand may continue to rise in the short term, this is mitigated through phased implementation, strong governance and ongoing monitoring of demand, cost and impact.

8. Natural environment, climate & ecology implications

8.1 The expansion of local provision (e.g. Inclusion Bases) is expected to reduce travel distances for children and families and lower transport-related environmental impact.

SEND Reform Plam



Quantitative Impact on CEE targets (if known)		
	Unit	Number of units (+/-)
2030 - Natural asset extent & condition	Ha	0
2040 - Operational Emissions	CO_2 (tonnes)	

9. Well-being and health implications

9.1. The plan will support earlier identification of need, improve emotional wellbeing through inclusive settings, reduce anxiety linked to school transitions and placement instability and strengthen integrated health support.

10. Other implications

10.1 The reforms align with:

I. Dorset Council Plan priorities

II. Children and Young People’s Plan

III. National SEND reform policy

11. Risk implications

11.1 HAVING CONSIDERED: the risks associated with this decision; the level of risk has been identified as:

- Current Risk: High
- Residual Risk: Medium

11.2 Key risks include

- Loss of parental confidence
- Workforce shortages
- Partner engagement
- Demand outpacing reform
- Delivery complexity

11.3 Mitigation includes strong governance, co-production, workforce planning, and robust monitoring.

12. Equalities

12.1 The plan promotes equality by improving access to support, reducing variation in provision, increasing inclusion within mainstream settings, and supporting disadvantaged and vulnerable groups. This is central to the council's duty to promote equality of opportunity.

13. Appendices

I. Appendix 1: Dorset SEND Reform Plan (2026–2029)
II. Appendix 2: Member webinar presentation (16 June 2026)
III. Appendix 5: Accessible Table of Impacts and Table of Recommendations (below)

14. Background papers

I. Appendix 3: Schools White Paper (2026)
II. Appendix 4: DfE SEND Reform guidance (2026)

15. Report sign-off

15.1 This report has been through the internal report clearance process and has been signed off by the Director for Assurance and Governance (Monitoring Officer), the Director for Resources (Section 151 Officer) and the appropriate Cabinet Member (s)

Appendix 5: Accessible Table of Impacts and Table of Recommendations

ACCESSIBLE TABLE SHOWING IMPACTS

Natural Environment, Climate & Ecology Strategy Commitments	**Impact**
Energy	major positive impact
Buildings & Assets	No known impact
Transport	major positive impact
Green Economy	No known impact
Food & Drink	No known impact
Waste	No known impact
Natural Assets & Ecology	No known impact
Water	No known impact
Resilience and Adaptation	No known impact

Corporate Plan Aims	**Impact**
Grow our economy	strongly supports it
High-quality and affordable housing	neutral
Communities for all	strongly supports it

TABLE OF RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations	**Responses -will this be incorporated into your proposal? How? And if not, why not?**
Energy	
No recommendations found for this category	
Buildings & Assets	
No recommendations found for this category	
Transport	
No recommendations found for this category	
Green Economy	
No recommendations found for this category	
Food & Drink	
No recommendations found for this category	
Waste	
No recommendations found for this category	

Natural Assets & Ecology	
No recommendations found for this category	
Water	
No recommendations found for this category	
Resilience & Adaptation	
No recommendations found for this category	