

Cabinet

28 July 2026

Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP)

Working Group – Final Report and

Recommendations to Cabinet

For Decision

Cabinet Member:

Cllr C Sutton, Children, Families and Education

Senior Leadership Team:

P Dempsey - Executive Director, Children's Services

Report author and job title:

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Report status: Public

1 Executive summary

- 1.1 The People and Health Scrutiny Committee undertook an inquiry into Education, Health and Care (EHC) Assessment and Planning, culminating in a presentation of the Committee's findings in a report discussed at the Scrutiny Committee meeting on 16th April 2026.
- 1.2 The Children's Services Leadership Team were able to respond verbally to the report at the Scrutiny Committee meeting on 16th April and have since considered the recommendations made.
- 1.3 It is recommended that Cabinet accept all the recommendations in full, except for recommendation 2 in relation to the specific target that is set for the issuing of EHC Plans within 20 weeks – see 4.2 below. Children's Services and partners were already practicing in line with most of the recommendations and have since implemented additional measures to address them further.
- 1.4 One of the key avenues of investigation in the inquiry was the timeliness of drafting of EHC Plans. It is worth noting that performance improved considerably through the latter part of the inquiry period, from 22% of plans being issued within 20 weeks in September 2025 to 58% for quarter 1 in 2026/27. The performance in September 2025 was impacted by a high volume of work at a time when the service was facing the challenges of implementing a new case management system. The national average performance on this measure is 46% of EHC Plans being issued within 20 weeks.

- 1.5 It is also of note that the national system for meeting the needs of children and young people with SEND has been widely accepted as failing. It is financially unsustainable, has not improved outcomes for children, and results in far too many children being subject to statutory EHC Plans, and far too many children being educated in special schools which are high cost and often at a distance from a child's home, instead of being educated in well supported mainstream schools within or close to their communities. This is the context we have been working in. The Schools White Paper published in February 2026 introduced a national SEND Reform plan designed to address these national issues and transform the SEND system.
- 1.6 Elsewhere on the agenda for this Cabinet meeting is a report advising that the Local Area Partnership in Dorset submitted our local SEND Reform Plan on 19th June in line with the national requirement for all local areas to do so. Much of the work set out in our Reform Plan will support us with addressing the recommendations of the Scrutiny Committee below.

2 Recommendation(s)

- 2.1 To agree the responses to the recommendations from the People and Health Scrutiny Committee.

3 Reason for the recommendation(s)

- 3.1 The Scrutiny Committee recommendations align with actions the service has already taken or understand we do need to take in order to improve how children and families experience our service, and we understand and accept that the Scrutiny Committee has a role in holding us to account for our performance in this area.

4 The report

The following recommendations are those made by the Scrutiny Committee:

- 4.1 **Recommendation 1** – Cabinet thanks the People and Health Scrutiny Committee for the work of their inquiry into Education, Health and Care (EHC) Assessment and Planning.

Cabinet Response:

Cabinet supports this recommendation

- 4.2 **Recommendation 2** - EHCP Statutory Timeliness

Dorset Council should implement a clear recovery plan to ensure that an absolute minimum 75% (current target) of Education, Health and Care Plans are issued within the statutory 20-week timeframe, but with regard

to compliance with the statutory duty of all plans being delivered within the set timescales with actions to achieve full compliance.

The plan should include:

- workforce capacity requirements
- performance monitoring arrangements
- monthly reporting to senior leadership

Progress updates should be reported to the People and Health Scrutiny Committee.

Context and progress to date:

The EHCP growth rate since 2015/16 is 136% in Dorset, compared to 93% nationally and 104% across the South West. Dorset was below the national average in 2015/16 and is now above it.

The number of EHCPs was 4,719 EHCPs in 2025 in Dorset, projected to rise to 5,035 in 2026, an overall growth rate of 6% over two years. The latest figure is 5003.

Due to the projected increase additional capacity was considered in summer 2025 alongside changes to the Dorset Thrive model that included:

- Bringing together Family Help and Child Protection teams
- Introducing Lead Child Protection Practitioner role withing the Multi-Agency Child Protection Team
- Reviewing our EHCP, school improvement and quality assurance offer to better meet the needs of schools and children.

Additional temporary capacity within the team, has supported an increase in the number of EHCPs issued within the statutory deadline in the interim period before the changes above in the final bullet point are implemented. At the time of the inquiry period 22% of plans were being issued within 20 weeks (September 2025). This has increased to 58% of plans issued within 20 weeks for quarter 1 in 2026/27. The national average performance on this measure is 46% of EHCPs being issued within 20 weeks.

Cabinet Response:

Cabinet accepts the recommendation for the service to implement a plan that ensures improving and consistent performance but does not agree that the 75% target is realistic to achieve consistently at this stage. We are mindful that the national average performance on this indicator is 46%, the southwest average is 34%, and the statistical neighbour performance is 28%. The latest performance in Dorset for quarter 1 in 2026/27 was 58%. Given the above we think it appropriate to set an initial target of 65% on this measure, significantly higher than those comparator group averages, with a stretch target of 75% being applied from January 2027, once the

service developments described in this report have been implemented and embedded.

Cabinet asks and expects Children's Services Senior Leadership Team to implement this revised recommendation.

4.3 **Recommendation 3** - Caseload Management and Workforce Capacity

Dorset Council should review the caseload levels of SEND Provision Leads to ensure workloads are manageable and consistent with good practice.

The Council should:

- establish appropriate caseload benchmarks
- ensure sufficient staffing levels to meet statutory duties
- monitor workforce capacity through quarterly reporting.

A summary of actions taken should be presented to the People and Health Scrutiny Committee.

Context and progress to date:

As with all of our work, Children's Services were already monitoring caseloads and staffing capacity.

From 1st Sept 26, following planning and consultation in summer and autumn 2025, there will be a dedicated team, based alongside the Family Support and Advice Line team, which will solely focus on new assessment requests and the 6- to 20-week statutory deadlines. This will bring greater consistency to decision making during the assessment process, but it will take time to embed and be fully operational. We will continue with interim additional capacity until the new team is embedded.

We are also working to introduce a new AI solution which will have the ability to support the drafting of new plans, bringing a considerable time saving element. We will be piloting this with the new assessment team in the autumn of 2026.

Cabinet Response:

Cabinet accepts this recommendation and asks and expects Children's Services Senior Leadership Team to implement it.

4.4 **Recommendation 4** - Communication with Families

Dorset Council should develop and implement a clear communication standard for families involved in the EHCP process.

This protocol should include:

- clear points of contact for each case
- defined response times for communications

- proactive updates to families during the EHCP process
- guidance for practitioners on maintaining effective communication with parents and carers.

The Council should report back to the People and Health Scrutiny Committee on how this protocol is being implemented and monitored.

Context and progress to date:

We continue to use the Dorset Council published customer service promise [Our customer promise - Dorset Council](#) as our standard for service delivery.

We aim to respond to communications (telephone/emails) within 5 working days, consistent with Dorset Council expectations. We accept that workload and capacity issues have meant we fell short of these standards in a small number of cases. Recruitment activity has taken place to successfully fill vacancies alongside the work to implement changes following a staff consultation and subsequent restructure within some teams.

There is work underway in Children's Services to review Practice Standards, which will include expectations around clear and timely communications with parents and carers. This will be socialised with the SEND teams from autumn 2026 in the light of the changes we are making.

We continue to hold the well established 'Let's Talk SEND' events for parents and carers that provide an opportunity for officers to share information with parents and carers and answer individual questions.

Cabinet Response:

Cabinet accepts this recommendation and asks and expects Children's Services Senior Leadership Team to implement it.

4.5 Recommendation 5 - Digital Systems and Case Management

Dorset Council should review the effectiveness of its current digital case management systems used for EHCP administration to ensure they support:

- efficient case management
- improved communication with families
- accurate performance monitoring.

The review should identify any improvements required to digital systems and provide a clear implementation plan where necessary.

Context and progress to date:

The new Case Management System was introduced to support EHCP administration. The challenges that have arisen were unpredictable. Officers in our Information and Communication and Technology, Performance and Learning and Belonging teams have worked tirelessly to ensure accuracy of data by checking and inputting data manually during the interim period. This work has improved the accuracy of the data and work with the Case Management System provider continues to ensure that they are delivering the expected service we require.

Cabinet Response:

Cabinet accepts this recommendation and asks and expects Children's Services Senior Leadership Team to implement it.

4.6 Recommendation 6 - Annual Reviews of EHCPs

Dorset Council should ensure that annual reviews of Education, Health and Care Plans are completed in accordance with statutory requirements.

The Council should

- monitor the timeliness of annual reviews
- ensure that relevant partners are invited and able to participate
- establish clear processes to ensure review outcomes are recorded and acted upon.

Performance data relating to annual reviews should be reported to the People and Health Scrutiny Committee on a regular basis.

Context and progress to date:

The current position shows an improving trend in the spring term 2026 with 69% of annual reviews completed on time.

When the dedicated team working on the assessment requests and the 6- to 20-week statutory deadlines (see Recommendation 2) is fully operational this will remove this workload from locality-based teams therefore releasing capacity to focus on annual reviews.

We expect the AI solution that we are piloting in autumn 2026 will have the ability to support the drafting of new plans and capture amendments. This will have a positive impact on annual review timeliness.

Cabinet Response:

Cabinet accepts this recommendation and asks and expects Children's Services Senior Leadership Team to implement it.

4.7 Recommendation 7 - Health Partner Participation

Dorset Council should work with the NHS Integrated Care Board to improve the involvement of health partners in the EHCP process.

This should include:

- ensuring appropriate health input into EHCP assessments
- improving attendance or contribution to annual reviews
- establishing clear joint working protocols between education and health services.

The Council and Health Partners should jointly report to the People and Health Scrutiny Committee on progress made.

Context and progress to date:

Ofsted recognised during the Area SEND inspection of Dorset Local Area Partnership in 2024 that, *'the established culture of collaborative working across the partnership is a real strength'*.

Officers continue to work closely with NHS Dorset colleagues to ensure good quality and timely advice is provided throughout the EHCP process. Since the inquiry the request for advice form has been updated, in co-production with NHS Dorset and parents/carers.

The SEND Reform plan was co-produced with partners including health who contributed significantly to its development and are fully committed to the implementation of the plan.

Cabinet Response:

Cabinet accepts this recommendation and asks and expects Children's Services Senior Leadership Team to implement it.

Cabinet would add the qualification that the Council and Children's Services cannot guarantee and be responsible for the actions of the ICB and Health partners.

4.8 Recommendation 8 - Reducing Tribunal and Complaint Levels

Dorset Council should analyse the causes of SEND tribunal cases and formal complaints, in order to identify opportunities to resolve issues earlier and reduce escalation.

This should include:

- reviewing patterns of tribunal outcomes
- identifying recurring issues raised by families
- improving early resolution processes.

Findings and proposed actions should be shared with the People and Health Scrutiny Committee.

Context and progress to date:

The most recent available data shows that Dorset's appeal rate is lower than the national average.

The current SEND system enables parents/carers to appeal any decision that the Local Authority takes and to date there are no patterns that we have been able to establish related to tribunals.

The planned changes to our staffing arrangements will support workload for officers in our Locality Teams and therefore support better communications with families (more time to work relationally). We believe this will have a positive impact on parental confidence and satisfaction. Monitoring will continue to identify any emerging themes. A key aim of our SEND Reform Plan is to increase support to children and parents, to increase the options parents have for their children's schooling, and to increase parental confidence in the system, so that parents do not feel the need to use the tribunal process.

Cabinet Response:

Cabinet accepts this recommendation and asks and expects Children's Services Senior Leadership Team to implement it.

4.9 Recommendation 9 - Engagement with Children and Young People

Future SEND service reviews and scrutiny work should include direct engagement with children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities.

Dorset Council should consider how the voices of children and young people can be more consistently included in service design and evaluation.

Context and progress to date:

Dorset has a dedicated Youth Voice team that continues to work with our children and young people to ensure they have the right to be heard. Officers use the Lundy Model of Participation which is a rights-based framework that reflects the United Nation Convention on Rights of the Child.

The team supported members of the Youth Council in their presentation to full Council on 15 May 2025, about the United Nations Convention of Rights of the Child and what it means to children and young people in Dorset. Following the presentation Councillors unanimously voted to

support a motion making Dorset Council a rights respecting council reflecting the convention. Dorset Council was the first unitary authority in the country to make this commitment to children and young people.

Cabinet Response:

Cabinet accepts this recommendation and asks and expects Children's Services Senior Leadership Team to implement it.

Cabinet would expect this recommendation to be implemented with the advice and support of our Youth Voice Team.

The Direct engagement with children and young people who have SEND, requires additional consideration and time, to enable them to meaningfully participate, and children and young people are always given choice on whether they wish to take part.

To fully uphold article 12 of the UNCRC, the Youth Voice team are guided by best practice illustrated in the Lundy Model.

4.10 Recommendation 10 - Ongoing Scrutiny Oversight

The People and Health Scrutiny Committee should receive a formal progress report outlining:

- actions taken in response to each recommendation
- progress made
- any further steps required

Cabinet Response:

Cabinet accepts this recommendation and asks and expects Children's Services Senior Leadership Team to implement it.

Alternative options considered

No alternative options considered

Legal considerations

No legal implications of this report

Financial implications

Financial resources within Children's Services budget have been reallocated to fund additional staff capacity to support our SEND work.

Natural environment, climate and ecology implications

Well-being and health implications

Timely support for children with special educational needs and disabilities will promote their health and wellbeing

Other implications

Risk implications

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

Appendices

Appendix 1 - People & Health Scrutiny Committee – Provision of EHCP Support Inquiry Final report.

Appendix 2 – Inquiry Day Timetable and Attendance List