

Report subject	SEND Reform Plan
Meeting date	30 September 2026
Status	Public Report (with Exempt Appendix)
Executive summary	Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole Council, working with NHS Dorset and wider local area partners, submitted its Local SEND Reform Plan to the Department for Education in June 2026. The Plan sets out a three-year roadmap to improve outcomes for children and young people with SEND, strengthen inclusive mainstream provision, improve family confidence and support the long-term sustainability of the High Needs Block. The Plan is underpinned by co-production with children, young people, parents, carers and practitioners, a local partnership maturity assessment, an Inclusive Place Sufficiency Strategy, an Experts at Hand partnership model and a clear Theory of Change. It responds to increasing demand, including sustained growth in Education, Health and Care Plans, whilst building on BCP's strengths and improving partnership arrangements. A key component of delivery is the introduction of a Targeted Cluster Funding Model, funded through £1.5m per annum from the High Needs Block, to support earlier intervention, inclusion and prevention activity. The Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee considered the proposed approach at their meeting on 14 September 2026.
Recommendations	It is RECOMMENDED that Cabinet: (a) Notes the BCP Local SEND Reform Plan and supporting appendices submitted to the Department for Education in June 2026; (b) Endorses the strategic direction set out within the Plan, including: i. strengthening inclusive mainstream provision; ii. implementation of the Experts at Hand model;

	iii. delivery of the Inclusive Place Sufficiency Strategy and associated capital programme; and iv. continued development of co-production and partnership working. (c) Supports the implementation of the Targeted Cluster Funding Model, including the proposed allocation of £1.5m per annum from the High Needs Block to support earlier intervention, inclusion and prevention activity across locality clusters; and (d) approves the continued delivery of the SEND Reform Plan and its associated investment priorities as part of BCP's wider programme to improve outcomes for children and young people and support long-term High Needs Block sustainability.
Reason for recommendations	The SEND Reform Plan provides a coherent three-year roadmap to improve outcomes for children and young people with SEND through earlier intervention, stronger inclusion, improved partnership working and increased local capacity. The recommendations support implementation of the Plan and the key delivery mechanisms required to achieve its objectives, whilst responding to increasing demand and financial pressures within the SEND system.
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Corporate Director	Juliette Blake, Interim Corporate Director of Children's Services
Report Authors	Lisa Linscott, Director of Education and Skills
Wards	Council-wide
Classification	Decision

Background

1. The Department for Education's SEND and Alternative Provision reforms require local area partnerships to develop and submit Local SEND Reform Plans setting out how they will strengthen inclusion, improve outcomes and deliver a more sustainable system for children and young people with SEND.
2. BCP Council, NHS Dorset and partner organisations submitted the BCP Local SEND Reform Plan in June 2026 following an extensive programme of engagement and co-production with children and young people, parents and carers, schools, colleges, health services and practitioners. The Plan is founded on the shared local ambition: "We belong. We're listened to. We can thrive."

3. The Reform Plan builds on positive progress already achieved locally, including strengthened partnership arrangements, improving lived experience for children and families, expanded inclusion activity and the development of a shared improvement framework. The Plan also recognises that children, young people and families continue to experience variability in outcomes and support.
4. A key challenge for BCP, as for many local authorities nationally, is the significant and sustained increase in demand for SEND support. The local area has experienced continued growth in Education, Health and Care Plans, alongside increasing demand for specialist placements and alternative provision. These trends place increasing pressure on the High Needs Block and on the wider SEND system.
5. The Reform Plan therefore seeks to move the system towards one that identifies and responds to need earlier, supports more children successfully within mainstream settings, strengthens workforce confidence and improves value for money through preventative approaches.

Purpose of this Report

6. This report provides an overview of the BCP Local SEND Reform Plan and its key delivery mechanisms.
7. The report is deliberately framed as a strategic update on BCP's SEND reform programme rather than solely as a report on the submission of a Department for Education plan. The central issue for members is how BCP intends to improve outcomes, strengthen inclusion and support the long-term sustainability of the High Needs Block.

Key components of the Reform Programme - Experts at Hand

8. A central element of the Reform Plan is the development of the BCP Experts at Hand model. This locality-based, multi-agency approach will provide schools and settings with access to specialist expertise, coaching, training and consultation. The model is intended to strengthen inclusive practice, support earlier intervention and build capacity within settings rather than create dependency on specialist services. Delivery of the first phase of the model is supported by £2,487,876 of Department for Education SEND Reform funding received for 2026/27.
9. The Experts at Hand model will include clear access arrangements, locality-based clusters, a consistent point of contact for settings and multi-agency input across education, health and wider services. It is a core mechanism for shifting the system from a referral-led model towards proactive, preventative and capacity-building support.
10. Whilst Experts at Hand provides access to specialist expertise, advice, coaching and workforce development, it does not in itself provide flexible funding for earlier intervention. The proposed Targeted Cluster Funding Model is therefore a complementary component of the reform programme. Together, the two approaches are intended to strengthen both the capacity and capability of mainstream settings to meet need earlier and more effectively, reducing reliance on statutory and specialist interventions where appropriate.

Inclusive Place Sufficiency Strategy

11. The Reform Plan is supported by BCP's Inclusive Place Sufficiency Strategy, which introduces a whole-system approach to planning education, SEND and alternative provision places from early years through to adulthood. The strategy is designed to ensure that children and young people can access the right support, in the right place and as close to home as possible.
12. The supporting three-tier capital programme prioritises:
 - inclusion as the default through mainstream adaptation;
 - expansion of targeted inclusion bases in mainstream settings; and
 - specialist provision where needs cannot appropriately be met through mainstream provision or targeted bases.
13. This approach supports the wider reform ambition by strengthening local pathways, reducing reliance on out-of-area and high-cost provision where possible, and aligning place planning with inclusion and financial sustainability.

Co-production and partnership working

14. The Reform Plan has been developed through extensive co-production activity involving children and young people, families and practitioners. Children and young people, parents and carers, schools, colleges, health, social care, early help, commissioning and wider partners have helped shape the vision, priorities and delivery model.
15. This approach will continue through implementation so that delivery remains responsive to local need, lived experience and practitioner insight. The Plan also builds on the Local Partnership Maturity Assessment, which was completed through a robust and honest partnership process and signed off through local SEND and AP partnership governance.

Targeted Cluster Funding Model

16. A key priority for implementation is the introduction of a Targeted Cluster Funding Model. Whilst the Experts at Hand model provides access to specialist expertise and support, the Targeted Funding Model provides schools and locality partnerships with flexible resources to respond to identified needs and implement early intervention strategies. Together they form a core part of BCP's approach to strengthening inclusion and preventing escalation.
17. This is a practical delivery mechanism for moving support earlier in a child's journey and enabling schools and partners to respond flexibly to emerging needs before statutory processes are required.
18. The model proposes allocating £1.5m per annum from the High Needs Block through locality-based school clusters, aligned with the Experts at Hand model and wider SEND reform activity. The funding would support earlier intervention, inclusive practice, prevention activity and targeted support within mainstream settings.
19. The approach is designed to:
 - improve outcomes for children and young people;
 - strengthen inclusive practice within settings;

- support earlier intervention and prevention;
 - reduce escalation to statutory and specialist support where appropriate; and
 - contribute to the longer-term sustainability of the High Needs Block.
20. The model should be understood as an invest-to-save and invest-to-improve approach. It is not possible at this stage to quantify future financial savings arising from the model. The report therefore does not claim a specific savings value. The evidence base and local Theory of Change support the view that earlier intervention and strengthened inclusion should reduce escalation pressures over time and support a more sustainable system.

Governance and performance

21. Delivery of the Reform Plan will be overseen through established partnership governance arrangements, supported by performance reporting and monitoring of demand, outcomes, family experience, workforce development and financial sustainability. The High Needs Block Board provides strategic oversight of SEND funding, cost drivers, cost containment measures, forecasting and deficit recovery activity.
22. Implementation will require close alignment between the SEND and AP partnership, education sufficiency governance, health partners, schools, settings, finance leads and relevant Council boards. Regular reporting will be required to ensure that delivery remains on track and that risks are escalated and addressed promptly.

Options Appraisal

Option	Description	Advantages
1	Continue with existing arrangements.	Avoids implementation activity and transition requirements.
2	Implement the SEND Reform Plan without the Targeted Cluster Funding Model.	Allows delivery of core reform activity and associated governance arrangements.
3	Implement the SEND Reform Plan including the Targeted Cluster Funding Model.	Aligns with the submitted Reform Plan; supports earlier intervention and inclusion; strengthens local capacity and partnership working; contributes to longer-term High Needs Block sustainability; provides a coherent whole-system approach to reform.

Summary of financial implications

23. The SEND Reform Plan includes a programme of reform activity funded through a combination of existing resources, High Needs Block funding, national reform

funding (£2,487,876 received from the DfE for year one delivery of the Experts at Hand model, with clear associated guidance as to how the funds can be used), and partner investment. A key proposal within the report is the introduction of the Targeted Cluster Funding Model, requiring an allocation of £1.5m per annum from the High Needs Block.

24. The Plan seeks to increase investment in earlier intervention, inclusion and local capacity whilst contributing to longer-term financial sustainability through reduced escalation and improved value for money. At this stage, quantified financial savings have not been identified for the Targeted Cluster Funding Model. Benefits will therefore need to be monitored through demand, outcomes, financial and value for money measures over time.
25. Detailed financial modelling, demand forecasts, projected unit costs, workforce assumptions and other financial planning information are contained within **Appendix 6, which is exempt from publication for the reasons set out in the appendices section of this report.**

Summary of legal implications

26. BCP Council's responsibilities for children and young people with SEND arise principally from the Children and Families Act 2014, the Education Act 1996 and associated statutory guidance, including the SEND Code of Practice. The Reform Plan supports the Council and local area partnership in meeting responsibilities to identify needs, secure appropriate support and keep education and training provision for children and young people with SEND under review.
27. Appendix 6 is recommended for exemption from publication under Schedule 12A, Part 1, Paragraph 3 of the Local Government Act 1972, as amended, as it contains information relating to the financial and business affairs of the Council and other organisations. Legal Services should review and confirm the final legal wording before publication of the agenda papers.
28. Failure to make sufficient progress in delivering the Reform Plan could increase legal and reputational risk for the Council, particularly where children and young people experience delay in assessment, provision or access to suitable education. In such circumstances, families may seek to resolve concerns through complaints, disagreement resolution, mediation, SEND Tribunal routes, the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman and, in some cases, judicial review. Delivery of the Reform Plan, with effective governance and monitoring, is therefore an important mitigation against escalation of disputes and legal challenge.

Summary of human resources implications

29. Implementation of the SEND Reform Plan will require workforce development, partnership working and new ways of working across education, health and care services. The Experts at Hand model includes multidisciplinary working, use of specialist expertise, secondments and development of inclusion leadership capacity across clusters.
30. The Plan is expected to create staff development and training requirements as inclusive practice, early intervention and locality-based working are strengthened. Any formal workforce changes, secondment arrangements or role changes will

need to be managed through appropriate HR processes and engagement with affected staff and partners.

Summary of sustainability impact

31. The SEND Reform Plan supports sustainability by promoting provision closer to home, reducing unnecessary travel where local suitable provision can be developed, strengthening local community provision and aligning investment with long-term sufficiency planning. The Inclusive Place Sufficiency Strategy and Inclusive Design Charter promote future-ready approaches to educational place planning, including adaptable environments, accessibility and environmental responsibility.

Summary of public health implications

32. The Plan aims to improve educational participation, belonging, mental wellbeing and life chances for children and young people with SEND through earlier identification, earlier support and improved access to services. It strengthens the connection between education, health and care through a multi-agency delivery model and supports a preventative approach to need, escalation and crisis response.

Summary of equality implications

33. The report relates directly to improving outcomes, inclusion and participation for children and young people with SEND. SEND is closely linked to duties under equalities legislation, including the need to remove barriers, make reasonable adjustments and promote equitable access to education and support.
34. The Reform Plan has been developed through co-production with children, young people, parent carers, schools, practitioners and partners. An Equality Impact Assessment or equality screening should be completed or confirmed as part of the Cabinet report process, with any additional actions reflected in the implementation plan.

Summary of risk assessment

35. Key risks include:
 - Demand for SEND support continuing to exceed projections
 - Workforce recruitment and retention challenges affecting delivery pace
 - Delays in implementation of reform programmes or capital schemes
 - Failure to achieve intended changes to inclusion, confidence and system behaviours
 - Continued financial pressures within the High Needs Block
 - Increased complaints, dispute resolution activity, Ombudsman referrals, Tribunal escalation or legal challenge if children, young people and families do not experience timely improvements in assessment, provision, inclusion and access to suitable education.

- National policy or funding changes affecting the assumptions underpinning the Plan
 - Insufficient evidence of impact if monitoring arrangements are not sufficiently robust
36. Mitigating actions include strong partnership governance, High Needs Block oversight, phased implementation, co-production, regular performance reporting, finance monitoring and annual review of the Targeted Cluster Funding Model to assess impact, value for money and any required adjustments.

Background papers

37. The following documents have been used to a material extent in drafting this report:
- BCP Local SEND Reform Plan June 2026.
 - BCP Local Partnership Maturity Assessment.
 - Department for Education SEND Reform documentation and guidance (published works).

Appendices

- Appendix 1 - Core Requirements Tracker.
- Appendix 2 - Theory of Change.
- Appendix 3 - Inclusive Place Sufficiency Strategy 2026-2036.
- Appendix 3a - Inclusive Design Charter.
- Appendix 3b - Inclusive Place Sufficiency Presentation.
- Appendix 4 - Experts at Hand Partnership Model.
- Appendix 5 - Co-production Approach.
- **Appendix 6 (Exempt) - BCP Local SEND Reform Plan Data Return 2026.**
- Appendix 7 – BCP SEND Reform Plan June 2026
- Appendix 8 – BCP Local Partnership Maturity Assessment

Appendix 6 is exempt from publication pursuant to Schedule 12A, Part 1, Paragraph 3 of the Local Government Act 1972, as amended, as it contains information relating to the financial and business affairs of the Council and other organisations.

The appendix contains financial modelling, demand forecasts, workforce projections, projected costs of specialist provision, alternative provision and other commissioned services, together with assumptions used for Department for Education reform monitoring and financial planning purposes. Publication of this information could prejudice the Council's ability to manage future commissioning, placement and service negotiations and could adversely affect the financial and business affairs of both the authority and external providers.