Public Report
Cabinet

Committee Name and Date of Committee Meeting
Cabinet – 16 November 2026

Report Title
Rotherham SEND Reform Plan

Is this a Key Decision and has it been included on the Forward Plan?
Yes

Executive Director Approving Submission of the Report
Nicola Curley, Executive Director of Children and Young People's Services

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Ward(s) Affected
Borough-Wide

Report Summary

This report asks Cabinet to approve Rotherham's Local Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) Reform Plan 2026–2029 and the Council's part in delivering it with health services, education settings, families, and other partners. The aim is simple: children and young people with SEND should get the right help earlier, be supported to learn and take part in their local community where this meets their needs and be better prepared for adult life.

Demand for support is growing quickly. Requests for Education, Health and Care needs assessments rose from 1,114 in 2024 to 1,556 in 2025, and the number of Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) rose from 3,623 to 4,062. Current forecasts suggest there could be 5,564 EHCPs by 2029. If support does not change, this will put more pressure on children and families, schools, specialist places, and the funding available for high needs.

The Plan changes the focus from responding when needs have become more serious to providing help earlier. Schools and settings will have earlier access to specialist education and health advice through Experts at Hand. The Council will also increase inclusion-base places, improve accessibility, and make the steps for getting extra help clearer and more consistent.

Children and families should notice a practical difference: help sooner, better access to therapy and specialist advice, better attendance and participation, and more

opportunities for children to be supported successfully in local schools where this is right for them. The Plan, by 2029, aims to support 2,433 children with EHCPs in mainstream settings, up from 1,417, and increase inclusion-base places from 120 to 258. The aim is to keep special-school places broadly stable and reduce independent placements from 116 to 100. This is in addition to those placed in alternative provision, Post-16 settings and out of authority. Children and parents will be asked whether support is improving their experience. There is also a strong financial reason for change. Without reform, spending from the High Needs Block is forecast to reach £80.5m in 2028/29 and £85.5m in 2030/31. If the reforms work as planned, the model shows spending of £78m and £78.1m in those years. These are forecasts, not guaranteed savings. They depend on children receiving effective help earlier, more mainstream schools being able to meet needs, and enough suitable local places being available. During this period there is also an expected increase in funding to schools and the Council to support inclusion.

Recommendations

That Cabinet:

1. Approve the Rotherham Local SEND Reform Plan 2026–2029 and the Council's role in its delivery.

2. Endorse the strategic direction of travel towards earlier identification and intervention, stronger mainstream inclusion, increased local provision and a mature multi-agency Experts at Hand model.

3. Note the first-year delivery plan and associated performance, governance and risk-management arrangements set out within the Local SEND Reform Plan.

4. Note the financial strategy underpinning reform, including the 2026/27 Schools Block to High Needs Block transfer of 0.5%, equivalent to £1.3m, and the alignment of high-needs capital investment to mainstream accessibility, inclusion bases, specialist provision, and alternative provision.

List of Appendices Included

Appendix 1 The Local SEND Reform Plan
Appendix 2 Glossary of Terms
Appendix 3 Part A – Initial Equality Screening Assessment
Appendix 4 Part B – Equality Analysis Form
Appendix 5 Climate Impact Assessment

Background Papers
The Schools White Paper: Every Child Achieving and Thriving
SEND reform consultation documentation
Schools Operational Guide 2026–2027
Local Partnership Maturity Assessment

Consideration by any other Council Committee, Scrutiny or Advisory Panel
No

Council Approval Required
No

Exempt from the Press and Public
No

Rotherham SEND Reform Plan

1. Background

1.1 The Department for Education (DfE) asked every council to produce a local SEND reform plan by 19 June 2026, following the Schools White Paper, Every Child Achieving and Thriving. Rotherham submitted its Plan and was told on 2 October 2026 that it had been approved.

1.2 Partners in Rotherham are ambitious for children and young people with SEND and intend to create a consistently inclusive 0–25 system in which needs are identified early, supported effectively, and met locally wherever possible. The Reform Plan has been shaped by the March 2026 Local Partnership Maturity Assessment and January 2026 SEND Self-Evaluation Framework, which identify increasingly mature partnership governance, co-production, joint commissioning and data capability, alongside further work required in frontline practice, mainstream inclusion, and workforce confidence.

1.3 The Reform Plan provides the partnership framework for turning that ambition into practice. This reform direction will also inform the Council's wider education strategy and its continuing relationship with all schools and settings (nursery schools, private, voluntary, and independent childcare providers, alternative provisions, and colleges).

1.4 The need for change is clear. Requests for an Education, Health and Care needs assessment rose from 1,114 in 2024 to 1,556 in 2025. EHCPs rose from 3,623 to 4,062 and are forecast to reach 5,564 by 2029. There are particular pressures linked to autism and speech, language, and communication needs. Waiting times for speech and language and occupational therapy and absence from education also remain challenges for children with SEND.

1.5 National and local reform is moving towards earlier help, stronger inclusion, and shared responsibility across services. Partners in Rotherham will bring specialist advice into schools and settings earlier, help mainstream settings build their skills and confidence, improve checks on quality, and make better use of local places and capital investment. The aim is to improve outcomes for children and families while making the SEND system more sustainable through supporting schools to meet the special educational needs of children within their existing resources.

1.6 The local area SEND Reform Plan deploys resources and structure to address the challenges within the existing national SEND system and begin to build a local SEND system that focuses on delivering improved outcomes for children, young people, and their families. The local area SEND reform plan is also a key plank in the development of a wider Rotherham education strategy that aims to improve the educational and life outcomes for all children.

2. Key Issues

2.1 The ambition is that children and young people get the right help at the right time. The Plan aims to identify needs earlier, provide support more consistently

and give children more opportunity to learn, belong and succeed in their local communities.

2.2 There is also a financial pressure. Without reform, High Needs Block spending is forecast to reach £80.5m in 2028/29 and £85.5m in 2030/31. With successful reform, the forecasts are £78m and £78.1m. The priority is better and earlier support for children. Reduced demand and lower future costs are expected to follow if the new approach, moving resources into schools, works.

2.3 The Plan aims to support more children successfully in mainstream education where this is appropriate for their needs. By 2029, children with EHCPs supported in mainstream settings are planned to rise from 1,417 to 2,433, and inclusion base places from 120 to 258. Special school placements are expected to remain broadly stable, moving from 1,221 to 1,246, while independent placements are planned to reduce from 116 to 100. This will be in addition to children placed in alternative provision, Post-16 placements and out-of-borough maintained or academy special schools.

2.4 Experts at Hand will be the main way of bringing specialist advice closer to children, families, and education settings. Instead of waiting until a child's needs have increased before seeking specialist help, schools and settings will be able to get earlier advice from a team including Educational Psychology, Specialist Teaching, Speech and Language Therapy and Occupational Therapy. This should help staff in schools and settings understand needs, adapt support, and decide what further help is required. The aim is for all settings to have access to Experts at Hand by 2028/29 and the Plan includes actions to recruit and retain the necessary workforce.

2.5 The wider reform will make support clearer and more consistent. This includes better information for families, staff development, clearer routes to support and shared guidance on different levels of need. Progress will be judged by whether children and families say they are getting earlier, more consistent, and more effective help.

2.6 In practice, the reform means moving help closer to the child and providing it sooner. Mainstream settings will get more consistent access to specialist advice through Experts at Hand, while more inclusion base places and accessibility improvements will help more children stay successfully in local provision where this is right for them. Special schools and specialist provision will continue to be essential for children whose needs require them.

3. Options considered and recommended proposal

3.1 The DfE required the Council to prepare this Plan working with partners. The High Needs Stability Grant (to address historic Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) deficits accumulated by local authorities up to 31 March 2026) is linked to approval of the 2025/26 local SEND reform plan, and any further support is linked to implementing this Plan and approval of the 2027/28 plan.

3.2 There are, however, two possible options.

3.2.1 Option 1 – Do not adopt the proposed reform approach. This would leave the partnership responding to rising demand through existing arrangements. The Plan's projections indicate continued growth in EHCPs and High Needs Block expenditure, with continuing pressure on specialist provision and services. This option would not address the identified variation in early support and mainstream confidence and is not recommended.

3.2.2 Option 2 - Approve and implement the Local SEND Reform Plan. This would provide a three-year plan for earlier help, inclusion, local provision, workforce development, co-production, data, quality, and financial sustainability. It includes clear delivery milestones, placement forecasts, financial modelling, and governance. This is the recommended option because it gives partners a shared framework, while allowing progress to be checked and the delivery approach to evolve if expected improvements are not being achieved.

4. Consultation on proposal

4.1 Children, families, and partners have helped shape the Plan. Rotherham Parent Carer Forum contributed through 2,391 parent engagements, including feedback on EHCPs, therapies, waiting times and placements. Engagement has also taken place through the Best Start Summit, Rotherham Education Strategic Partnership, Place Board, multi-agency workshops and Special Educational Needs and Disabilities and Alternative Provision (SENDAP) partnership activity. This feedback has helped shape Experts at Hand and the wider priorities in the Plan.

4.2 Engagement will continue with children and young people, parents and carers, schools, early years settings, further education, health partners, the voluntary and community sector, elected members, Special Educational Needs and Disability Information, Advice and Support Service and other representative groups' views. A South Yorkshire memorandum of understanding between Local Authorities and the Integrated Care Board is also planned to support fair arrangements for children who attend provision across council boundaries.

4.3 Children and families will continue to help shape the work after the Plan is approved. The Parent Carer Forum are developing a tool to measure parental confidence and children's experience, alongside performance data, so that partners can see whether the reforms are making a real difference.

5. Timetable and Accountability for Implementing this Decision

5.1 Delivery runs from 2026/27 to 2028/29. In the first year, the programme will start the implementation of Experts at Hand, design and test the first inclusion bases, progress accessibility and capital work, improve data and monitoring, agree ways to measure parental confidence, and develop clearer borough-wide routes to support.

5.2 The Service Director - Education & Inclusion is the Senior Responsible Officer for the Reform Plan. Progress will be reviewed every month by the SENDAP Strategic Partnership Board and every quarter by the SEND Executive. There will also be annual checks using data, Cabinet reporting on the CYPS Capital

Programme and the Local Area Reform Plan and the SEND Self-Evaluation Framework. This means problems can be identified, challenged, and escalated, and delivery can be changed where necessary.

6. Financial and Procurement Advice and Implications

6.1 Historically, Rotherham has faced significant pressure within its High Needs Budget (HNB), driven by rising demand for SEND provision, including increases in the number of Education, Health, and Care Plans (EHCPs). The Council has managed the SEND demand and financial pressures over the last 5 years through the Safety Valve Programme (DfE recovery programme for local authorities with significant High Needs deficits, combining financial support with SEND system reform). Financial support previously provided through the Safety Valve Agreement ended in 2025/26, the final year of the programme.

6.2 The Government has replaced the former Safety Valve programme with the High Needs Stability Grant (HNSG), which provides support towards historic Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) deficits accrued up to 31 March 2026 and forms part of the transition to a reformed SEND system. The continuation of the statutory override, which excludes DSG deficits from the Council's general fund position, remains in place until 31 March 2028. Following approval of Rotherham's Local SEND Reform Plan, the Council's 2025/26 HNSG allocation of £0.4m has been confirmed. Taking account of the latest DSG forecast and HNSG funding, the DSG Reserve is forecast to have a cumulative deficit of £10.4m by 31 March 2027, reinforcing the importance of delivering the SEND Reform Plan.

6.3 The Council submitted its Local SEND Reform Plan to the DfE by 19 June 2026, setting out how it will transition to the reformed SEND system and increase early intervention, inclusion, and mainstream capacity. The Plan demonstrates a clear pathway towards the Government's vision for a more inclusive SEND system.

6.4 The Government recognises that implementation will take time and that financial pressures are likely to continue during the transition period leading to a forecast £10.4m deficit in the DSG Reserve by 31 March 2027, as described in 6.2. It is expected that Stability Grant funding will continue during this transition. The Council will be required to maintain robust financial management while continuing to deliver appropriate, high-quality support for children and young people with SEND.

6.5 To support implementation, the Government has, nationally, committed £4bn of investment, including £1.6bn for mainstream schools, early years settings and colleges to strengthen inclusive practice, and £1.4bn for local authorities to provide specialist support through the Experts at Hand programme, including specialist teachers, educational psychologists and therapists. The Council has been allocated funding of £2.2m in 2026/27 for the delivery of the Experts at Hand (EAH) model across schools in Rotherham as well as a High Needs Capital Allocation of £3.4m, with proposed priorities including

mainstream accessibility, special-school accessibility, inclusion-base development and special school growth.

6.6 There are no immediate procurement implications arising from the recommendations detailed in this report. To support the delivery of the report, if there is a need to commission and contract with external third party providers, these must be procured in compliance with relevant procurement legislation (Procurement Act 2023, Public Contracts Regulations 2015 or the Health Care Services (Provider Selection Regime) Regulations 2023) dependent on requirement and route to market, as well as the Council's own Financial and Procurement Procedure Rules.

7. Legal Advice and Implications

7.1 The proposed reforms support the Council in complying with its Statutory Duties in accordance with the Children and Families Act 2014, The Special Educational Needs and Disability Regulations 2014 and the associated SEND Code of Practice: 0-25 years.

7.2 There is a significant risk of legal challenge in the event that the Council fails to meet its Statutory Duties, which could be by way of Judicial Review proceedings, Appeal proceedings to the SEND Tribunal or via the complaints process which may result in complaints being raised to the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman.

7.3 Extensive co-production has shaped the plan; the Reform Plan is a partnership framework covering education, health, and care. It requires formal sign-off by specified local authority and Integrated Care Board (ICB) leaders and establishes governance for delivery across organisational boundaries. Legal implications arising from specific implementation decisions, commissioning arrangements, information sharing, capital schemes, or changes to provision will need to be addressed through the relevant decision and assurance processes.

7.4 The Cabinet decision sought is to approve the Rotherham Local SEND Reform Plan 2026-2029 and the Council's role in its delivery, endorse its strategic direction and associated financial approach, and note the first-year delivery, performance, governance, and risk management arrangements.

8. Human Resources Advice and Implications

8.1 Workforce capacity is a critical dependency and one of the Plan's highest-rated implementation risks. The proposed Experts at Hand model requires Educational Psychology, specialist teaching, therapy, and programme capacity, supported by joint ICB recruitment, commissioning, and workforce planning. Recruitment and retention challenges within specialist SEND professions may impact the pace of implementation and achievement of intended outcomes.

8.2 The first-year plan includes recruitment to the multi-disciplinary team of educational psychologist, specialist teacher, speech and language therapists,

and occupation therapists, and additional programme management and performance capacity. Any employment, establishment or workforce-change implications will need to follow the Council's usual HR and partnership processes, including appropriate consultation and employee engagement arrangements.

8.3 Successful delivery of the Plan will require investment in workforce development across education, health, and Council services to strengthen confidence and capability in supporting children and young people with SEND. Workforce development requirements are incorporated into delivery planning and monitored through programme governance arrangements.

8.4 Workforce wellbeing, workload management, recruitment, and retention will continue to be monitored throughout implementation, particularly in specialist services where capacity constraints could impact delivery of reform objectives and anticipated benefits realisation.

9. Implications for Children and Young People and Vulnerable Adults

9.1 The Plan is intended to improve support for children and young people aged 0–25 with SEND and their families. It aims to identify needs sooner, improve access to different types of specialist help, strengthen inclusion, improve attendance and participation, increase suitable local placements and support better preparation for adult life.

9.2 The Plan also focuses on reducing persistent and severe absence and exclusions, improving access to therapy, and increasing participation in education, employment, or training. Children's views and parental confidence will be used alongside performance information to judge whether the reforms are working.

10. Equalities and Human Rights Advice and Implications

10.1 The Plan is explicitly concerned with improving equity of access and reducing variation in the support experienced by children and young people with SEND. Expansion of inclusive mainstream provision, accessibility investment, consistent pathways, and an equitable Experts at Hand offer are intended to reduce inequity between settings and localities.

10.2 Equalities Impact Assessment has been included as Appendix 3 and 4.

11. Implications for CO2 Emissions and Climate Change

11.1 The source Plan does not quantify carbon impacts. It does, however, intend to increase local provision and reduce reliance on distant specialist placements, which may affect travel patterns for children and young people. A travel impact assessment is included within the capital and sufficiency programme.

11.2 A Carbon Impact Assessment has been included as Appendix 5.

12. Implications for Partners

12.1 The Council cannot deliver the Plan alone. Education, health, social care, and other partners will need to work together so that needs are identified earlier, schools and settings are better able to include children, and specialist advice is available sooner. Partners will therefore need to share responsibility for changing practice, staffing and the way resources are used. The Plan is co-signed by representatives from NHS South Yorkshire ICB and Rotherham Council.

12.2 For schools, early years providers and Post-16 settings, the reform brings both more support and a stronger expectation of inclusion. Settings will receive clearer guidance, professional development, earlier specialist advice, and more inclusive capacity, including additional inclusion bases. In return, the aim is for more children to have their needs met effectively in mainstream and local provision where appropriate. Specialist provision will remain essential for children who need it.

12.3 For health and specialist services, Experts at Hand changes how advice is provided. Educational Psychology, Specialist Teaching, Speech and Language Therapy and Occupational Therapy will work as a more joined-up team, giving settings earlier advice as part of the graduated response. This will require shared planning on staffing, commissioning and pathways, and progress will depend on having enough specialist staff.

12.4 The Plan gives partners shared responsibility for managing rising demand and building capacity. Growth in statutory assessments, pressure on specialist places and increasing High Needs costs cannot be solved simply by adding more specialist placements. Partners have committed to strengthen early support and inclusive practice. Any reduction in demand or cost will depend on these service improvements being delivered successfully.

12.5 Taken together, the reforms are a major change in how the partnership between RMBC, schools, settings and the health system works. The aim is to move from specialist help that often arrives after needs have increased to help that is available earlier around the child, family, and education setting. Children must still receive the provision appropriate to their assessed needs, and each organisation will keep its own legal responsibilities.

12.6 Partnership governance will keep organisations jointly accountable for delivery. The SENDAP Strategic Partnership Board will review progress monthly and the SEND Executive quarterly. They will look at delivery, staffing, outcomes and family experience, demand, placements, and finances, and will act when progress is off track. Decisions that need formal approval will still go through the responsible organisation's normal governance process.

13. Risks and Mitigation

13.1 The Plan identifies five main risks to delivery. These will be tracked through the programme risk, action, issue, and decision arrangements, reviewed

monthly by the SENDAP Strategic Partnership Board, and escalated through partnership and Council governance where necessary.

13.2

Risk	Impact / Likelihood	Plan mitigation	Management route
Not enough specialist staff can be recruited or retained	4 / 5	Joint Council/ICB recruitment, group working models and commissioning	Programme risk log and partnership governance
New inclusion bases open later than planned	3 / 4	Early feasibility work, agreements with trusts and travel impact assessment	Capital and sufficiency workstream
Early support is not consistent across settings	4 / 5	Agreed core offer, quality checks, and Specialist Inclusion Team outreach	Practice, pathways and quality assurance
Costs are higher than the financial plan assumes	4 / 5	Challenge commissioning costs, increase local capacity and strengthen routes into adulthood	Financial monitoring and governance
Information is incomplete or arrives too late	3 / 3	One shared dashboard, common definitions, regular quality checks, and training	Performance and data workstream

13.3 The two most important enablers are having enough specialist staff and making sure early support works consistently across settings. If either fails, the expected changes in demand, placements and spending may not happen. Financial benefits will therefore be treated as a result of better services, not as a separate savings target.

13.4 If monitoring shows that delivery, outcomes, or financial assumptions are off track, the programme will agree corrective action. Any change that affects an approved budget, policy or provision will go through the Council's normal decision-making process.

14. Accountable Officers

Niall Devlin – Service Director, Education & Inclusion

Approvals obtained on behalf of Statutory Officers: -

	Named Officer	**Date**
Chief Executive	John Edwards	27/10/26
Executive Director of Corporate Services (S.151 Officer)	Judith Badger	16/10/26
Service Director of Legal Services (Monitoring Officer)	Phil Horsfield	20/10/26

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