

IMPROVING LIVES SELECT COMMISSION
Tuesday 21 July 2026

Present:- Councillor Monk (in the Chair); Councillors Bennett-Sylvester, Blackham, Bower, Brent, Clarke, T. Collingham, Currie, Elliott, Fisher, Garnett, Harper, Ismail and Robinson.

Apologies for absence:- Apologies were received from Councillors Adair, Hughes, Ryalls, Sutton, Ms. L. Hickey, Mr. M. Hemmingway and Mr. J. Newman.

Also in attendance were:-

Councillor V. Cusworth, Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member
Mr. N. Devlin, Service Director for Education and Inclusion
Mrs. K. White, Service Director for Family Help

The webcast of the Council Meeting can be viewed at:-

<https://rotherham.public-i.tv/core/portal/home>

12. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

Resolved:- That the minutes of the meeting of the Improving Lives Select Commission, held on 9th June, 2026 be approved as a correct record of proceedings.

13. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

14. EXCLUSION OF THE PRESS AND PUBLIC

Resolved:- That, under Section 100A(4) of the Local Government Act 1972, the press and public be excluded from the meeting for (Minute No. 17 (SEND Reform Plan) on the grounds that the appendix to that report involves the likely disclosure of exempt information as defined in Paragraph 3 of Part 1 of Schedule 12A to the Local Government Act 1972 (information relating to the financial or business affairs of any particular person (including the authority holding that information)).

15. QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC AND THE PRESS

There were no questions from members of the public or press.

16. CORPORATE PARENTING PARTNERSHIP BOARD UPDATE

The update from the Corporate Parenting Partnership Board meeting held on 30th June, 2026 will be deferred to the next meeting.

17. ROTHERHAM'S LOCAL SEND REFORM PLAN SYSTEM TRANSFORMATION UPDATE

Consideration was given to the report which detailed how local areas were to respond to the Schools White Paper and associated national government policy in their requirement to develop Local SEND Reform Plans to address rising demand, reduce unsustainable high-needs financial deficits, and fix a fragmented system.

Councillor Cusworth, Cabinet Member and Deputy Leader, introduced the report by confirming the extensive engagement that had taken place with the Department for Education (DfE) on Social Care and SEND Reform which supported the progression of a wide-ranging programme aimed at delivering a more consistent, high-quality system for children, young people and their families.

The Council had undertaken significant work to support the All Local Areas SEND submission on 19th June, 2026 focusing on current provision and specialist high-needs places. This would lead to an increase in local provision and capacity, ensuring children and young people could access the right support, in the right place, at the right time. This reflected the growing complexity of need and the Government's commitment to improving sufficiency and reducing reliance on out-of-area placements.

Niall Devlin, Service Director of Education and Inclusion, was invited to give a presentation and update on Rotherham's Local SEND Reform Plan System Transformation.

An update was provided on the SEND Improvement Plan, which was submitted to the Department for Education (DfE) on 19 June. The plan remained in draft status pending DfE feedback and the timeframes for acceptance were outlined.

The Directorate remained confident that the SEND Plan would be accepted, but until such time it was it remained restricted.

The Commission were advised of the wider context of SEND and Social Care Reform, including the challenges presented by the forthcoming White Paper and the need to understand how local plans aligned with the broader national reform programme. The Expert at Hand model was also discussed, with recognition that further scrutiny would be required as reforms developed.

An overview of SEND finance and funding arrangements was provided, including the operation of the Safety Valve programme and funding for high-needs provision. Further detail as provided on how the funding was distributed and the amount the authority had secured through the Safety Valve programme over a four-year period, enabling investment in schools,

strengthening SEND provision and reducing the accumulated deficit. The programme concluded in April 2026.

The presentation and detail shared covered the following areas:-

- Background to SEND Reforms.
- DfE National SEND Reforms Timeline 2026-2030.
- Rotherham Local SEND Reform Plan Overview.
- A Shift Toward Early Intervention and Inclusion.
- SEND 3-Year Transformation Roadmap (2026–2029).
- Experts at Hand, Inclusion Bases, and Workforce Development.
- What Success Will Look Like by 2029.
- Governance.
- Key Oversight and Partnership Arrangements.
- Key Risks and How They Will Be Managed.
- Overall Impact for Children, Families, and the System.

A discussion and question and answer session ensued. Members of the Commission raised issues in the following areas and received in-depth responses from the Service Director for Education and Inclusion and Service Director for Family Help along with the Cabinet Member to their queries briefly noted as:-

- Rotherham's Local SEND Reform Plan System Transformation involving all schools, including academies.

There was a strong collaborative relationship between the Council, academy trusts and school leaders in developing the inclusion strategy, with broad sector buy-in.

- Confidence in the new education management system.

The new integrated education and social care management system had recently gone live, improving data sharing and oversight, while further work was underway to develop enhanced monitoring and early-warning systems. The proposed parental confidence measure would also be co-produced with the Rotherham Parent Carer Forum through surveys and engagement activities to ensure families could effectively shape and assess services.

- Ofsted inspection arrangements and referrals.

Accountability concerns would be addressed by outlining mechanisms including annual discussions with Ofsted, regular engagement with the DfE, grant funding conditions, independent reviews of inclusion bases and the development of clear standards for inclusive provision across all schools.

- Recruitment and retention of the workforce and mitigation of risk of demand and overload on professionals.

Rotherham had a strong recruitment and retention record, with additional investment in Educational Psychology services, reduced reliance on agency staff, development of local talent pathways and a positive working culture helping to attract and retain skilled professionals despite national workforce pressures.

- Expert at Hand Model and whether the demand for support could be attributed to screen time on devices.

The complex causes of speech, language and developmental difficulties recognised that factors such as early childhood experiences, home environments, screen time, poverty, genetics and the lasting effects of the pandemic could all contribute, highlighting the importance of early intervention and support.

- Distrust in the system and how parents confidence and trust could be improved.

Legislation required the Council to name the most suitable and cost-effective provision capable of meeting a child's needs, while recognising parental concerns and highlighting that SEND reforms, increased investment and improved provision were intended to rebuild confidence and improve outcomes in what was widely acknowledged as a challenging national system.

- Performance indicators and reducing demand for Education and Health Care Plans whilst managing parental expectations and feedback.

Funding and the Expert at Hand model had been targeted towards areas of greatest need, using data on attendance, exclusions and EHCPs to provide earlier intervention, increase support in schools and strengthen the tracking of outcomes for children with SEND.

- The potential risk that increasing numbers of parents would seek special school places, alternative provision or elective home education and the contingency plans to address this.

Confidence in mainstream education would be improved through early intervention, stronger SEND support, and inclusion reforms, while maintaining existing services and increasing opportunities for children with SEND to thrive in mainstream schools wherever appropriate.

- Best educational establishment in meeting the needs of a child with significant SEND needs.

Early investment and targeted interventions for younger children were reported to have improved outcomes, reduced the need for specialist placements and been well received by schools.

Specialist provision would continue for children with the most complex needs, while expanding inclusion bases and strengthening mainstream support to meet needs closer to home.

- Workforce development wider than the teaching cohort to deliver the plan and make it a success.

Improving SEND awareness and training across the whole school workforce was essential to delivering effective inclusion and better outcomes for children.

- Potential increase in the demand for Education and Health Care Plans ahead of implementation of SEND Reform and the role and input from Early Years.

SEND demand was expected to continue growing, particularly in Years 1 and 2, but improved early years funding, monitoring, tracking and support arrangements were helping to identify needs earlier and strengthen planning for future demand.

The Chair thanked Members of Improving Lives for their in-depth questioning and the responses from the Service Directors for Education and Inclusion and Family Help and the contribution from the Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member.

The Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member welcomed any further questions on the SEND Reform Plan for which responses would be provided.

Resolved:- (1) That the draft Local SEND Reform plan and ambition of the Vision and Priorities be received and noted.

(2) That the plan delivery and impact be received and the contents scrutinised.

(3) That consideration be given to further scrutiny of the performance of the Local SEND Reform Plan following its implementation and this be considered at the first meeting of the Commission early in the new year.

18. WORK PROGRAMME

The Chair invited the Commission to consider the Work Programme which had been circulated with the agenda and invited any comments or suggestions for inclusion for the 2026/27 municipal year and respective scheduling.

The Work Programme set out clearly the dates of the Commission's meetings for the municipal year and where items may be scheduled for respective agendas which were updated whenever there were changes.

It was pointed out that the work programme was very much a live document and the Chair was keen to hear from Members if there were any particular areas of focus or even specific items that were listed so these could be scheduled for consideration.

Resolved:- (1) That the draft work programme for 2026/27 be approved with the current agenda items for inclusion.

(2) That the Governance Advisor be authorised to make any required changes to the work programme in consultation with the Chair and Vice-Chair and reporting any such changes back to each meeting for endorsement.

19. URGENT BUSINESS

There was no urgent business.