

From: Rory Love, Cabinet Member for Education and Skills
Sarah Hammond, Corporate Director of Children, Young People and Education

To: Children, Young People and Education Cabinet Committee – 9 July 2024

Subject: Special Education Needs transformation and the role of the Specialist Teaching and Learning Service (STLS)

Past Pathway of report:

Future Pathway of report:

Electoral Division: All

Summary: This report provides the Children, Young People and Education Cabinet Committee with the background and current position of the Specialist Teaching and Learning Service (STLS), including options for the future of the service beyond the end date of the current Service Level Agreement.

Recommendation: The Children, Young People and Education Cabinet Committee is asked to consider and note:

- A. the content of the report
- B. the proposal to undertake a public consultation in relation to the service, to understand in more detail what gaps in provision it may fill within the new ways of working.
- C. a report will be presented to this Committee on the outcome of the consultation at the earliest opportunity.

1. Introduction

- 1.1. Kent County Council is in the process of a significant transformation in its approach to supporting children and young people with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND).
- 1.2. In response to significant areas of weakness identified by OFSTED, an Accelerated Progress Plan (APP) identifying 116 projects across nine areas of weakness has been developed. These projects will improve outcomes for children and young people with SEND.
- 1.3. At the same time, the Safety Valve programme establishes a need to consider carefully how the High Needs Funding (HNF) budget is spent to ensure that services can demonstrate impact and improved outcomes for children and young people, taking into consideration funding of non-statutory versus statutory services.

- 1.4. During this period of significant change, it is important to understand how existing, established processes, structures and services fit into the new ways of working. This understanding is needed to avoid both duplication and creation of gaps.
- 1.5. The Specialist Teaching and Learning Service (STLS) is one such service. It is commissioned by the Education and Special Education Needs and Disabilities (SEND) Division within Kent County Council (KCC).
- 1.6. The service has existed for over ten years. A key decision (Decision - 22/00001) taken in March 2022 agreed the development of a new three year Service Level Agreement (SLA). This SLA came into effect on 1 September 2022 and ends 31 August 2025. There is no option to extend.
- 1.7. STLS is a local resource, supporting the development and embedding of inclusive practice within mainstream schools and early years settings. Given the changing local SEND landscape in Kent and the introduction of a Localities Model for School Inclusion, among other initiatives, the proposal is to undertake a public consultation in relation to the service, to understand in more detail what gaps in provision it may fill within the new ways of working.

2. Current Provision and Context

- 2.1. STLS is currently commissioned from 12 maintained Special Schools in Kent via an SLA that ends 31 August 2025. The service has approximately 94 full time equivalent members of staff, including administrative support, specialist teachers and district leads who are employed directly by the special schools. Funding for the service is from the HNF Block and is £5.8m per year.
- 2.2. The overarching aim of the STLS is to support early years settings and schools to build their capacity and confidence in delivering high quality provision for children and young people with SEND, in improving pupil progress and outcomes and to spread best practice across educational settings. The Purpose of the Service can be found at Appendix 1.
- 2.3. In considering how STLS fits within the transforming Kent landscape it is important to understand how and why schools access the service and the impact that the support has.
- 2.4. STLS offers a broad menu of support, the main areas being:
 - Support for individual children, including advice and support provided through the Local Inclusion Forum Team (LIFT) meeting.
 - Training
 - Transition support.
- 2.5. Over the duration of the current SLA, Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) have been implemented and refined to provide a comprehensive picture of the activity and impact delivered by the service. This includes a Local Activity Report (LAR) that provides information about levels of activity through Local Inclusion Forum Team (LIFT).

- 2.6. Performance monitoring meetings take place three times per year with each individual district reporting retrospectively on the previous two terms. This includes the use of a narrative report that adds context to data submitted.
- 2.7. The 2022 – 2023 Annual Performance Report (Appendix 2) and the Countywide Report for Terms 1 – 4 for 2023 – 2024 (Appendix 3) include information related to the performance of the service with the later comparing performance across Terms 1 – 4 of 2022 – 2023 and 2023 – 2024.
- 2.8. Information gathered through KPIs and LARs demonstrate high levels of engagement with the service as illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1: Percentage of settings and schools in Kent engaging with the service on average per term

| | Early Years | Primary | Secondary |
|--------------------------------|--------------------|----------------|------------------|
| Term 1- 4 2022-2023 | 78% | 99% | 84% |
| Term 1- 4 2023-2024 | 81% | 100% | 90% |

- 2.9. LIFTs are multi-agency meetings, chaired and administered by STLS through which specialist teachers are allocated. Primary schools access support for individual children via LIFT more than early years settings or secondary schools (Table 2). The service has worked hard to engage more secondary schools and the figures below illustrate that there has been some success in this.

Table 2: Percentage of settings and schools attending LIFT on average per term

| | Early Years | Primary | Secondary |
|--------------------------------|--------------------|----------------|------------------|
| Term 1- 4 2022-2023 | 38% | 68% | 53% |
| Term 1- 4 2023-2024 | 31% | 67% | 63% |

- 2.10. While performance monitoring is clear that demand for the service is high, feedback from settings and schools’ points to a widely held belief that attendance at LIFT, the allocation of a specialist teacher and the production of a Record of Visit is required to access Special Educational Needs Inclusion Funding (SENIF), HNF or as part of the process to request an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP). This may be driving some demand through LIFT and the service, and it is unclear how this may change once new processes are implemented as part of the early years review and Localities Model of School Inclusion.

- 2.11. The service supports some of the most complex children in mainstream schools. Table 3 shows that the highest percentage of children discussed at LIFT are in receipt of SEN Support.

Table 3: SEN Status of primary and secondary age children presented at school age LIFT on average per term (this information is not collected for early years)

| | SEN Support | Receiving HNF | Has EHCP |
|--------------------------------|--------------------|----------------------|-----------------|
| Term 1- 4 2022-2023 | 74% | 9% | 7% |
| Term 1- 4 2023-2024 | 83% | 12% | 7% |

2.12. Of the children discussed at LIFT, Table 4 shows that a higher portion of children from early years settings are allocated a specialist teacher compared to school age children. This difference may be due to the solution focused approach and the use of pre-LIFT clinics that are more widely adopted for school age LIFT.

Table 4: Percentage of children presented at LIFT that are allocated a specialist teacher on average per term

| | Early Years | School Age |
|--------------------------------|--------------------|-------------------|
| Term 1- 4 2022-2023 | 71% | 51% |
| Term 1- 4 2023-2024 | 72% | 47% |

2.13. Because most LIFTs support primary and secondary schools in one meeting, the LAR does not separate out primary children allocated a specialist teacher from secondary age children. However, Table 5 below shows that primary age children represented 87% of school age children on STLS caseloads in 2022-2023 and 86% in 2023-2024.

2.14. Feedback provided via surveys and workshops suggest that one to one support for individual children is the area of support most highly valued by schools and settings. Although some feedback notes that the advice provided is not always relevant or reflects what SENCOs already know, Table 5 shows that caseloads for specialist teachers are consistently high with primary schools accessing this support more than early years settings or secondary schools.

Table 5: Average numbers of pupils on caseload per term

| | Early Years | Primary | Secondary |
|--------------------------------|--------------------|---|---|
| Term 1- 4 2022-2023 | 1,530 | 2,620 (2% total primary age children)* | 402 (0.4% total secondary age children)* |
| Term 1- 4 2023-2024 | 1,411 | 2,550 (2% total primary age children)* | 425 (0.4% total secondary age children)* |

* based on January 2022 school census [Facts-and-Figures-2022.pdf \(kelsi.org.uk\)](#)

2.15. On average, 70 – 80% children on caseload are actively supported each term (see Table 6). Active support means taking an approach that is bespoke to individual children, generally consisting of three visits per year to undertake an initial observation and assessment during which initial targets are set, followed up by visits or discussions to review and amend targets as progress is made.

Table 6: Average number of pupils actively supported per term

| | Early Years | School age |
|--------------------------------|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Term 1- 4 2022-2023 | 1,103 (72% children on caseload) | 2,191 (73% children on caseload) |
| Term 1- 4 2023-2024 | 1,106 (78% children on caseload) | 2,341 (79% children on caseload) |

2.16. STLS offers a core and bespoke training programme. Primary and secondary schools engage more consistently in training (Table 7). KPIs reflect that the bespoke training offer is accessed more than the core offer, reflecting STLS responding to identified local need. While generally considered relevant and helpful, some feedback from schools and early years settings provided via surveys and workshops note that training can be outdated.

Table 7: Percentage of settings and schools attending training (core and bespoke) on average per term

| | Early Years | Primary | Secondary |
|--------------------------------|--------------------|----------------|------------------|
| Term 1- 4 2022-2023 | 17% | 49% | 53% |
| Term 1- 4 2023-2024 | 18% | 66% | 65% |

*excluding AET training delivered by STLS

2.17. STLS are engaged in supporting transition both from early years to school and from primary to secondary phases of education. Support includes conversations with schools and settings about transition support for individual children as well as coordinating and facilitating workshops. The past year has seen increased planning for transition between STLS and the Council’s Kent Education Psychology Service and SEND Improvement Advisors. This is reflected in an increased number of transition events reported each term between 2022-2023 and 2023-2024.

2.18. Impact surveys undertaken in 2023 and March to April 2024 show that the service is highly valued by early years settings and schools. Each survey received over 450 responses, with the highest proportion of responses coming from primary school SENCOs. (Analysis of the surveys can be found in Appendices 4 and 5)

2.19. As noted in 2.13, in these surveys respondents ranked one to one specialist support for a named child and support provided through the LIFT as the type of support that had the most benefit for developing inclusive practice within their setting or school.

2.20. SENCOs also cite ‘support provided’ as a key benefit of the service and it is clear from comments made, that the value of the support provided to this group cannot be underestimated.

2.21. Regarding impact, this is challenging to determine. Consistent feedback from impact surveys is that respondents felt more confident in supporting children with SEND and noted a positive impact in relation to the outcomes for children and young people receiving support.

2.22. For example, STLS take a bespoke approach with each child, setting targets that are specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and time bound (SMART). Based on KPI returns, on average 39% of school age children open to STLS have their targets formally reviewed each term. Of these, an average of 29% have their cases closed due to targets being met and an average of 35% have their targets amended due to progress against them. Given the complex needs of children being supported this is a positive outcome for those children.

- 2.23. Respondents to feedback surveys report feeling confident in supporting children with SEND because of support provided by the service. In the recent impact survey early years settings and schools STLS received a countywide average rating of 4.1 in relation to the degree to which schools or settings are more able to provide support to a child or a group of children with SEN without the need for an EHCP.
- 2.24. However, this confidence does not translate into a reduction against various measures that are indicative of embedded inclusive practice at a district or county level. For example, the percentage of primary age children with an EHCP have risen year on year since 2020. [District Dashboard - KELSI](#)
- 2.25. Within a wider strategic context, the Special Education Needs and Disabilities and Alternative Provision Improvement Plan, published in March 2023 outlines the governments commitment to improving mainstream provision so that it is more inclusive of children with SEND. It identifies priorities related to supporting and upskilling the teaching workforce, through high quality, evidence-based teaching, teacher training in SEND, SEND specific professional development and increased use of assistive technology. It recognises the importance of providing specialist support at an appropriate time to prevent needs from escalating and how joined up working across education, health and social care can ensure that the right support is put in place as early as possible. Achieving this at a local level, requires reflection on and understanding of how we remove complicated referral pathways and deploy specialists within the system more effectively and for best outcomes. This is reflected in both the Early Years review and the Localities Model for School Inclusion.

3. Commissioning Intentions

- 3.1 As the current service level agreement for STLS ends on 31 August 2024 with no option to extend, the following options have been identified in relation to the service delivery beyond that date:
- Option 1: Do nothing. The Service Level Agreement and the service ends 31 August 2025.
 - Option 2: No change. The service continues to be funded through the High Needs Funding block under a further SLA.
 - Option 3: STLS becomes a traded service.
 - Option 4: STLS is funded directly by clusters of schools through the HNF allocated to clusters for decision making via the Localities model.
- 3.1. Workshops undertaken with stakeholders, including STLS, early years settings and schools and Council officers regarding these options resulted in three preferred options, with schools and STLS preferring Option 2 and the Council preferring Option 1 or 4.
- 3.2. In relation to these options, additional feedback was that:
- For Option 2 consideration should be given to increasing funding to the service to make it financially viable 'as is' over the longer term.
 - For Option 2 any decision to not increase funding would necessitate streamlining the service to focus on key areas of maximum impact, stopping other areas of support to make it financially viable.

- For option 4 schools and settings reported finding it difficult to comment on this due to lack of clarity about what future models will look like.
- 3.2 Since the completion of this process, two additional options have been identified and dismissed. These are:
- Option 5: bring the service in house.
 - Option 6: transition option, extending the current SLA for one year to enable a transition to Option 3 or 4.
- 3.3 Appendix 6 provides a detailed description of the feedback received and Appendix 7 provides an options appraisal based on this feedback.
- 3.4 In considering the above options, the Council recognises that the impact on early years settings and providers is likely to be different from that on schools. While schools have access to a range of support services, these are more limited for early years settings and proposals related to the Localities model do not currently relate to early years. Therefore, it may be necessary to consider different options for school age versus early years STLS.
- 3.5 The changing SEND landscape within Kent resulted in some stakeholders struggling to engage fully in the options appraisal process due to lack of detail related to some of this change. As an underpinning part of this change, a Continuum of Need and Provision is being developed as part of the Localities Model and any future service will need to be dynamic enough to deliver on this continuum. Given these factors, the Council intends to undertake a full public consultation in relation to the service. The consultation will seek to understand in more detail what gaps in provision it may fill within the new ways of working.
- 3.6 Any future activity will be considered within the strategic context of:
- The Council's commitment in discharging its statutory duty for children and young people with SEND.
 - The Council's drive for greater inclusion of children with SEND in mainstream settings and schools as outlined in the Countywide Approach to Inclusive Education (CATIE).
 - Outcomes Framework for Children and Young People in Kent.
 - Framing Kent's Future
 - Securing Kent's Future
 - Delivery of the Safety Valve and the Accelerated Progress Plan (APP).
- 3.7 These actions will support Framing Kent's Future through:
- Priority 1: Levelling Up Kent and our commitment to maintain KCC's strategic role in supporting schools in Kent to deliver accessible, high quality education provision for all families, specifically: Maintain improvement support services for all Kent schools, including maintained schools and academies, to maintain Kent's high-quality education system.
 - Priority 4: New Models of Care and Support and our commitment is to support the most vulnerable children and families in our county, ensuring our social work practice supports manageable caseloads, reflective learning, joined up

safeguarding and effective corporate parenting arrangements, specifically:
Respond to national policy changes on SEND provision, work with SEND families to rapidly improve the service provided to SEND children and work with mainstream schools so more can accept and meet the needs of children with SEND, increasing choice and proximity of school places.

3.8 These actions will support Securing Kent's Future by:

- Supporting Objective 1 in bringing the budget back into balance through cost avoidance achieved by supporting more children in mainstream schools from the outset of their statutory education and avoiding the use of non-maintained independent special school placements.
- Further transforming the operating model of the Council (Objective 4) by making processes less time-consuming and bureaucratic we can free up our resource to focus on working directly with children and the providers that support them. A greater focus on understanding and demonstrating impact will enable more effective decision making about how and where to focus the use of resources.

4. Financial Implications

4.1. The annual cost of STLS is £5,856,468. This is a static budget that has remained unchanged since before the existing SLA and has not been subject to inflationary uplifts over that time.

4.2. Individual districts receive varying levels of funding (see table below). Discussions with SLA holding headteachers have highlighted the historical nature of the funding agreements, and that these have not been reviewed considering inflation, or changes to demography and levels of need that have occurred over time. The level of funding allocated to each district has a direct impact on staffing and therefore the capacity the service has and its ability to deliver impact.

4.3. The information below has been collected from SLA holding schools as part of the performance monitoring process.

| District | Core Budget | Outreach Budget | Total (This is the amount specified in each SLA) | Any other Income 22-23 | Any other Income 23-24 |
|-----------------------|-------------|-----------------|---|------------------------|------------------------|
| Thanet | £377,550 | £278,000 | £655,550 | £1,120 | £22,751 |
| Swale | £617,679 | 0 | £617,679 | £50,596 | £42,230 |
| Maidstone | £267,850 | £240,000 | £507,850 | £12,080 | £40,293 |
| Folkstone and Hythe | £307,210 | £200,000 | £507,210 | £3,000 | £3,000 |
| Ashford | £292,840 | £210,000 | £502,840 | £17,751 | £17,751 |
| Gravesham | £309,310 | £180,000 | £489,310 | £9,000 | £28,159 |
| Canterbury | £278,840 | £200,000 | £478,840 | 0 | £19,145 |
| Dover | £283,230 | £180,000 | £463,230 | £23,479 | £19,803 |
| Dartford | £288,830 | £170,000 | £458,830 | £8,276 | £45,318 |
| Tonbridge and Malling | £264,850 | £190,000 | £454,850 | £1,750 | £25,272 |
| Tunbridge Wells | 364,850 | 0 | £364,800 | £19,163 | £16,163 |
| Sevenoaks | £235,480 | £120,000 | £355,480 | £24,023 | £15,870 |
| | | | | | |
| Total | | | £5,856,468 | | |

4.1. The service is funded from the High Needs Block of Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) provided by the Department of Education. Spend is reported within the Special Educational Needs & Psychology key service line presentation of the 2024-2025 Medium Term Financial Plan. This is not currently a direct cost to the General Fund. However, the Council has committed to contributing a total of £82m towards the DSG deficit relating to High Needs overspends by 2027-28, and the statutory override, which is currently holding this deficit off the Council's balance sheet (in an unusable reserve), is due to cease from April 2026, unless the Department of Levelling Up, Housing and Local Communities extends this policy further.

5. Legal implications

5.1. Legal advice will be sought in relation to any future SLA.

6. Equalities implications

6.1. An Equality Impact Assessment has been completed as part of this process.

6.2. Key areas of impact have been identified in relation to age, given that the potential impact on early years and school age children, and gender given that representative number of females within the associated workforce.

7. Governance

7.1. Accountability for statutory functions in relation to Safety Valve and Accelerated Progress Plan sits with Corporate Director for Children, Young People and Education. Responsibility sits with the Director for Education and Special Education Needs.

8. Conclusions

8.1. Provision of support to children and young people in Kent is undergoing a significant period of change and transformation. During this time, it is important to understand the role that established process, structures and services will play in the future ways of working to avoid duplication or the creation of gaps.

8.2. STLS is an inclusion focused service that is valued by early years settings and schools. Both report that the service has impact across a range of measures and that support related to advice and guidance provided for individual children, especially through the LIFT process, is the most highly valued aspect.

8.3. Schools and settings report that the service has impact, improving outcomes for children and enabling schools to feel more confident in supporting children with SEN. However, this does not appear to translate through into a reduction against measures that would be indicative of embedded inclusive practice.

8.4. The current SLA ends 31 August 2025 and there is no option to extend. Options have been identified for the future of the service beyond that date and stakeholders engaged to inform the appraisal of those options. This has resulted in different preferred options for different stakeholder groups.

8.5. Given the changing local SEND landscape in Kent, the introduction of a Localities Model for School Inclusion and the recommendations of the review into early years education in Kent, the proposal is to undertake a public consultation in relation to the service, to understand in more detail how it might fit within the new ways of working.

9. Recommendation(s):

9.1 The Children, Young People and Education Cabinet Committee is asked to consider and note:

A. the content of the report

B the proposal to undertake a public consultation in relation to the service, to understand in more detail what gaps in provision it may fill within the new ways of working

C. a report will be presented to this Committee on the outcome of the consultation at the earliest opportunity.

10. Background Documents

- Appendix 1: Purpose of the service
- Appendix 2: Countywide Annual report 2022-23
- Appendix 3: Term 1 – 4 Countywide Report
- Appendix 4: Feedback Survey 2022-23
- Appendix 5: Impact Survey 2024 Analysis Report
- Appendix 6: Options Appraisal Workshops
- Appendix 7: Options Appraisal

11. EQIA

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