

From: Beverley Fordham, Cabinet Member for Education and Skills
To: Scrutiny Committee, 1 April 2026
Subject: What would a Sustainable SEND System Cost?
Classification: Unrestricted

Summary: This report discusses the concept of a sustainable SEND system, the recently published white paper and SEND consultation and outlines some of the work being undertaken in the Kent education sector to build capacity and sustainability.

Recommendation(s):

The committee is asked to note the report.

1. Introduction, context and high-level financial update

1.1 The SEND system was reformed following the implementation of the Children and Families 2014 Act, supported by the Code of Practice and a range of other policy and statutory guidance. There is a broad continuum of views about the best way to implement this legislation and so the question of what would a sustainable SEND system cost is in many ways dependent on the approach to managing the system and the agreed level of financial investment. Financial sustainability is one of the drivers for the government's intended reforms of the SEND system as outlined in the recent white paper Every Child Achieving and Thriving and the SEND consultation so it is timely to consider this issue to help shape the future system.

1.2 The current funding for SEND comes through a variety of routes

Mainstream School Funding (Department of Education)

- The primary and secondary schools are expected to pay for and support children with SEND from their core school budget – the Code of Practice includes a 'mainstream school presumption' which means the expectation is mainstream schools should be educating children and young people with a range of special needs in their day to day practice and this position is supported through a range of other documentation including the Standards for the Teaching Profession (teachers are expected to 'adapt teaching to meet the needs of all pupils including those with special educational needs, high ability, English as an additional language or disabilities...').
- The core school budget is also intended to fund early support for SEN in mainstream (also known as Element 2 or Notional SEN budget) – primary & secondary schools are expected to fund from their school budget at least the first £6,000 of additional costs for children and young people that are identified as requiring a higher level of support (this could include small group or individual help, or special equipment) . This funding may be linked to the child having an Education, Health and Care Plan.
- Where costs exceed £6,000, the schools can seek further funding from the Local Authority (known as Element 3 funding) – this is intended for children with complex, long term needs that cannot be met by the school's existing budget. In other parts of the Country, this is typically allocated through an EHCP and a banding system which

is currently being reviewed in Kent. This source of funding is fully paid from the High Needs Funding Block (see below).

- Primary & Secondary Schools will also receive extra grants, such as pupil premium, to support both individual and groups of children, this will include children with SEN.

1.3 Local Authority Contribution (Council Tax)

The Council is responsible for the costs of staffing all aspects of the statutory processes (SEND workforce and Educational Psychologists) as well as Home to School transport from the Council's General Fund.

1.4 Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG, from the Department of Education)

The Council receives the DSG annually, which funds a range of school & early years services, including the High Needs Funding Block (HNFB). The HNFB is ring fenced for direct SEND related use. The HNFB is used to pay for all special school and alternative provision placements, additional funding for mainstream schools (see above), Post 16 settings & early years, along with some central LA SEN functions for education providers. LAs also have the option of transferring some of the mainstream school budget to "top up" the HNFB. Kent has agreed an annual top slice with the support from schools, School Funding Forum and the Secretary of State. This funding is used to enhance the County's SEN support offer in mainstream schools. The LA also use some of the Early Years Block (another part of the DSG) to fund SEN services specifically for children supported by early years providers.

1.5 In 2025-26, the combination of the mainstream's notional SEN budget, the HNFB and the contribution from KCC totalled circa £720m, excluding funding by health. This includes an in-year overspend of £70m on the HNFB. The Kent SEND system has been spending more than the total grant received since 2018. Annual overspends since 2018 have resulted in Kent having a total SEN accumulated debt (excluding any additional DfE and LA contributions) of approximately £296.5m by March 2026.

1.6 This only relates to KCC spend – the Integrated Care Board budget and spending through other parts of the health system is not included in these sums, it is in addition.

1.7 Local Authorities have a statutory duty to set a balanced budget and the government has assisted councils, such as KCC, who have incurred overspends on their HNB to apply a 'statutory override' which means the accumulated SEND related overspend has not been included in council budgets (although it is included in the Council's overall cashflow), but this facility is expected to come to an end in April 2028. KCC was informed about national changes to the approach to SEND deficits on 9th February 2026 when the government announced a new High Needs Stability grant which will make a financial contribution of 90% of eligible Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) deficits up to the end of 2025-26 as a first phase of funding reforms. LAs are expected to plan to meet the cost of the residual deficit (equivalent to the remaining 10%) from their own reserves by 2028-29, including setting aside appropriate reserves in the next 2 years. The future SEN funding reforms, including the High Needs Stability grant, will be replacing the Safety Valve programme, the previous Department of Education programme to support local authorities with the largest overspends to provide additional funding and achieve future financial sustainability, of which Kent had been a part since 2023.

1.8 Whilst the use of the High Needs Stability Grant is a very welcome development, it's release to the LA is dependent on the production of an SEN reform plan which will be assessed by the DfE, in addition, future funding arrangements for 2026-27 onwards have not been confirmed. This reinforces the need for proper consideration of national context when discussing what a sustainable system might look like.

- 1.9 In Kent, if the current SEND decision-making trajectory does not change significantly, the annual overspend will continue and could increase to around £110m in 2026-27, and then £126m in 2027-28. This position has been exacerbated by the Government freezing High Needs Funding allocations at 2025-26 levels.
- 1.10 The annual overspend is well documented and is reported within the Cabinet Finance Monitoring Report ([section 1h](#)). National Benchmarking data continues to show Kent as an outlier in terms of a higher proportion of children in both special and independent schools compared to other Councils, and a smaller proportion of children with SEND in mainstream schools. In addition, the overspend results from a combination of continual higher demand for additional SEN support and higher cost per child from continual demand for more specialist provision. Higher placements costs, driven by inflation and greater demand by schools for additional funding, along with delays in DfE lead special school builds and larger numbers of other local authorities now refusing to fund the cost of their looked after children (where they had done so in the past), are all contributing to higher spend.
- 1.11 Kent is not unique, across the country and LAs are under huge pressures to spend more on SEND than the allocated funding from the Department of Education, with national data (based on March 2025) indicating 123 out of 153 LAs had an accumulated deficits with an indicative total of around £4 billion, and is expected to grow further in 2026. Despite this increase in spending there has been no appreciable improvement in pupil outcomes. Despite this being a critical factor with regard to benefits to pupils and their families as well as an important value for money consideration the public debate has become very focused on the role of the LA, sometimes with limited recognition of the statutory framework that LAs are required to work within. For example, in recent Parliamentary debates KCC has been accused of 'losing its moral compass' and cynically 'gaming the Tribunal system' when in fact KCC officers are discharging statutory SEND duties including meeting the legal requirement that parents/carers are informed of their right to Tribunal if they do not agree with the decisions made. Whilst the Kent SEND system still has improvements to be made, this lamentably low level of public discourse, misinformation and personal attacks on public servants is extremely unhelpful and reinforces an incorrect interpretation that families and public services are in unnecessary conflict with each other.
- 1.12 The role of the Local Authority is to apply the legislation which essentially provides a threshold based decision-making framework for the allocation of resources for children and young people with additional and special needs and disabilities. Some children are born with clear complex needs including for example physical disabilities and it is appropriate that they and their families are supported from birth or early childhood. For the majority of children however, additional needs may emerge as their growth and development does not meet child development expectations when they are within early years settings or in the school system.
- 1.13 There is very little agreement on the application of the current legislation, with a wide continuum of views. At one end of the continuum, there are some who believe there should be no thresholds at all and that a perception of additional need should be enough to access additional resource and/or funding through an Education, Health and Care Plan. To illustrate the implications of taking this approach this report includes some high-level financial modelling of the impact of responding to demand without applying any thresholds or decision-making processes, below. Generally however, the focus of discussion is around a number of critical questions over which there is no agreement including

- what is a reasonable expectation that mainstream education settings should be providing as part of their day-to-day practice
- evidence that such expectations have actually been implemented by the school and whether the child is making progress with such interventions
- what is the evidence of a child needing different or more support in a mainstream setting
- when and how the decision is made that the child should be in specialist provision or other alternative education provision
- which children should be attending the most expensive specialist provision.

1.14 To conclude this section, there is little agreement about how the current statutory expectations related to mainstream schools should be applied or how the LA applies the legislation in relation to SEND across the system. In addition, there is another important question about whether or not there should be a funding ceiling or should the budget SEND be entirely needs driven. In view of this lack of agreement, it is difficult to answer the question, what would a sustainable funding system cost because essentially it depends on the view of the person asking the question.

1.15 Following the 2022 inspection, KCC has focused on improving the quality of decision making and making use of expertise in the sector, as well as being increasingly open and transparent and working towards meeting the statutory duty to deliver services within budget. Whilst the SEND transformation in Kent has met the DfE Safety Valve requirements as evidenced by the release of funds following the submission of regular reports, the last feedback letter of 30th January 2026 made it clear that going forward the DfE will be taking a more rigorous approach to financial sustainability

“ Kent has made notable progress in implementing Safety Valve workstreams and promoting inclusion through the Communities of Schools model. However, the scale of the financial challenge remains significant, with forecasts showing a substantial and growing deficit. It is critical that the authority accelerates cost-containment measures rigorously prioritises projects that deliver the greatest impact.

“ Continued focus on partnership working and readiness for SEND reforms is essential but this must be matched by decisive action to address financial sustainability. Without stronger intervention and tighter controls, the current trajectory risks undermining both the Safety Valve agreement and the wider reform agenda.”

1.15 There was a similar message in the DfE’s evidence to the School Teachers Review Body which annually recommends salary levels -

“ The department expects that most schools will need to implement plans to realise and sustain better value from existing spend in addition to the funding being provided through the Core Schools’ Budget to deliver the pay awards. As it is the collective responsibility of government and the entire school system to secure the best value for money, the department is urging every school, trust and local authority – underpinned by departmental support to tackle the systemic issues that drive costs and prevent schools getting the best value for money – to take proactive steps now to identify and implement opportunities that maximise value from the school budget, ensuring we make best use of every pound to the benefit of children.”

1.16 The government is seeking to address concerns about the functioning and quality of the SEND system as well as financial sustainability through a reform programme as expressed in a new White Paper and SEND consultation. Appendix A outlines high level

2.4 When the decision has been made to assess the LA seeks advice and information covering needs, provision required, and outcomes from at least the following (SEND Regs 2014, reg.6): Parent/Young Person, Education, Medical/health professional; Educational psychology; Social care; any other person the LA thinks appropriate; any person the parent/YP reasonably requests (e.g., SALT, OT, CAMHS).

2.5 By the end of Week 16 (counted from the original request date), the LA must decide whether it is necessary to issue an EHC plan and notify the parent/YP of that decision. If the decision is made to issue a plan, the LA proceeds to draft the plan and issues a draft to the parent/YP, allowing 15 days for representations and for the parent/YP to request a school/college. The entire cycle from request to final plan should be completed within 20 weeks, however there can be exceptions to this, usually in more complex circumstances.

2.6 Percentage of Decisions to Issue

Feb 25	Ma 25	Apr 25	Ma 25	Jun 25	Jul 25	Au 25	Se 25	Oct 25	No 25	De 25	Jan 26	Fe 26
72.	85.	80.	83.	79.	84 %	79.	77.	76.	74.	76.	77.	81.
												%

2.7 If the decision is made that the issuance of an EHC plan is not necessary, parents are informed of this decision and also informed that the school can contact an SEN Inclusion Advisor to arrange an SEN Support Planning meeting. Parents are also signposted to the Local Offer and IASK. Support can also be provided from the Kent Resilience Hub.

2.8 Refusal to provide an EHCP or to agree to place a child in a specialist provision is not analogous with stating that the child has no need. As it is highly unlikely that any application would be made in the absence of clear need, this creates an unavoidable scenario of disappointment and frustration in the event that official assessments identify that additional stages of support are not appropriate. Councils have a legal duty to advise parents at any stage of the assessment or annual review processes that if they are unhappy with decisions that have been made, they can initially be reconsidered through mediation, or where necessary, through Tribunal. This means that through the lifetime of assessment and annual reviews, there are potentially hundreds of opportunities for appeal against council decisions. There is also no limit on the number of appeals that can be lodged for a single pupil. Sole focus on the volume of appeals is therefore an inaccurate way of assessing a council's delivery of this statutory function.

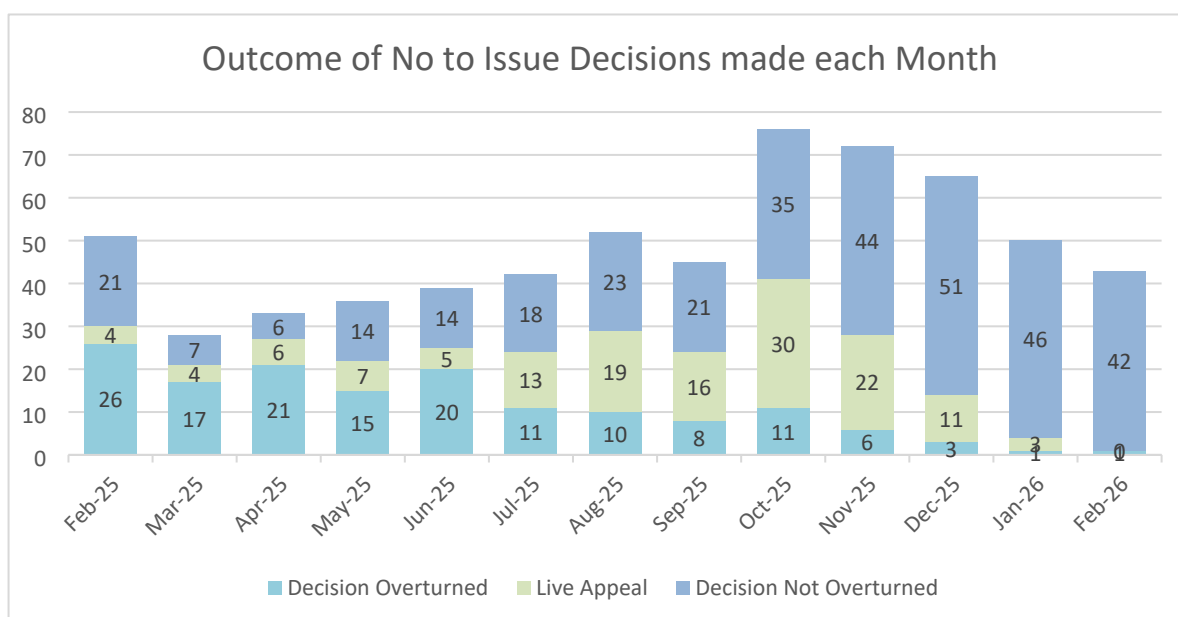
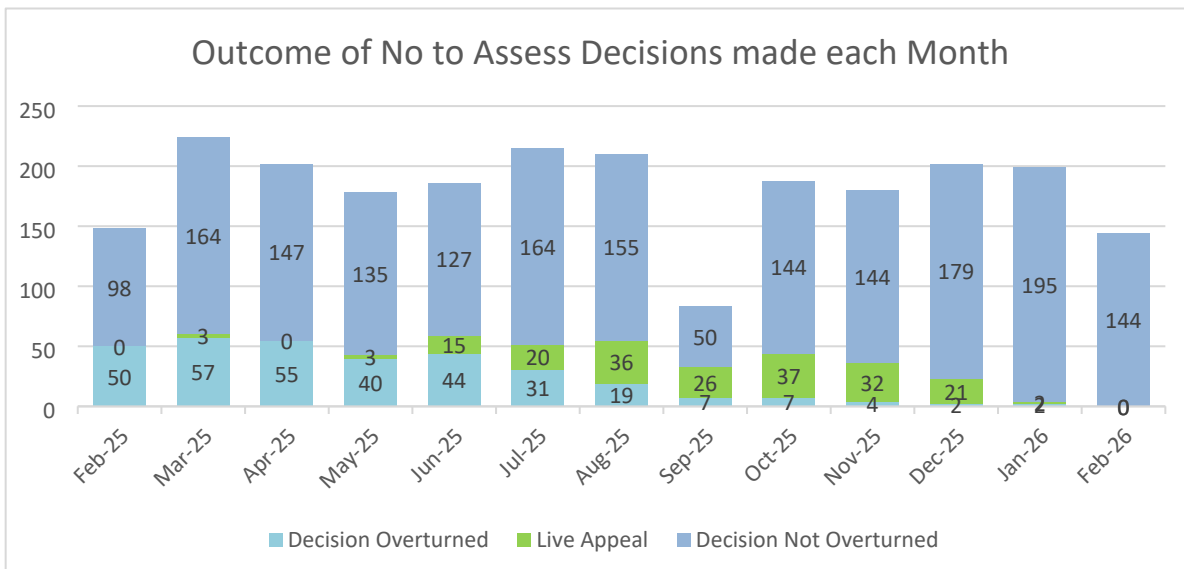
2.9 Percentage of plans completed within 20 weeks

***Above national average completion rate**

Feb 25	Mar 25	Apr 25	May 25	Jun 25	Jul 25	Aug 25	Sept 25	Oct 25	Nov 25	Dec 25	Jan 26	Feb 26
89.9 %	81.7 %	85.3 %	60.2 %	53.9 %	51.9 %	41.5 %	44.3 %	50.6 %	49.0 %	33.3 %	31.6 %	77.8 %

2.10 KCC currently has a rolling average of 58% completion of EHCPs within the 20 week period, however this includes a lower than average completion rate over four months which was a consequence of specialist staff capacity. This has been addressed and we are expecting completion rates to continue at the February level going forward. By the end of February, there were 15 cases which were over 20 weeks, of 117 plans completed.

- 2.11 A key question is what confidence can there be in the decision-making process? A complete review and refresh to ensure consistency was undertaken in late 2023/early 2024. The new process was then observed and assessed through an external peer review and input from Inclusion Champions (KCC's team of serving education leaders who also undertake consultancy work for the LA to support improvements in SEND) to strengthen further. KCC SEND has a Quality Assurance team which regularly undertakes audits on the SEND system and EHCPs, the findings of which feed into multi agency audits (which include parents). Alongside this senior leaders undertake regular dip sampling. Findings from audits, complaints, the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman cases and from senior leaders dip sampling are used to shape staff training and a Top Tips document which is issued weekly.
- 2.12 There is also a rigorous Quality Assurance process in place assessing the quality of EHCPs which includes DfE regularly considering a sample of plans and feedback through all the QA routes is routinely very positive.
- 2.13 There is a right to appeal at each stage and the table below shows the outcome where the decision to assess has been no. Where the decision is over-turned, it does not mean the original decision was wrong – it is often a consequence of further information being provided. The Tribunal system is also not currently required to consider the same information as Councils and can and does make a decision with the sole focus being on the individual about whom the appeal has been made with no consideration of wider implications. For example, where a school has submitted evidence that another child plus their equipment in an already over-crowded classroom would create a health and safety risk in the event of a fire, this evidence has been disregarded by the Tribunal in its decision. When KCC provides evidence that a child's needs could be met in an state funded and lower cost special school, with the same specialism as the independent school parents want, in the majority of cases the Tribunal will find in favour of the parent.
- 2.14 The SEN Reforms include proposals that Tribunal decisions will have to consider the resources available to Councils and their current financial circumstances before deciding on the individual offer for each child. This requirement is inherent in any internal Council decision as we must ensure both value for money and that one child does not benefit to the detriment of another. There are no similar requirements on current Tribunal decisions, and it is of interest that based on all new placements in 2024-25, 29% of placements in the independent sector are the outcome of Tribunal decisions.
- 2.15 The number of appeals is much lower for the most recent months as they are still in the process of being submitted within timescale of four months. The second table shows the outcome when the Request to assess has been agreed, then a decision is made not to Issue an EHCP.



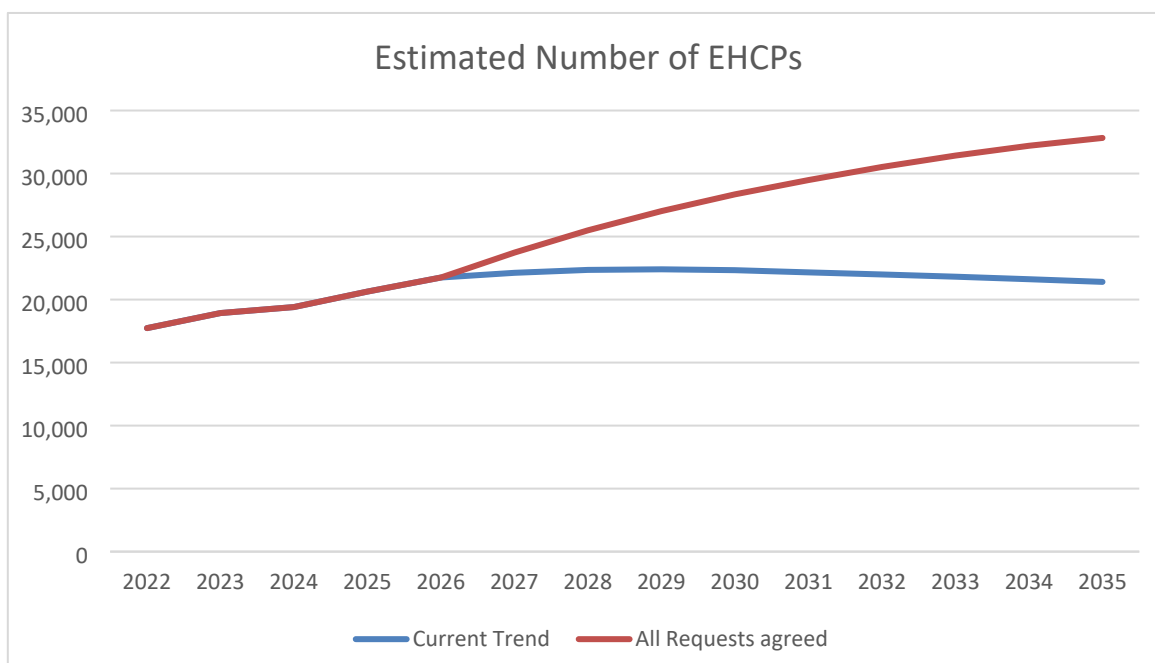
2.16 The report discussing why Kent may be an outlier in regards to SEN, which was considered during Scrutiny Committee 22 January 2026 ([Scrutiny Report Final - January 2026.pdf](#)), examines how Kent’s decision making has deviated considerably from the South East and national trends in recent years, with higher levels of agreement for EHCPs and specialist placements. This paper provides useful additional context which informs Kent’s current levels of demand and should be considered alongside this report, rather than replicating similar points here.

2.17 Identifying appropriate school places for pupils

The Code of Practice includes a mainstream school presumption. Over time special schools have become more popular and as well as Kent being an outlier in the proportion of children and young people with an EHCP, we are also an outlier in the proportion attending special schools, both state funded and independent. Whilst there is a stronger preference amongst a cohort of parents for a special school place, this does not necessarily result in better outcomes for pupils. Ofsted recently published a report presenting findings from an analysis of GCSE outcomes for pupils with Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs), comparing those educated in mainstream schools with those in special schools (so comparative pupils) over thirteen academic years from 2011/12 through 2023/24, using data from the National Pupil Database.

2.18 After controlling for prior attainment, type of special educational need, and demographic characteristics, pupils with EHCPs in mainstream schools achieve on average 0.56 grades higher across their combined English and Maths GCSEs than comparable pupils in special schools. This comparison is based on the 94,927 pupils with EHCPs who took GCSEs between 2011/12 and 2023/24 — representing approximately 22% of all pupils with EHCPs. This is caveated that the report identifies an association, not a causal effect, however given the cost differential between the two types of school, this needs further analysis. These themes are identified in the current School’s White Paper and SEND Reforms consultation and so will likely benefit from ongoing national debate and analysis. The full report can be seen here [GCSE outcomes for pupils with EHCPs: mainstream versus special school settings](#)

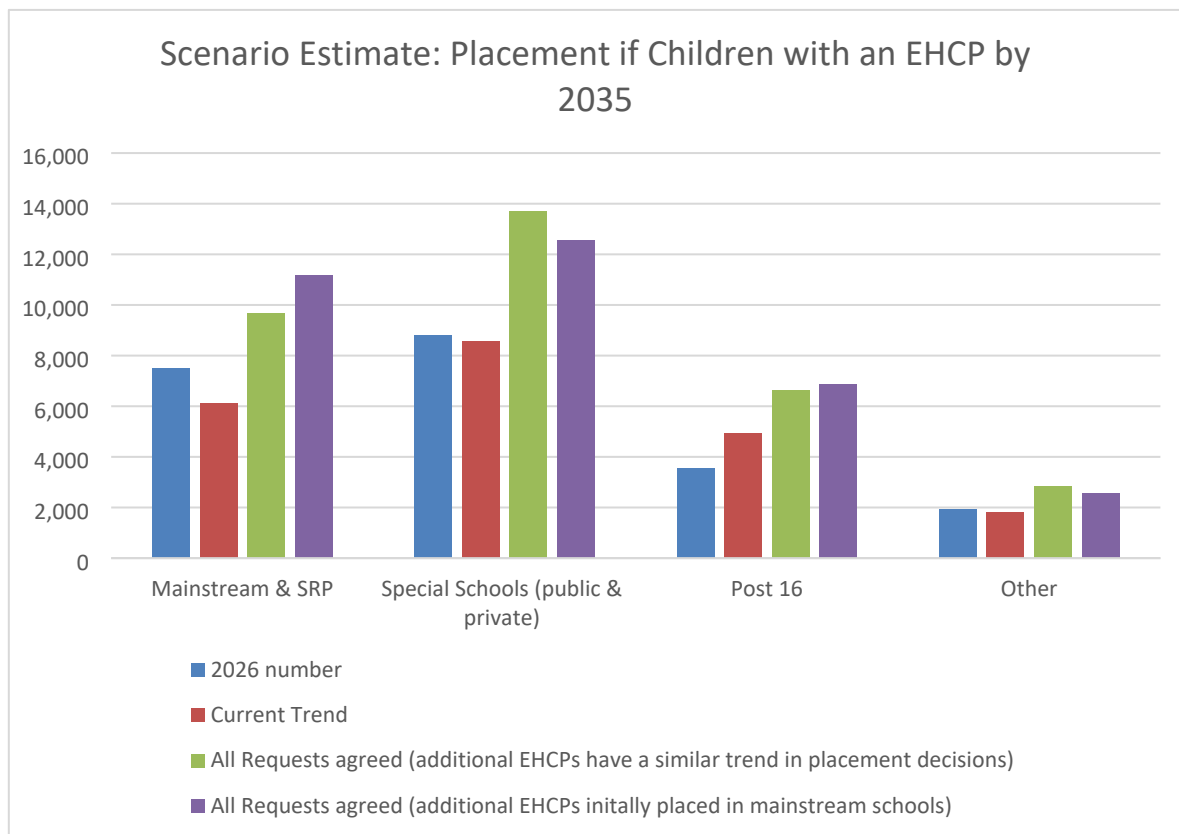
2.19 Clarifying the impact of not applying thresholds In addition to meeting it’s broader duties, application of the statutory framework through decision making processes is critical to the financial position of KCC. Below, we have modelled two different scenarios to estimate demand for SEN services currently funded by the High Needs Block to demonstrate both the demand and the possible cost of delivering a SEN service in response to all requests, which in turn would need to be fully funded by Government in order to be financially sustainable. This model assumes all requests for an ECHP would be agreed leading to around 33,000 EHCPs by 2035 as opposed to our current decision-making approach (see above) which would result in around 21,400 over the same period (around the same number as 2026). The 2026-27 staffing budget for the SEN and Educational psychology service is £18 million, this would have to increase by around 50% (£9 million) to manage the full assessment process and maintenance the resulting EHCPs. These forecasts include the impact of population changes and assume request rates remain steady during this period (no assumption has been made in requests increasing further).



2.20 The cost of educating children with EHCPs is funded from school budgets (if placed in a mainstream setting i.e. primary & secondary school, FE college) and the High Needs Block (to fund top up cost in mainstream or special school/other places in both the public & private sector). Further modelling has been undertaken to estimate the education cost of support 33,000 EHCPs, based on whether all additional EHCPs are placed in mainstream settings or if they are placed in similar proportions to the current trends of placements for new EHCPs. Children are then aged through each year, with any subsequent placement

changes based on current trends (an adjustment has also been made to reflect parental preference at year 6 to 7 phase transfer). The reality is if all requests for an EHCP were agreed it is likely placement changes are likely to fall between these two extremes.

2.21 The Graph below presents the placement profile by 2035 compared to current trends.



2.22 The forecast change in the distribution of children across education between now (2026) and the 2035 shows the estimated impact of current decision-making (outlined above in sections 2.1-2.15) and changes in population growth over this period. This forecast indicates the current pattern of children in specialist placements would continue, therefore the overspends would continue and would increase further with inflation (unless Government choose to increase funding). Therefore, under current funding arrangements, KCC needs to implement further actions to reduce these ongoing costs, the extent we will be able and expected to do so will be informed by the outcome of SEN reform plan.

2.23 The graph above also indicates that if all requests were agreed by 2035, the Council would need to source around 12,500 to 13,700 special school places. We currently commission 8,800 from state-funded special schools (6,700) and independent schools (2,100). These are our highest cost education placements. and would cost an additional £150m to £275m a year depending on the extent to which places would have to be sourced in the independent sector rather than state-funded special schools. Additional state-funded special school places would also come at a capital cost, whilst the Council has been successful in securing Government funding for three new special schools/alternative provision, this only equates to 450 places, and whilst there are plans for further expansions (294 places), this is the context our current special schools are at or over capacity. A new average-sized special school costs in the region of at least £25-30m. If we changed our current decision-making to meet the needs of all requests this could take total revenue spending on SEN up to around £1 billion a year in Kent (when school, administration and transport costs are included). In addition, to significant capital

investment (assuming sufficient sites could be sourced).

2.24 The Government have set out their position that continuing to increase specialist provision in the way that is depicted above, is not financially sustainable, or should be necessary, to improve the outcomes for all children, if the wider SEN system can be reformed focused on quality inclusive mainstream education across our early years, schools and post 16 sector as set out in section 3.

3 The School White Paper – Every Child Achieving and Thriving and associated correspondence

3.1 The White Paper together with a SEND consultation were published on 23rd February 2026. Every Child Achieving and Thriving is part of the government's wider Children's Opportunity Mission, that focuses on

- Best Start in Life
- Every Child achieving and thriving
- Skills for opportunity and growth
- Family Security.

3.2 The policy aims to improve outcomes for all children by addressing key issues of attainment, disadvantage, Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) and attendance. The White Paper's proposals include

- Halving the disadvantage gap particularly supporting children from low-income backgrounds to achieve higher grades at GCSE
- Increasing school attendance
- Boosting teacher recruitment and retention, particularly incentivising headteachers to work in high-needs areas
- Enhancing the national curriculum
- Providing enrichment entitlement where schools will be required to provide access to civic engagement, arts and culture, nature and outdoor activities, sport and wider life skills.
- Providing enrichment entitlement: A new enrichment entitlement requiring schools to provide access to civic engagement, arts and culture, nature and outdoor activities, sport, and wider life skills.

3.3 With regard specifically to SEND, the reforms are built around five principles:

- 1. Early: support as soon as needs are identified
- 2. Local: learning close to home, alongside peers, rather than travelling long distances
- 3. Fair: settings resourced to meet commonly occurring needs and clear legal rights and national standards to secure support for children who need it
- 4. Effective: evidence-based approaches that work
- 5. Shared: education, health/care and family support working together.

3.4 Early years is a critical time and it is welcome that Best Start in Life is integral to these reforms and officers are currently considering how best to achieve better integration of developments across Children's Services. A key focus is on supporting mainstream early years settings, schools and colleges to be more inclusive through capital investment for adaptation of buildings, training for staff and improved access to specialists such as educational psychologists and therapists (referred to as Experts at Hand in the White Paper and SEND consultation paper).

3.5 Every mainstream setting will be expected to deliver a strong universal offer – high-quality, inclusive teaching for all children which draws from a clear evidence base, with pupils able

to access to three flexible layers of support – Targeted, Targeted Plus and Specialist – on top of the universal offer as and when needed. Alongside this, there is an intention that every secondary school and the same number of primary schools will have an inclusion base to provide targeted interventions. Schools will be expected to work in partnerships or groups and make a contribution to pooled budgets. With regard to special schools and alternative provision, the expectation is they will continue to provide high quality education for children with the most complex needs, while also acting as outreach hubs to support mainstream settings.

3.6 It is intended that all children and young people with SEND will have an Individual Support Plan. Those with complex needs will retain an EHCPs, however this will be associated with support over and above what can routinely be provided by mainstream settings. Currently, the legislation and guidance allows for a great deal of local autonomy and this lack of national consistency will be addressed through new National Inclusion Standards and increased clarity about what good looks like through guidance. Specialist Provision Packages for the cohort of children with an EHCP will be agreed nationally and EHCPs will be digital and standardised. For children and young people with an existing EHCP, transition to the new system will begin from 2030, once the new inclusive mainstream system has been fully built.

3.7 The DfE has declared a welcomed intention to cap independent school costs. Accountability will continue to be through Ofsted (and for Local Areas Care Quality Commission) will inspect all settings on how well they support children with SEND including whether the right support is in place and high expectations are being met.

3.8 KCC and the key SEND reforms
 Though the government at the time of the last inspection in 2022 was developing policy on SEND, given the very poor state of services in KCC the decision was taken to press ahead with changes informed by horizon scanning and taking advice from DfE and NHS England representatives working with KCC. As it has taken four years for draft national policy to be published, and Kent has improved services significantly during this time, pushing ahead was the right decision. There was a risk that the KCC SEND transformation programme could have been out of alignment with national policy, but actually the work that has been done aligns well with the contents of the White Paper, the SEND consultation and other documentation.

3.9 This table includes a summary of KCC work in relation to the key developments

Achieving and Thriving WP and SEND consultation	KCC action
Capital investment to adapt mainstream buildings	Accessibility Strategy 2025 to 2028 School Access Initiative Sensory/environmental audit tool
Strong universal offer of teaching and learning in mainstream settings	A wide range of support which started in 2020 <u>Training</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Individual Early Years, Primary and Secondary SENCO briefings • Nuture UK accredited training • Inclusive leadership • Autism Education Trust

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • PINS (Promoting Inclusion of Neurodiversity in Schools) • This is me • Headteacher Briefings • IThrive • Dingley's Promise (Early years specific) • Portage/SENI (Early Years specific) <p><u>Guidance documents</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A Countywide Approach to Inclusive Education (CATIE) • Special educational needs mainstream core standards • Mainstream Core Standards guide for parents • SEND Reflection Tool - KELSI • The Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Reflection Tool • Kent Continuum of Need and Provision - KELSI and case studies • Kents-approach-to-literacy-development-difficulties-inc.-dyslexia.pdf • What 'good' looks like for SLCN in Kent - KELSI • A variety of documentation on the KELSI website and through the weekly Headteacher briefing <p><u>Specialist staff</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inclusion Adviser team • Inclusion Champions team • Specialist Teaching and Learning Service • School Improvement Team
National Inclusion Standards	<p>For links to these documents please see above</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CATIE • Mainstream Core Standards • SEND Continuum of needs and provision
Experts at Hand	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Professional Resource Group - KELSI • Inclusion Champions team • Family Hub • Early Help • Health visiting • Designated Social Care Officer
Inclusion bases	<p>Specialist Resource Base programme expansion CYPE Cabinet Committee 18/11/2025 (Public Pack)Agenda Document for Children's, Young People and Education Cabinet Committee, 18/11/2025 10:00</p>
Special schools meeting the needs of children with the most complex needs	<p>Special school review CYPE Cabinet Committee November 2024 (Public Pack)Supplement - Items 6, 10 and 12 Agenda Supplement for Children's, Young People and Education Cabinet Committee, 21/11/2024 14:00</p>
Special schools	<p>Some outreach is already underway. LA officers are working with groups of special schools by type to agree a countywide offer to</p>

providing outreach	contribute to the Professional Resource Group
Schools working in local partnerships	Communities of schools - KELSI
Funding arrangements and Pooled school budgets	Communities of Schools Financial Information - KELSI Proposed development of revised funding model for mainstream and special schools using standard descriptors to confirm funding arrangements.
Capping costs of independent schools	Improvements to commissioning of independent special schools Commissioning and Procurement of a new framework contract for Independent and Non-Maintained Special Schools

4. Work being undertaken to improve SEND system quality and financial sustainability in Kent

- 4.1 The White Paper and SEND consultation reflects a shift away from a system that maintains almost a total focus on individual children, to a strengthened consideration of context, particularly the educational institution which the child or young person attends. The ambition in the White Paper and SEND consultation is to develop inclusion capacity in the mainstream sector. This reflects the approach that has been taken by KCC to improve system quality, educational experience and financial sustainability, alongside improvements to statutory process. KCC has had a long -term focus on developing organisational (school/setting) capacity particularly in the mainstream sector. In January's Scrutiny Committee Report ([Scrutiny Report Final - January 2026.pdf](#)), there was a detailed description of the system-wide work on developing capacity on neurodiversity in schools. This section provides an overview of work on SEND inclusion plus three specific areas where the capacity-building approach has been taken – Early Years, Speech and Language Therapy and Communities of Schools.
- 4.2 The Countywide Approach to Inclusive Education underpins the work in mainstream settings to develop their practice, together with the Mainstream Core Standards. Following extensive engagement and co-construction with the Kent education sector, a final version was published in 2022 and this will be reviewed in 2028. Whilst the CATIE pre-dates the White Paper by four years, the approach is completely in line with the government's aspirations to develop more SEND inclusive practice in mainstream schools. The CATIE has four priorities, again reflected in the White Paper-
- Develop a school led system
 - Access to additional support and intervention
 - A holistic approach to wider services
 - A focus on transitions.
- 4.3 Countywide phase specific (Early years, Primary and Secondary) forums for Special Educational Needs Coordinators (SENCO) were established in 2022. These provide opportunities to share good practice, receive updates from a range of practitioners and for SENCOs to share their concerns and training needs. There is on-going evaluation to monitor changes and trends across the two phases, materials can be seen here [Countywide SENCO forums year 2025/2026 - KELSI](#)

4.4 In the absence of any national guidance, KCC commissioned Dr Alison Edkins, Director of SEND for the Valley Invicta Trust and member of the Inclusion Champion team to develop a SEND Continuum of Need and Provision. This guidance, which was developed, 'By schools, for Schools' between 2023 – 2025 is currently still in draft form so that it could be amended when government policy was published and has put KCC and Kent schools that have been following the guidance in an excellent position to progress with the national reforms as supporting training (again developed by Kent education leaders) is now being rolled out. Wider services are now starting to use the guidance to evaluate and further develop their offer to schools. and further training has been developed by school leaders to support other leaders in how to develop their offer. The document and supporting case studies drawn from Kent schools can be seen here [Kent Continuum of Need and Provision - KELSI](#)

4.5 **Early Years reform** : Following a period of review and consultation, a revised model of support for early years settings in Kent was fully implemented in September 2025. This focuses on embedding inclusive practice across early years settings, earlier intervention due to streamlined processes and referral pathways and increasing the capacity of the workforce to engaging directly with children and settings by reducing bureaucracy.

4.6 The model implemented changes to the previous way that support was provided, including:

- Universal support moving to a link practitioner model rather than a self-referral process. As a result, every group setting and childminder in the county has access to support from a designated universal practitioner.
- Implementing support at a targeted level of intervention, where previously there was no targeted support.
- Implementing a model of specialist support that is based on an outreach model.

4.7 Between September and December 2025, 368 out of 728 (51%) group settings in Kent received a face to face visit from their Early Years Quality Advisor (universal support) and 511 (71%) a virtual visit. Support based on the needs of child is allocated to settings through a Professional Resources Group. The focus is on enabling settings and childminders to develop the skills and confidence to support vulnerable children, especially those with SEND, in their mainstream setting. This is done through a coaching and modelling approach.

4.8 As of term 3 2025-2026 academic year, a total of 351 requests for support have been made to PRG from group settings. Of these, 47 requests were for cohorts of children and 304 requests for support for individual children, resulting in a total of 495 children being referred to the PRG. 73.7% children referred are in -1 year group, and 79.4% have communication and interaction as their identified need type. Of these, 54.6% children are offered support via SIPS workers at a targeted level of support and 38.5% specialist support via the Early Years Outreach Intervention Service.

4.9 A post intervention questionnaire has been developed to understand the impact of support provided and inform a continuous improvement cycle. Between Term 1 and 3, 184 responses have been received with:

- 86% respondents agreed that they feel supported in applying the guidance and strategies demonstrated;
- 89% agreed that they feel confident in applying the guidance and strategies demonstrated;
- 86% were satisfied that support was accessed in a timely manner;
- 85% agreed that the support provided them with additional skills and knowledge to support the child or children;

- 83% agreed that the support received has increased their confidence to support the children or children;
 - 74% ranked the support received as very effective;
 - 25% rated progress made as 'very good' and 36% rating progress as 'good';
 - 43% agreed that some of the progress made was a result of the intervention, 39% that most of the progress made was a result of the intervention and 7% that all of the progress made was a result of the intervention.
- 4.10 Qualitative feedback has been positive in relation to the revised model and the support being provided. There remain areas for improvement and concerns from settings about how interventions and new strategies can be implemented when child to adult ratios in the setting are high and how support can be accessed to enable EHCP and funding applications.
- 4.11 Another key strand of the review was to implement a coordinated, free at the point of access training offer for settings. Consequently a core and enhanced training offer has been identified and is accessible via KELSI. This offer aims to ensure that settings are able to access quality, affordable and accessible training programmes relevant to supporting children with SEND.
- 4.12 The Balanced System® for Speech, Language and Communication Needs (SLCN) In 2022 Speech and Language Therapy (SaLT) waiting lists for assessment and interventions were very long, up to 2 and half years, and a lack of support for children and families while waiting. Practitioners had large caseloads, with children remaining on caseloads for many years.
- 4.13 SaLT services were delivered by three different providers who all worked separately and differently. This resulted in inequitable access across Kent – in some areas children had to meet specific service criteria or have an EHCP to receive intervention from the SaLT Service. The service providers and commissioners recognised the need to work differently and committed to implement the Balanced System® which is a framework for delivery based on core delivery principles of
- Easy access
 - Developing targeted offer and
 - Place-based service delivery (so families do not have to travel to appointments).

The model develops capacity through SaLTs providing training, guidance and support of the workforce and parents/carers, building a stronger universal and targeted offer which is accredited with the SaLT direct delivery being more focused on specialist provision. Following a pilot with 21 schools in Kent the approach has been rolled out across Kent. Since launching in 2022, 31 Kent schools and early years settings have been accredited and a further 29 are working towards accreditation, including 11 schools who started in September 2025 as part of Kent's PINS project. A Celebration Event last summer highlighted the impact of accredited schools and settings and enabled us to map and share strong SLCN practice. This information is now available to all schools though What good looks like for SLCN in Kent, along with a support pack to help them strengthen provision for minimally speaking pupils which can be seen here [What 'good' looks like for SLCN in Kent - KELSI](#)

- 4.14 Work has been undertaken to align commissioning of SaLT services. The new NHS Community Services contract and KCC contract for speech and language therapy are both using a Balanced System service specification. Kent Community Health Foundation Trust (KCHFT) was awarded both contracts and began delivery late in 2025. This has involved TUPE of staff from East Kent Hospital Universities Foundation Trust (EKHUFT) to KCHFT,

a significant undertaking, but in the medium to longer term there is confidence this will lead to improved equity of service. For time being, Medway Community Health Care (MCH) continue to deliver services in Swale under KCHFT as lead provider. The inequity due to a difference in providers is being addressed.

4.15 Whole system agreed approaches are vital in supporting this type of transformation and strong collaborations including education providers (schools, settings, and council-run services), Family Hubs and Health Visiting have taken an agreed approach. Specific SLCN partnership groups have been established for both Early Years and School Aged children bringing professionals together from across the system to review and develop the offer for Speech, Language and Communication Needs (SLCN).

4.16 There has been system-wide investment in improving parental engagement and co-production. For example, the SLCN Parent Engagement group has enabled families to shape the offer in Kent, including provision of support for pupils who do not attend school. Where specialist support is needed, children and families with the professional co-create meaningful functional goals to enable measurement of progress.

4.17 Previously there were long waiting lists for support and so improving access to SaLT support was vital. There has been a focus on increasing access through a variety of routes through the roll out of the Balanced System-

- Higher levels of competence and confidence in the wider workforce means that there is better access to the right support for SLCN – for example Health Visitors and Early Years Practitioners access core online interactive training ‘The Prime Importance of Communication & Language’ – (following training, 93% of practitioners reported they were confident or very confident to support children’s communication). There is bespoke support for school staff for example through Coaching Cycles for specific interventions and approaches
- Early identification of needs improved through Early Language Identification Measure (ELIM) screening delivered by Health Visiting service and priority access
- Partnership working established with Family Hubs – including through development and delivery of Talking Walk-ins (Talking Walk-in Service | Kent Community Health NHS Foundation Trust) and targeted interventions (The Communication Tree and Little Talkers). A SLCN volunteer role has been developed to support within these sessions
- By being ‘place based’, we have built stronger relationships with nurseries and schools, including those who were historically hard to engage. Our offer is more consistent, fair and needs-led
- Influence reaching further into other services such as occupational therapy and physiotherapy who are keen to adopt the Balanced System® principles after witnessing the outcomes for CYP. Integrated therapy teams are more knowledgeable about where and how to access support for children and young people with SLCN. Within education, KCC have adopted link practitioner model for other support services.

4.18 The impact measures include –

- As of 1st February 2026, 44 children had been waiting longer than 12 weeks for initial contact with the SaLT service compared with 407 in May 2023 (NB. This excludes 87 children in Swale who have not yet launched these service changes)
- As of December 2025, 68% of schools had met with a link therapist and had a development plan in place
- The number of children on specialist caseloads has more than halved (5161 in May 2023 vs 2377 in January 2026 excluding Swale), reflecting a shift towards more focused, time-limited intervention. Children now receive active support when needed, and are not held on caseloads indefinitely thanks to a stronger universal and targeted

offer.

4.19 Work continues through

- Developing an equitable offer: Building on the improvements that have already been made countywide to provide an equitable service, the key next step is transformation of the SaLT service within the part of Swale covered by MCH including an offer of pre-school drop ins ('Talking Walk-ins') and link therapists for every school in this remaining patch of Kent
- Strengthen the universal offer including public campaigns to support parents in their role as primary communication partners and promoting oracy education in schools
- Building on previous parent engagement work to look at how the voices of children and families shape service delivery – with support from a Canterbury Christchurch University researcher
- Improvements to the offer of support for children and young people with SLCN (or possible SLCN) who do not attend school (for reasons such as electively home educated or awaiting an educational placement). This is being taken forward by a cross-service working group
- Working within new Professional Resource Groups for both early years and schools to develop more joined up and effective support for early years settings and schools. Ongoing development of link therapist support to every school with SaLT service mobilising workforce capacity to ensure more school-based working
- Work to develop strong quality assurance processes for key SLCN Provisions in Kent, to ensure quality is maintained or improved, with fidelity to the Balanced System® framework and principles
- Health Visiting service to launch ELIM in Ashford in April 2026 (last district to roll out, delay due to staffing/recruitment challenges).

4.20 **The Communities of Schools** refers to 53 geographic-based groups of schools, co-terminus with Primary Care Networks, that all mainstream schools in Kent are members of. Grouping schools in this way enables them to work in collaboration to share good practice and resources (for example sensory rooms or specialist staff) as well as to access specialist staff including health services easily through the supporting Professional Resource Groups. The principles of the Communities of Schools were agreed by schools in April 2023 and the focus is on supporting schools to meet needs locally, prioritising greatest need and not individual schools and ensuring equitable access to support. Each community has an independent Chair and a Community SEND budget. Consistency is addressed through five Community Chairs meetings annually and through Countywide Fora.

4.21 This organisational change is expected to enhance educational outcomes for pupils, particularly those with additional and special needs and deliver better value for money. The system went 'live' in September 2025 after three years of preparation, engagement and consultation. A moderation exercise took place in December 2025 to explore how schools are using the system and this intelligence is being used to refine and develop the model further.

4.22 The feedback highlighted where improvements need to be made to the operating guidance and communication channels which are being reviewed by the Communities steering group and changes and improvements disseminated through the Community Chairs meetings as well as the Countywide Fora.

4.23 The White Paper makes reference to all schools being expected to engage in local infrastructures to share good practice and develop strategy to meet local needs, as well as pooling some elements of budget, so it can be seen that again Kent is already delivering on government policy.

5. Conclusions

- 5.1 With the publication of the white paper and accompanying SEN Reform consultation, the Government is setting out its vision on what a “Sustainable SEN System” looks like, focusing on upfront and future funding to support mainstream schools whilst recognising it will take 10 years to fully secure the wider benefits. In terms of what this will cost? The Government’s view is that this can be achieved by investing over £7 billion nationally in the next 3 years along with a further £3.7 billion capital.
- 5.2 It continues to remain unclear, how much funding Government will make available to cover historic commitments, whilst this national transformation is implemented, leaving a question mark over whether Kent’s current SEN system will be financially sustainable over the next few years and so the SEND deficit will continue to be a significant financial risk to the Council until this is resolved. What is clear is a SEN system with no checks or balances is not sustainable unless the Government is willing to invest significantly more (for KCC this would equate to double our current funding allocation). In the meantime, KCC is a good position to implement the new reforms, much of which will build on the work already underway.

6. Recommendation(s)

Recommendation(s):

The committee is asked to note the contents of the report.

7. Contact Details

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8. Appendices

Appendix A : **Special Education Needs (SEN) Deficit Announcement 09/02/2026**