
From: Christine McInnes, Corporate Director for Children, Young People & Education

To: Beverley Fordham, Cabinet Member for Education & Skills

Subject: Expert at Hands (EaH) and Local Authority (LA) Special Educational Needs & Disability Grant

Decision no: 26/00043

Key Decision : Yes

Classification: Unrestricted

Past Pathway of report: Children, Young People and Education Cabinet Committee,
14 July 2026

Future Pathway of report: Cabinet Member Decision

Electoral Division: All

Is the decision eligible for call-in? Yes

Summary:

The report seeks approval to accept and deploy the Expert at Hands (EaH) and Local Authority (LA) Special Educational Needs & Disability (SEND) Transformation Grant. This is a new grant from the Department of Education, to be received between 2026 and 2029, to help support the implementation of the Government's proposed SEN reforms.

This report also provides a summary of the Government's recent requirement for all Councils to submit a draft SEN reform Plan by 19th June for feedback and agreement by the Autumn.

Recommendation(s):

That the Cabinet Member for Education and Skills consider the following proposal:

- a) Accept the Expert at Hands (EaH) and Local Authority (LA) Special Educational Needs & Disability (SEND) Transformation Grant from the Department for Education for 2026 to 2029; and the deployment of the grant funding in accordance with the grant terms & conditions including the development and implementation of an Expert at Hands Offer and actions to support the design, review and implementation of wider SEN reform activity; .
- b) Delegate authority to the Corporate Director of Children, Young People and Education to take all necessary actions to administer and deploy the grant funding, develop and implement the Expert at Hands offer, and deliver associated SEND reform activity in accordance with the grant terms and conditions; and
- c) Delegate authority to the Corporate Director of Children, Young People and Education to take relevant actions including but not limited to, negotiating, finalising the terms of and entering into relevant contracts, contract variations and other legal agreements as required, to implement the decision.

As set out within the RoD (appendix a)

1. Introduction

- 1.1 In February 2026, the Government published its White Paper: Every Child Achieving and Thriving and accompanying SEN reform Consultation: Putting Children & Young People First, setting out its vision for schools and Special Educational Needs & Disability (SEND) reform to support every child & young person (CYP) to achieve and thrive. This included the commitment to invest £1.8 billion nationally over next three years to develop the Expert at Hands (EaH) Offer along with a further £0.2 billion to support Local Authorities to deliver future national SEN reforms.
- 1.2 In mid-April, the Department of Education announced the 2026-27 individual LA allocations for the EaH and LA SEND Transformation Fund, along with indicative national allocations for 2027-28 and 2028-29. For Kent County Council this equated to £12.2 million in 2026-27, and approximately £21.2 million and £24.0 million respectively for the next 2 years. The detailed guidance and updated terms & conditions of the grant were then published on 5th June.
- 1.3 The EaH offer is a key pillar of the Government's proposed SEND Reforms, a long-term (10-year) plan, to achieve a single, inclusive system for CYP with SEND, with high-quality local support. This funding is expected to be invested

over the next 3-years, to improve mainstream settings access to specialist support, alongside the roll-out of wider legislative and system reform. The Government has set an ambitious timeline, with LAs (in conjunction with the Integrated Care Boards, ICB) expected to work at pace to co-design and begin roll-out of new or enhanced services during 2026, even though detailed guidance for EaH to inform local planning has only recently been published (5th June) and other SEND reform changes are still being developed.

- 1.4 This decision is required to accept the funding for the 3-year programme, providing the terms and conditions remain similar each year, and deploy the grant funding in accordance with the grant conditions and future DfE guidance.

2. Key Considerations

2.1 The EaH and LA SEN Transformation Fund is for LAs, working in partnership with the local system partners, to provide an offer of advice and direct support to early years education settings, mainstream schools and further education colleges. It is intended to invest in services that individual education settings cannot commission alone, such as specialist health & education support, to improve the quality of inclusive education for CYP with SEND and strengthen the capability of mainstream education settings to meet the needs of CYP with SEND more effectively, as set out in the White Paper and accompanying SEN Reform consultation.

2.2 Local Authorities are expected to work in partnership with ICBs to develop and deliver a new EaH offer for mainstream education settings which provides a new route to access expert advice and support from education & health professionals including:

- Educational psychology services & specialist teachers
- Additional outreach including from alternative provision, special schools & post 16 institutions.
- Speech & Language therapists and Occupational therapists
- A new Speech & Language Therapist Advanced Practitioner in every ICB area

2.3 The DfE are expecting this offer to provide time-limited:

- Support teachers - provide support through observations, light touch assessment and advising strategic for individual CYP.
- Jointly deliver time-limited group or whole class intervention, to embed in daily learning.

- Jointly develop resources & workshops for parents to help them understand and support their child's development.
- Provide support advice & guidance to mainstream education settings staff to build knowledge & skills and overcome barriers to inclusion and better meet diverse needs. Whilst ensuring the voice of parents & carers informs decision-making and provision.
- Provide special school & alternative provision outreach services in mainstream settings or if required, extra help or temporary direct support in specialist setting with a view to integrate the child or young person back into the mainstream setting.

2.4 The DfE expect the EaH offer to be co-designed with a range of stakeholders including: the ICB, mainstream settings' (Early Years, Schools & Post 16) representatives, alternative provision and specialist settings representatives, health providers, parent carer forums and CYP voice.

2.5 The grant will also fund associated administration costs of EaH offer and wider SEN reforms including evaluating existing SEN support services to mainstream schools and developing, submitting and implementing future SEND reforms.

2.6 The delivery and administration of the services funded from the grant are expected to be through both the LA and system partners (including health) but will be confirmed as part of the planning process.

2.7 Local areas are responsible for defining the exact offer and distribution of resources, according to local circumstances within national expectations as set out within the guidance.

2.8 The grant is designed to build on and enhance existing local capacity and good practice across the Local Area (including both LA and ICB commissioned services). The grant is not expected to be substituted to fund existing spend. Kent has historically chosen to invest in a range of SEND support services for schools and early years providers including countywide training, Specialist Teaching and Learning Service, the recently refreshed early years offer (including targeted and specialist services) and Professional Resource Group supporting the Community of Schools Model. Along with commissioning joint services with the ICB including the Speech and Language Balance System and piloting the Partnerships for Inclusion of Neurodiversity in Schools (PINs) and "This Is Me" project (supporting CYP with neurodivergence without requiring a formal diagnosis). The majority of these services are funded from the High Needs Block of the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG). This puts Kent in a strong position, enabling the use of existing

infrastructure to enhance services, in line with Government expectations, alongside commissioning new services where appropriate.

2.9 This funding is ring-fenced for preventative services to support inclusion in mainstream settings and cannot be used to provide support named in a child's Education, Health & Care Plan (EHCP); assessments for EHCP; provision schools should/can do themselves; or wider social care or family support. Education settings will still be expected to use their own budgets to support CYP with SEND, and Local Authorities will continue to use High Needs Funding (part of the Dedicated Schools Grant provided by the DfE) to fund existing SEN support services and support named in an EHCP.

3. Background

3.1 Previous reports to this Committee and others have set out the various challenges and planned improvements with SEND in Kent, the most recent at Scrutiny Committee in April 2026 ([C1 - What would a Sustainable SEND System Cost.pdf](#)). The Government have also recognised the need for both legislative and system wide changes to address systemic failures resulting in local services being overstretched, some CYP's needs escalating unnecessarily to crisis point, and unsustainable financial pressures. The intended reforms are set out in the long-awaited White Paper: Every Child Achieving and Thriving and accompanying SEN reform Consultation: Putting Children & Young People First, published in February. This is focused on creating a sustainable system that is **fair, effective, shared** and rooted in inclusion, where every child and young person receives high-quality support **early** and can thrive in their **local** early years setting, school or college. This will be delivered through:

- **An inclusive mainstream system:** where most CYP with SEND will be supported to achieve and thrive in mainstream education settings through high-quality teaching, inclusive practice, and targeted support. Settings will be equipped to create the right environments, and multidisciplinary professional support services will be commissioned at a group level to address needs efficiently.
- **Specialist support for CYP that need it:** Specialist settings will continue to play a vital role for CYP who require a substantially different curriculum or highly individualised approaches that cannot be delivered in mainstream educational settings.
- **Efficient and effective local delivery:** investment in and improvement of local services, including health, care, and wider workforces and resources, aimed at supporting the delivery of joined-up, place-based provision focused on whole school approaches so CYP can access the help they need, along with ensuring mainstream settings have the right

physical spaces. This is also expected to be linked to other CYP's related reform programmes including Families First Partnership (FFP), Best Start in Life, Neighbourhood Health Models (NHS), and Mental Health Support Teams.

3.2 To help deliver this transformation the Government have committed to provide significant funding over the next 3 years to invest in more preventative services, focused on delivering support **early** through a range of ring-fenced grants including: Mainstream Inclusion Fund (to be paid directly to schools, early years & colleges); Expert at Hands offer and LA Transformation Fund (the subject of this key decision); Best Start SEND Inclusion Advisors (to be based in Family Hubs); and investment in a national programme for teachers SEND workforce development. Additional capital funding will also be provided to support development of SEND places in mainstream schools and strategic special school delivery.

3.3 Alongside national system wide reform and investment the Government also require every **local area** to take full responsibility for driving significant improvement in the sustainable delivery of local services, demonstrated through the development and implementation of a local area SEND reform plan. This is expected to a local area plan, not a LA plan, whereby the Council acts as a "system convenor", taking the lead to bring together all system partners including health partners (Integrated Care Board & health providers), early years, Multi Academy Trusts (MATs), schools and colleges; working together with parents and carers to develop the plan and build the inclusive system. The first iteration of the local area SEND reform plan is intended to build on existing foundations and groundwork for the reforms setting out a collaborative commitment across the area, with the understanding this is intended to be iterative and reviewed annually, in conjunction with developing Government guidance and legislative change. The plan must also be agreed by the DfE, with this agreement linked to the receipt of High Needs Stability Grant (the first tranche of funding to pay off historic debt on the Dedicated Schools Grant currently being held by most LAs including Kent). This plan is not expected to supersede existing governance processes for respective partners and appropriate decisions-making will continue to take place for individual strategies and policy changes.

3.4 The requirement for local areas to produce a first iteration of the SEND reform plan was given 2 weeks after the publication of the White Paper and SEN reform consultation on 23rd February, for submission to the DfE by 19th June with review and feedback expected in the Autumn. This timescale for completion included an expectation the draft plan would be jointly developed with area partners including preparation and consultation with the education sector (whilst working around 3 weeks of school holidays during this period). It was also expected to be developed in lieu of the outcome of the Government's SEND reform consultation, and publication of detailed Government guidance on the Expert at Hands offer

and Inclusion Bases, two key areas of the reforms. Kent's draft plan recognises these constraints setting the expectation to complete further reviews and develop detailed proposals in the coming months with system partners, ahead of implementation. The draft plans also recognise the significant amount of transformation work already underway in Kent to improve SEND services.

3.5 Working with the Kent & Medway ICB, the SEND service undertook a series of engagement events with system partners to socialise the DfE requirements and seek feedback to shape initial priorities in the draft plan including briefing sessions with schools, and engaging with the Schools Funding Forum, Kent Association of Leaders in Education (KALE); Kent Special Educational Needs Trusts (KSENT) and Kent Parent and Carer Team (KPACT). An extended Kent Partnership Board also took place with representatives across the Kent education system in attendance. Feedback from the DfE appointed SEND and Finance advisors was also incorporated ahead of formal submission. The intention is to share the plan more widely during the Autumn, once it has been agreed by the DfE and any necessary changes have been made in response to feedback.

3.6 Given the limitations and lack of clear guidance from central government around what the various elements of the plan were required to include, the submission made clear that one of the first actions that would be undertaken when the plan was approved would be to review all elements again with key stakeholders. This means that KCC and key partners are not bound to deliver the proposals if they are no longer fit for purpose. This also allows us in future to manage the lack of provision within the government's plans to allow local democratic processes to be properly completed. This means that further delivery of SEND reforms will all be subject to key decisions where necessary.

3.7 It should be noted that the submitted plan is not final. Government guidance suggests that there is potential for refinements in all submitted plans and that some may require further exercises after September, before they are agreed. As such, KCC is not publishing or widely sharing the submitted plan, as this is highly likely to be changed by government and/or further refinement as outlined above. Sharing the submission in this stage would therefore have huge potential to create confusion, wasted effort and potentially anxiety without reason. The background documents linked at the bottom of this report provide an overview of what plans were expected to include.

3.8 In the meantime, to avoid any delays, and to meet the Government expectations, this key decision will enable the progression of planning and initial implementation of the Expert at Hands offer and wider LA transformation activities, in line with Government guidance and the terms & conditions of the grant funding.

4. Options considered and dismissed, and associated risk

4.1 The option to not accept the funding has been considered. This was disregarded at an early stage. The Expert at Hands Offer is a nationally prescribed offer. If the LA did not accept the model, education settings would not have the opportunity to access additional professional advice, and the CYP of Kent would not have an equitable offer of support compared to the rest of the country. Unless the Council chose to invest its own funding in an equivalent service (at a significant cost to the Council Taxpayer). It would also put at risk current and future support from Government to help fund the Dedicated School Grant overspend. Kent overspent its Dedicated School Grant allocation by nearly £60 million in 2025-26 (which when added to previous years deficits totalled an accumulated deficit of nearly £300 million by end of March 2026), with further in-year deficits predicted in 2026-27 of nearly £110 million and even higher in 2027-28. This deficit payment will only be made following the government's acceptance of our submitted plan, which requires the delivery of the Expert at Hand model.

5. How the proposed decision supports the Council's Strategic Statement

5.1 This decision supports the Council's aim of Supporting residents that need help by improving support for children and young people with SEND and their families. The funding will provide earlier access to specialist advice and support, helping schools meet children's needs before they escalate.

5.2 The proposal also supports the Council's objective to improve processes and outcomes for SEND services while tackling the unsustainable growth in demand. The Expert at Hands programme will strengthen SEND support in mainstream schools and colleges, helping more children and young people to succeed in their local education setting where appropriate.

5.3 By investing in early intervention, prevention and partnership working across education, health and care services, the proposal will help create a more sustainable SEND system and deliver better outcomes for children and young people while making effective use of public funding.

6. Financial Implications

6.1 The DfE have announced the 2026-27 funding allocation for the Expert at Hands and LA SEND Transformation Fund for Kent County Council is £12,155,170. Indicative allocations for 2027-28 and 2028-29 have been estimated from national totals as £21,200,000 and £24,027,000 respectively.

- 6.2 This is a ring-fenced revenue grant, and the total cost of delivery is expected to be met from the grant. There is no expectation of a General Fund contribution towards the additional delivery expectations set out in the grant. The acceptance of the grant and development of related services will be completed on the basis this is fully funded from the grant and there is no ongoing cost to the General Fund. Related services are currently funded by the Council from its Dedicated Schools Grant allocation (Education ring-fenced grant) or in the case of services commissioned directly by the ICB: the grant conditions stipulate that it should be used to build on and enhance existing local capacity & good practice. It is not intended to be used to substitute existing spend.
- 6.3 For 2026-27 allocation, funds are permitted to be carried forward past March 2027 for the purposes outlined in the terms and conditions (of that year of funding) but must be used by September 2027. Terms and conditions for future years of funding are still to be published.
- 6.4 Funding post 2029 has yet to be confirmed but the Government has set out its intention to invest a further £3.5 billion nationally into the High Needs Block of Dedicated Schools Grant and has set out its long term intention in the SEN Reform Consultation that Local Authorities will continue to be responsible for commissioning the Expert at Hands Offer in the future. If sufficient funding is not available after 2029, to continue to the enhanced services, these services will need to be reviewed in line with available funding envelope.
- 6.5 At least 80% of the total grant is expected to be spent on direct delivery of the EaH offer, with up to 10% to fund EaH administration activities and up to 10% for wider transformational activities to support development and delivery of wider SEN reform activities.
- 6.6 Local Authorities are required to maintain clear records of income & expenditure in relation to this grant including evidence of use of funds and will be required to submit returns periodically to the DfE setting out financial summaries and forecasts. This requirement extended to system partners if responsible for delivery.
- 6.7 Failure to comply with the terms & conditions may result in the Secretary of State recover some or all of the grant that has been allocated.
- 6.8 Future support for high needs related Dedicated Schools Grant deficits that arise in 2026-27 and 2027-28 will take into account local authorities' appropriate use of this grant to establish an effective and quality Expert at Hands offer. The Plan to implement the Expert at Hands offer will also be an influencing factor in the DfE agreeing to pay the High Needs Stability Grant in 2026-27 which will fund 90% of the Council's Dedicated School Grant accumulated deficit as at March 2026 (estimated grant total of £290 million).
- 6.9 This grant will be reported against the key service line "SEN & Psychology Services" in the approved KCC Budget Book.
- 6.10 The collective actions of the Government's SEN reforms, including the EAH offer, are expected to increase the number of CYP without an EHCP being

supported, with increased numbers of CYP supported through mainstream inclusion bases and closer to home, with better outcomes. This will in turn reduce the number of CYP requiring an EHCP or appealing, less demand for specialist placements, and less children out of school. Ultimately delivering more cost-effective support, reducing spending on specialist placements and home to school transport. The Government have committed CYP will not be moved from existing placements therefore improved outcomes will be incremental and achieved over the long term, delivering cost avoidance in the first instance by slowing rising costs in the medium term before cost savings can be delivered in the long term. Funding of most SEND support services (including specialist placements) are funded from the High Needs Block of the Dedicated Schools Grant. The Government have still to confirm future funding arrangements in the medium to long term and the Council is still expected to overspend the current grant allocation whilst these reforms take effect. The Home to School Transport budget and administration of EHCPs will continue to be funded from Council Tax.

7. Legal implications

7.1 The Experts at Hand & Local Authority special educational needs and disability (SEND) Transformation grant will be paid by the Secretary of State for Education as a grant to local authorities under section 14 of the Education Act 2002.

7.2 The purpose and permitted use of the funding is set out in section 2 (Key Considerations) of the report.

7.3 Failure to comply with the terms & conditions of this grant are set out in section 5 of the report (the financial implications).

7.4 Whilst the LA is the recipient and coordinator of the grant, it is expected the LA will work with the local area partnership to commission and provide services funded from this grant. Where delivery or commissioning is undertaken by a third party, for example: the ICB or with schools, the appropriate legal agreement will be put in place including Section 75 agreement, service level agreement or contract.

8. Equalities implications

8.1 An Initial Equalities Impact Assessment (EQIA) has been completed. With no immediate issues raised at this time. This will be kept under review as plans for delivery are refined for implementation.

9. Data Protection Implications

9.1 A DPIA will be completed where required.

10. Other corporate implications

10.1 Support will be sought from the Human Resources (HR), Finance and Portfolio Management Office (PMO) function where required.

11. Governance

11.1 This report sets out the proposal from the Cabinet Member for Education and Skills to accept and deploy the Expert at Hands and LA SEND Transformation Grant for the period 2026-2029, in accordance with the grant terms and conditions, including the development and implementation of the Expert at Hands Offer and activities supporting wider SEND reform.

11.2 The decision includes approving relevant delegations to the Corporate Director of Children, Young People and Education to deploy the funding in line with the terms and conditions of the grant. This delegation includes spending approval and operational direction to ensure delivery of relevant services including but not limited to entering into and finalising contracts or other legal agreements as required to implement the decision. This may include a memorandum of understandings (MOU) or service level agreements (SLA) where system partners are commissioned to deliver services on behalf of the local area.

11.3 This decision authorises the acceptance and deployment of the grant funding to deliver the Expert at Hands Offer and associated SEND reform activity in accordance with the grant conditions. It does not constitute approval of any future strategies, policies or substantive service changes arising from the wider SEN reform programme that meet the Council's Key Decision criteria.

12. Conclusions

12.1 The Expert at Hands offer, is a key pillar of the Government's SEN reform proposals and provides an opportunity to strengthen the capability of mainstream education settings to meet the needs of children and young people with SEND more effectively and inclusively.

12.2 The grant is expected to fully fund this new offer, along with supporting the implementation of other SEND reform changes, over the next three years. With funding from year 4 expected to be met from reformed SEND funding arrangements. This grant is proposed to be accepted on the basis this funding will fully cover the cost of the new offer and there will be no requirements on the

General Fund. The service will be designed to be affordable within the grant funding available.

12.3 This offer, along with other national and local SEND reforms, is anticipated to improve outcomes for children with SEND, and deliver greater impact and value for money in the long term by helping to reduce the escalation of need and reduce the dependency on more costly, individualised provision where appropriate, whilst still providing specialist support for children with complex needs.

Recommendation(s):

That the Cabinet Member for Education and Skills consider the following proposal:

a) Accept the Expert at Hands (EaH) and Local Authority (LA) Special Educational Needs & Disability (SEND) Transformation Grant from the Department for Education for 2026 to 2029; and the deployment of the grant funding in accordance with the grant terms & conditions including the development and implementation of an Expert at Hands Offer and actions to support the design, review and implementation of wider SEN reform activity; .

b) Delegate authority to the Corporate Director of Children, Young People and Education to take all necessary actions to administer and deploy the grant funding, develop and implement the Expert at Hands offer, and deliver associated SEND reform activity in accordance with the grant terms and conditions; and

c) Delegate authority to the Corporate Director of Children, Young People and Education to take relevant actions including but not limited to, negotiating, finalising the terms of and entering into relevant contracts, contract variations and other legal agreements as required, to implement the decision.

As set out within the RoD (appendix a)

10. Background Documents

10.1 Equality Impact Assessment

10.2 White Paper: Every Child Achieving & Thriving: [Every child achieving and thriving - GOV.UK](#)

10.3 SEN Reform First Consultation - putting children and young people first:
[SEND reform: putting children and young people first - GOV.UK](#)

10.4 DfE EaH and LA Transformation Fund Guidance: [Supporting SEND reform: developing the Experts at Hand offer - GOV.UK](#)

11. Appendices

Appendix A: Record of Decision

12. Contact details

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