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| From: | **Beverley Fordham, Cabinet Member for Education and Skills**<br><br>**Christine McInnes, Corporate Director for Children, Young People and Education** |
| To: | Children, Young People and Education Cabinet Committee |
| Subject: | **Kent Local Area SEND Strategic Improvement Plan** |
| Classification: | **Unrestricted** |

**Future Pathway of Paper:** For Information


**Summary**:

Kent's SEND system has been subject to a substantial programme of improvement which has been consistently monitored by sustained external scrutiny. A joint Ofsted/CQC inspection in 2019 identified nine areas of significant weakness. When inspectors revisited in 2022, they found that sufficient progress had not been made in any of the nine areas. A Department for Education Improvement Notice followed in 2023 and Kent, with NHS Kent and Medway and wider partners, implemented an Accelerated Progress Plan. Following evidence of progress under a new leadership team, the Improvement Notice was lifted in August 2024.

The latest area SEND inspection took place between 22 June and 10 July 2026, with findings published on 18 September. Inspectors found that arrangements led to inconsistent experiences and outcomes for children and young people with SEND, identifying six distinct areas of weakness. This was the middle of the three possible inspection outcomes: the report acknowledged meaningful improvements while identifying important weaknesses that remain. The findings are therefore neither a return to the historic position nor a basis for complacency. They provide the evidence for the next phase of improvement, against a backdrop of meaningful improvements being delivered in the system for the first time in many years.

The proposed 2026–2029 Strategic Improvement Plan responds to six areas identified by inspectors: understanding the impact of services; improving EHC plans and annual reviews; communication, engagement and co-production; reducing variation across Kent; preparation for adulthood; and ensuring improvements are embedded and consistently experienced. These areas provide a coherent structure for collective action across education, health and care.

The strategic direction has been developed jointly by local area partners and informed by inspection evidence and established engagement with families and professionals. A public consultation on the draft plan, alongside discussions with partner organisations and community groups, has provided routes for further scrutiny. The six inspection priorities provide the central organising framework for the agreed approach.

**Recommendation(s):**

**Members note the history of local area SEND improvement in Kent and the findings of the 2026 Ofsted/CQC inspection that underpin the proposed Strategic Improvement Plan.**

**Members note the six required strategic areas for improvement as the basis for the partnership's work over 2026–2029.**

**Members recognise the role of engagement and co-production in shaping the partnership's direction and endorse continued involvement of children, young people, families, schools and partners in implementation and scrutiny.**

**Members note the Kent Local Area SEND Strategic Improvement Plan 2026–2029 as the shared strategic framework for the next phase of improvement.**

## 1. Introduction

1.1 This report presents the rationale and requirements for the Kent Local Area SEND Strategic Improvement Plan 2026–2029. It explains the historical context of SEND improvement in Kent, the findings of the most recent Ofsted and Care Quality Commission (CQC) inspection, the development of the proposed plan, the engagement undertaken and the arrangements through which the partnership intends to deliver and account for improvement.

1.2 The plan is a local area partnership response. Its success depends on coordinated action across education, health and care, with children, young people and their families at the centre of decisions. The purpose of Member engagement is prepare KCC for its part in this shared direction, empowering the necessary monitoring and scrutiny to ensure improvements are felt consistently across Kent.

1.3 The plan brings together the learning from successive inspections, partnership improvement activity and engagement with families, young people and practitioners.

## 2. Kent's SEND history and the improvement journey

### 2.1 The local area context

SEND support is delivered through a network of schools, early years settings, colleges, health services, social care services, the local authority and community organisations. Families experience these arrangements as one system, even where individual services have different statutory functions and governance. Kent's size and geographic diversity add complexity to the task of providing accessible, consistent support. A shared strategic approach is

essential to ensure that the quality of help a child receives is not determined by where they live, which service they first approach or how successfully their family can navigate the system.

2.2 The Children and Families Act 2014 and the SEND Code of Practice established expectations for coordinated planning and support across education, health and care, including the involvement of children, young people and families in decisions affecting them. The partnership's responsibility is not simply to operate separate services, but to make those arrangements work together effectively.

**3. Inspection and the improvement journey**

3.1 Kent's current strategic direction must be understood in the context of successive Ofsted and CQC inspections and the improvement activity that followed. The 2019 joint inspection identified nine areas of significant weakness in the local area's SEND arrangements. These were wide ranging, systemic, structural failings, identifying a lack of basic competencies across the entire statutory function. They identified poor leadership, partnership working, planning, monitoring, commissioning, communication, co-production, a lack of pupil voice and widespread failure to deliver statutory duties. It showed a system universally failing, with no coherent plan or capacity to change. Those findings, published on 29 March 2019, led to a Written Statement of Action setting out the changes required of the council and its health partners.

3.2 In September 2022, Ofsted and the CQC revisited Kent to assess progress against the nine areas. Their findings, published in November 2022, concluded that sufficient progress had not been made in any of them. This was a critical point in the improvement journey. It demonstrated that the existing approach had not delivered the pace and consistency of change required and that stronger collective leadership, accountability and delivery had failed to be implemented. It also meant that governance arrangements and scrutiny during that period were insufficient to identify that necessary actions were not being taken. Failure remained fully entrenched and little to nothing had been done to address it.

3.3 In March 2023 the Department for Education issued an Improvement Notice. Kent County Council and NHS Kent and Medway subsequently developed an Accelerated Progress Plan, published in August 2023. During this period, a new leadership team took responsibility for addressing these historic and ongoing failures. The plan was subject to twice yearly monitoring by the Department for Education and NHS England and focused the partnership on addressing the longstanding areas of weakness. This period strengthened the emphasis on joint accountability, more disciplined oversight and evidence of progress.

3.4 In August 2024 the Improvement Notice was lifted following evidence of improvement. This was a significant milestone and reflected the work undertaken across the local area partnership. It did not mean that all families were experiencing timely and effective support, or that the need for

improvement had ended. Rather, it marked progress in tackling the historic weaknesses and created an opportunity to embed changes more consistently. It identified that historic failures in meaningfully affecting change were not being repeated, even if considerable improvement was still required.

3.5 Ofsted and the CQC inspected Kent again between 22 June and 10 July 2026. The inspection report, published on 18 September 2026, concluded that the local area partnership arrangements led to inconsistent experiences and outcomes for children and young people with SEND. Inspectors recognised progress in the quality of newer education, health and care plans, more inclusive approaches in schools, earlier help for some children and young people, stronger partnership working and a greater focus on meeting needs without waiting for a diagnosis. The Dynamic Support Register was identified as a particularly strong example of effective multi-agency working. This is a mechanism which helps identify and support children and young people who are at risk of admission to hospital or placement breakdown.

3.6 The same inspection was clear that progress was not yet experienced consistently. Areas requiring further attention included delays in accessing some services; variation in support and outcomes across the county; communication with families; support while awaiting specialist assessments; the quality, timeliness and oversight of EHC plans and annual reviews; preparation for adulthood; and leaders' understanding of the impact of services on children and young people. These areas mirrored the local areas self assessment, which was required and shared as a part of the inspection. The final report groups these into six areas of weakness.

3.7 While historic areas of weakness identified systemic failures and incoherent plans to address them, these new areas of focus are discrete and already have examples of emergent good practice. This creates a positive environment for further improvements to be made. These six are also distinct from the previous nine areas of weakness, highlighting that the historic systemic failures have been addressed sufficiently to no longer specific monitoring

3.8 The inspection therefore establishes both the case for continued improvement and the direction of travel. It confirms that the local area did not have areas of weakness that had not yet been identified, providing assurance that historic failures are not being repeated by new leadership group and indicating much improved governance and oversight. Kent has made progress from the position identified in earlier inspections, but there remains a gap between improvements in processes or arrangements and the reliable, positive experience of every child and family. The Strategic Improvement Plan is designed to close that gap further.

3.9 Members will also be aware that significant national SEND Reforms have been initiated following governments Education White paper being released in February 2026. While those reforms are subject to their own monitoring and related cabinet papers, both plans have been developed with knowledge of each other, ensuring overlapping priorities are do not create duplication of effort, or gaps. While both areas will be reported separately, references to

corresponding workstreams will be included wherever this aids comprehension.

## 4. Transition to a new strategic phase

4.1 The Department for Education has confirmed that, following inspection under the newer framework, the additional monitoring arrangements associated with the former Improvement Notice, including the Accelerated Progress Plan, will come to a close. The proposed Local Area Strategic Improvement Plan provides the framework for the next phase. It is not a replacement for the partnership's statutory responsibilities, nor a declaration that existing improvement activity is over. It brings forward the learning from the historic improvement programme and aligns future action to the six areas identified in the 2026 inspection.

4.2 This shift matters for Members because it moves the emphasis from responding to a historic list of weaknesses towards demonstrating that children, young people and families experience sustained improvement. The partnership will need to show not only that actions have been completed but also that support is timely, effective, joined up and equitable across Kent. These requirements will therefore form the basis of the majority of our next round of monitoring and scrutiny. This plan is intended to cover the next three years' worth of development activity and should prepare the local area for its next inspection at the end of that timeframe.

## 5. Why the Strategic Improvement Plan is needed

5.1 The central issue for the plan to address is the continuing inconsistency identified by inspectors. The evidence indicates that a growing number of children, young people and families are benefiting from improvements, but others still face barriers, delays or uneven provision. The partnership therefore needs a shared framework that identifies the changes required across the whole system to propagate emergent good practice and the outcomes against which success will be judged.

5.2 A local area plan also addresses the risk of fragmented action. Education, health and care partners hold different responsibilities, but many of the issues highlighted in the inspection cut across organisational boundaries. Improving the quality of an EHC plan, for example, depends on effective contributions from different professionals, clear communication with families and arrangements to deliver and review the support described. A strategic plan makes these interdependencies visible and provides a common basis for prioritisation and accountability.

5.3 The plan is also needed to sustain momentum. The lifting of the Improvement Notice in 2024 recognised progress was finally being made. The 2026 inspection showed that progress must now be embedded more consistently. A multi-year strategic framework enables the partnership to focus on the enduring changes needed in practice, culture, commissioning, information and leadership rather than relying solely on short-term improvement activity.

## 6. How the plan has been developed

6.1 Following publication of the 2026 inspection findings, Kent County Council, NHS Kent and Medway and wider education, health and care partners reviewed the identified areas for improvement and developed a draft Local Area Strategic Improvement Plan. Ofsted requirements meant that this plan needed to be developed and published with 50 days of the inspection report being made public. The created a deadline of 20 November 2026. The plan is a jointly developed response to the six inspection areas, intended to strengthen support across the SEND system and help children, young people and families receive the right support at the right time.

6.2 The starting point has been the external inspection evidence, which draws on service information, case records, the experiences of children and young people and feedback from families and professionals. This provides a common evidence base across organisations and reduces the risk that priorities are determined only by the perspective of one service. The six areas identified by inspectors form the core of the proposed plan, linking the partnership's actions to an independently assessed set of needs.

6.3 The partnership opened the draft to wider co-production opportunities and engagement, recognising that inspection findings alone cannot fully describe the experience of navigating services. Consultation and professional dialogue offered opportunities to test the relevance, clarity and ambition of the proposed priorities against lived experience and practical delivery considerations.

6.4 The resulting strategic framework connects the inspection's six areas for improvement with the partnership's wider ambition to improve consistency, quality and outcomes. It establishes a shared direction for education, health and care, with ongoing co-production and transparent reporting forming essential parts of delivery.

## 7. Engagement and co-production

7.1 Engagement on the draft plan

While the required timescales to produce the plan created a challenging environment, all key partners were clear that the plan needed to be developed collectively. The local area partnership has invited views on the draft Strategic Improvement Plan from parents and carers; children and young people; schools, colleges and early years settings; health organisations; social care practitioners and providers; voluntary and community sector organisations; and other partners involved in supporting children and young people with SEND. In addition to this consultation activity, similar engagement with education, health and care professionals, partner organisations and community groups through workshops, engagement events and discussions have taken place.

7.2 Consultation activity took place until 2 November 2026, alongside a separate opportunity for parent and carer feedback promoted by Kent PACT. These

routes complemented wider engagement with education, health and care partners. Together, they reflect the importance of testing the partnership's direction with both people who use services and those responsible for providing them.

7.3 The consultation activity is particularly significant given the inspection finding that communication, engagement and co-production require further improvement. The manner in which the plan is developed must demonstrate the behaviours the partnership intends to embed: openness about challenges, a willingness to listen and a clear explanation of how views affect decisions.

7.4 Learning from earlier family engagement

Kent's recent engagement with Kent PACT during the development of the government requested SEND Reform Plan provides relevant context about families' experiences. Parents and carers raised the importance of earlier help, improved communication and trust, clearer accountability, stronger support in mainstream settings, better access to emotional wellbeing and mental health support, more accessible information and stronger preparation for adulthood. While these findings relate to the wider SEND reform work they nevertheless reinforce why the six inspection areas matter to families.

7.5 That earlier feedback demonstrates the importance of distinguishing between changes within the control of the local area partnership and those affected by national legislation, funding or workforce pressures. Being clear about this distinction is part of rebuilding confidence. Families need to understand what the partnership has committed to do, what depends on other decisions and how progress will be reported.

7.6 Published feedback from parents and carers during Kent's wider SEND reform work has emphasised earlier support, more reliable communication, stronger mainstream inclusion, better transitions and clearer accountability. These concerns align closely with the areas identified by inspectors and reinforce the importance of the six strategic priorities. The partnership's ongoing approach must make the link between what people say, the decisions taken and the difference made visible.

**8. The six areas for strategic improvement**

8.1 The six identified areas of weakness and initial development priorities are as follows:

8.2 Understanding the impact of services and interventions

The first area is to strengthen leaders' understanding of the impact of services and interventions on the experiences and outcomes of children and young people with SEND. This requires the partnership to look beyond volumes of activity or the completion of actions. Leaders need to understand whether support is making a difference, for whom, and where outcomes remain weaker. Performance information must be considered alongside feedback

from children, young people and families so that improvement is measured in ways that reflect their experiences.

8.3 Improving EHC plans and annual reviews

The second area focuses on the quality, timeliness and oversight of education, health and care plans and annual reviews. Inspectors recognised improvements in newer EHC plans but also identified continuing concerns, particularly in relation to consistency and review arrangements. The strategic priority is therefore not simply to improve administrative processes, but expand recent improvements in quality assurance to ensure that plans remain accurate, coordinated and useful in securing appropriate support as needs change.

8.4 Communication, engagement and co-production

The third area strengthens communication, engagement and co-production with children, young people, families and education providers. Effective communication is central to confidence in the SEND system. Families need timely, clear information about decisions and next steps, and meaningful opportunities to influence support and service improvement. Co-production must be reflected in the way decisions are made, not limited to consultation exercises.

8.5 Reducing variation across Kent

The fourth area is to reduce variation and improve consistency of support across the county. The inspection identified differences in experiences and outcomes, including between those who have benefited from more recent improvements and those who have been in the SEND system for longer. A countywide approach must therefore identify where variation exists, understand its causes and respond in ways that improve equity without overlooking the needs of individual communities.

8.6 Preparation for adulthood

The fifth area is to improve preparation for adulthood and help more young people, including those receiving SEN support, to achieve positive next steps into education, employment and independent living. Preparation for adulthood should be a continuing consideration rather than a late-stage transition exercise. Better coordination between education, health, care and other partners is needed to support young people’s aspirations and ensure that planning is timely and purposeful.

8.7 Embedding improvement consistently

The sixth area is to ensure that improvements are embedded and experienced consistently by children, young people and families. This is the overarching test of the plan. The partnership must demonstrate that better practice is sustained over time and across different services and localities, rather than depending on isolated examples or short-term initiatives. The

focus must remain on reliable improvement in the day-to-day experience of support.

## 9. Delivery, governance and accountability

9.1 The Strategic Improvement Plan requires coordinated delivery across the local area partnership. Kent County Council, NHS Kent and Medway, education providers and other partners each have a role in translating the agreed priorities into changes in practice. Shared strategic ownership is important because the challenges identified through inspection cannot be addressed effectively by any one organisation acting alone.

9.2 The six improvement areas are supported by a delivery framework that makes responsibilities, milestones and dependencies clear. The partnership's existing governance and assurance arrangements will provide local and strategic partner oversight of progress, identify barriers and enable timely escalation where action is not delivering the intended effect. This will be particularly important where improvements rely on contributions from more than one organisation.

9.3 Members' oversight will focus on whether the partnership is making a measurable difference. Reporting should distinguish progress in completing actions from changes in quality, timeliness, consistency and outcomes. It should also be open about areas where progress is slower than expected and explain the corrective action being taken. Transparent reporting will be important in maintaining public confidence and demonstrating that the plan is an active programme of improvement rather than a statement of intention.

9.4 Children, young people and families will continue to have opportunities to challenge and shape delivery. The inspection's emphasis on communication and co-production means that ongoing involvement is itself an important measure of whether the partnership is changing how it works.

## 10. Risks and considerations for Members

10.1 The principal risk is that the partnership delivers planned activity without achieving consistent improvements in experience and outcomes. The 2026 inspection shows why this distinction matters. A credible delivery and assurance framework will therefore need to combine performance measures, quality assurance and direct feedback from children, young people and families.

10.2 A further risk is that different organisations or localities progress at different rates. This could perpetuate the variation identified by inspectors. Strong partnership oversight, shared expectations and attention to differences across Kent will be necessary to reduce this risk. The Kent Local Area System Leadership board will be integral in maintaining that oversight.

10.3 Capacity and workforce pressures may also affect the pace of delivery, particularly where access to specialist services is constrained. Kent has previously acknowledged that national shortages in some specialist

professions influence local provision. The plan will need to be implemented with realistic assumptions about capacity, while making the most effective use of existing expertise and partnership working.

10.4 Formal financial, legal, equality and constitutional implications will need to be addressed through the council's established decision process. Agreement of the strategic direction does not in itself authorise additional expenditure or change statutory responsibilities; any specific proposals requiring separate approvals must follow the appropriate routes.

## 11 Conclusion

11.1 The Kent Local Area's SEND improvement journey has been shaped by serious historical inspection findings, a period of accelerated improvement and more recent recognition of progress alongside continuing inconsistency. The 2026 Ofsted/CQC inspection makes clear that the partnership has addressed historic failures, but has more to do to ensure that every child and family benefits from effective, joined-up support.

11.2 The Local Area Strategic Improvement Plan provides the framework for that next phase. It provides a shared direction across education, health and care, and directly reflects the six areas identified through inspection and places sustained impact at the centre of the partnership's ambitions. Members are asked to support that direction and ensure that final approval takes full account of consultation, with clear accountability for delivery and outcomes.

## 12 Recommendations

**Members note the history of local area SEND improvement in Kent and the findings of the 2026 Ofsted/CQC inspection that underpin the proposed Strategic Improvement Plan.**

**Members note the six required strategic areas for improvement as the basis for the partnership's work over 2026–2029.**

**Members recognise the role of engagement and co-production in shaping the partnership's direction and endorse continued involvement of children, young people, families, schools and partners in implementation and scrutiny.**

**Members note the Kent Local Area SEND Strategic Improvement Plan 2026–2029 as the shared strategic framework for the next phase of improvement.**

## 13. Background Documents

Kent County Council, "SEND Ofsted and CQC inspections" (updated 18 September 2026): https://www.kent.gov.uk/education-and-children/special-educational-needs-and-disabilities/listening-to-your-voice-and-taking-action/send-ofsted-and-cqc-inspections

Ofsted, Kent County Council inspection reports, including the 2019, 2022 and 2026 SEND reports: https://reports.ofsted.gov.uk/provider/44/80476

Kent County Council, “SEND Local Area Strategic Improvement Plan” (draft and consultation): https://www.kent.gov.uk/about-the-council/strategies-and-policies/service-specific-policies/education-policies/send-strategies-and-policies/send-local-area-strategic-improvement-plan

Kent PACT, “Draft Local Area Strategic Plan Kent” (2026–2029 feedback): https://kentpactnew2022.co.uk/draft-local-area-strategic-plan-kent/

Kent County Council, “Working with parents and carers to shape Kent’s SEND Reform Plan” (May 2026): https://www.kent.gov.uk/education-and-children/special-educational-needs-and-disabilities/listening-to-your-voice-and-taking-action/share-your-views-about-the-send-service/how-your-feedback-improves-send-services/working-with-parents-and-carers-to-shape-kents-send-reform-plan

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