

Report of the Director of Children and Young Peoples' Futures

Update on the SEND Transformation Programme

Recommendations to DEF:

1. That DEF Members note the ongoing work around the SEND Transformation Programme and next steps, including action on governance and delivery improvements, financial planning, and collaborative efforts with key stakeholders.

Background:

Since January, and our last update, the SEND Transformation Programme has continued to make progress in addressing a range of key priorities, integrating Ofsted/CQC improvement work and taking forward the Safety Valve Programme. Whilst the financial year overall has proven challenging, the programme remains focused on financial and operational challenges while embedding improvements in practice and governance.

1) Programme Updates and Current Position

- 1.1 The SEND budget remains under significant pressure, with the High Needs Block deficit projected to exceed £51 million by the end of the current financial year. Despite management actions, demand for EHCPs continues to grow, impacting financial sustainability. Though difficult however Safety Valve linked activity has seen around £12m of SEND saving realised this year, with relatively steady progress around the elements that the Authority can control.
- 1.2 The Council formally launched its updated SEND Strategy in November 2024, reinforcing its commitment to aspirational support, enhanced communication, improved ways of working, and inclusive communities. Work is now focused on embedding these principles and ensuring all partners align with the strategic vision.
- 1.3 A comprehensive governance review has been launched last week to strengthen oversight, ensuring strategic alignment and operational effectiveness to the SEND Transformation approach. This includes working closely with board members, partners, and service leaders to define the next phase of transformation, with a heavy focus on increasing the pace of change across SEND provision, but also further embedding practice.
- 1.4 Financial sustainability remains a significant challenge across the County, with EHCP demand continuing to exceed projections. As of February 2025, there were 9,950 EHCPs, surpassing the safety valve target by around 550 for this year. However, recent management actions have begun to slow cost acceleration, with a slight reduction in average EHCP costs and a falloff in new applications in the past two months.
- 1.5 A new provision management system is currently being introduced, along with strengthened invoicing processes, enhanced provider cost monitoring, and refined cost-sharing arrangements with education and health partners. Work is currently underway to ensure that the service and cost improvements from this work are now carried over and accelerated into the new financial year.

- 1.6 Work is underway to finalise savings and operational plans for 2025/26, ensuring a sustainable approach that balances financial control with high-quality SEND provision. This includes work to both accelerate our progress around closing the gap with peers on practice metrics and seek to enhance efficiencies (notably about managing the average cost of plans, around out timeliness, and around responsiveness with parents and partners)
- 1.7 Discussions continue with the Department for Education (DfE) regarding financial pressures, with the potential for reprofiling funding agreements being explored as part of a wider national approach to SEND financial reform. Recent announcements by the Department appear to reflect a sense of a changing mood at the national level around SEND and its sustainability.
- 1.8 A range of demand management initiatives are being pursued, including the development of additional resource hubs, commissioning improvements, outreach provision, and closer collaboration with mainstream and specialist schools.

2) Next Steps

- 2.1 Implementing revised governance structures to improve decision-making, accountability, and overall programme effectiveness.
- 2.2 Refining and delivering the savings and operational plans for 2025/26 to ensure financial stability and improved service efficiency.
- 2.3 Enhancing collaboration with key partners and stakeholders, including schools, health services, and parent/carer groups, to reinforce a whole-system approach to SEND transformation and work together around additional places and capacity.
- 2.4 Exploring further opportunities to improve EHCP processes, reduce backlogs, and ensure timely support for children and young people.

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Appendices:

- 1) SEN 2 Early Insight Analysis Presentation