

Executive response to CYPE Scrutiny Commission Task Group Recommendations on the SEND High Needs Block

27 May 2026

Background

The Children, Young People and Education Scrutiny Commission identified the need for an in-depth evaluation of the efficiency and effectiveness of the SEND High Needs Block (HNB) (of the Dedicated Schools Grant). They formed a Task Group which took evidence across three sessions towards the end of 2024.

The findings of the review and recommendations have been referred to the Executive for consideration. The recommendations are attached for reference as an appendix at the end of this response.

Executive response

The Executive welcomes the constructive and well-evidenced recommendations set out by the High Needs Block Task Group and would like to thank all those involved for their diligence and hard work. The work undertaken between March and May 2025 provides a robust assessment of local pressures, good practice and opportunities for improvement within a SEND system operating in an extremely challenging national context.

Since the Task Group concluded its evidence gathering, there have been two significant developments which materially shape the council's response to the recommendations.

Firstly, the Department for Education published the schools White Paper *Every Child Achieving and Thriving* on 23 February 2026. This White Paper sets out a renewed national direction for education and SEND reform, with a strong emphasis on early intervention, inclusive mainstream practice, strengthened accountability, and a more sustainable approach to SEND funding. Many of the Task Group's recommendations strongly align with this national policy direction, particularly in relation to prevention, better use of mainstream provision, improved collaboration between partners, and clearer expectations around what should ordinarily be available in schools.

The White Paper also makes clear that reform of the SEND system cannot be delivered by local authorities alone and requires shared responsibility between government, education, health, and care partners. This reinforces the Task Group's emphasis on partnership working, co-production with families and young people, and integrated approaches across agencies.

Secondly, Leicester City Council, working jointly with system partners including schools, the Integrated Care Board (ICB), parents, carers and young people, is in the final stages of developing the Leicester City Local SEND Reform Plan. This plan is

required to be submitted to government in June 2026 and builds directly on learning from local scrutiny, inspection findings, the SEND Transformation Programme and national reform priorities.

If the Local SEND Reform Plan is accepted by government, it will provide a proposed route out of the current High Needs Block deficit. In particular, the plan is predicated on government meeting approximately 90% of the existing High Needs Block deficit, alongside a clear commitment that national government will assume full responsibility for funding the system from 2028 onwards. This represents a fundamental shift in the financial landscape and directly addresses the Task Group's concerns about the long-term sustainability of the High Needs Block once the statutory override ends.

In this context, the Executive views the Task Group's recommendations as complementary to, and reinforcing of, both the national reform agenda and the emerging Local SEND Reform Plan. Work is already underway, or planned, to strengthen early intervention, expand local provision, improve transparency and confidence in funding arrangements, reduce reliance on tribunals, and embed inclusive practice across mainstream schools. These actions are being taken forward through existing transformation governance and in partnership with schools, health services and families.

We therefore consider that the most effective response to the Task Group's recommendations is through their integration into the Local SEND Reform Plan and associated delivery arrangements where appropriate, rather than through isolated or short-term initiatives. This approach provides the best opportunity to align local ambition with national policy, secure financial sustainability, and ensure lasting improvement in outcomes and experiences for children and young people with SEND in Leicester.

We are grateful to the Task Group for its contribution and are committed to ongoing dialogue with scrutiny as national reforms are finalised and the Local SEND Reform Plan moves into implementation.

Cllr Elaine Pantling
Assistant City Mayor for Children and Young People

Appendix: recommendations of the Task Group

Improve Transparency of HNB Funding Allocation

- Develop a clear, accessible funding guidance document for schools on the national guidance outlining what HNB can and cannot cover, with practical case study examples - Feedback indicated confusion among schools regarding HNB usage. Improved clarity will support better planning, equitable distribution, and accountability.
- Publish clear and accessible summaries of HNB spending, including tribunal costs, consultant fees, the percentage of the HNB funds used to fund support services and provision categories.
- Ensure clear access for the public and schools to the annual public report on HNB allocation, outcomes, and value-for-money analysis.

Prioritise Early Intervention and Prevention

- Scale up early intervention models such as the Rainbow Room (Stokes Wood) and Beaumont Leys' pilot internal provision - Preventative approaches help avoid EHCP escalation, reduce long-term costs, and improve inclusion outcomes.
- Continue to allocate a proportion of HNB to fund early intervention strategies that prevent escalation of needs.
- Updates on the long-term savings and impact of earlier support to continue.

Support Bespoke Support Models Across Schools

- Facilitate and fund locally tailored support models in schools to better meet student needs - Evidence shows a "one-size-fits-all" approach is not effective.
- Bespoke interventions have led to improvements in attendance, behaviour, and cost efficiency.
- Continue to offer training to schools on cost-effective inclusion practices and alternative provision models.
- Increase support for parents and carers to navigate the EHCP process and access support earlier.

Promote Inclusive Practice in Mainstream Education

- Encourage sharing of best practice between Leicester Schools, including positive behaviour policies such as those at Crown Hills and Beaumont Leys Schools that adjust behaviour policies and provide SEND-focused staff training have seen reduced exclusions and better student engagement.

Strengthen Tribunal and Mediation Services

- Maintain robust monitoring of tribunal related costs and outcomes. Expand support for early mediation services and SENDIASS Mediation is cost effective and reduces adversarial conflict. SENDIASS has demonstrated success in resolving disputes early and supporting families through the system.
- Implement a formal review mechanism for tribunal outcomes to understand root causes and reduce future litigation.
- Set criteria for appointing external consultants to ensure cost effectiveness and impact assessment.

Increase Designated Specialist Provision (DSP) Capacity

- Invest in expanding DSP units in mainstream schools across the city - Demand for specialist places is growing. Local DSPs reduce out-of-city placements, improve inclusion, and are a more cost-effective use of HNB resources.
- Use current and projected demand data to assess sufficiency of SEND provision across Leicester.
- Prioritise investment in local capacity (e.g. SEN units in mainstream settings, targeted interventions) to reduce reliance on out-of-area or independent placements.

Enhance Co-Production and Parental Engagement

- Embed parent and carer voice more formally in strategic planning, through Family Hubs and the SEND Local Area Partnership - Co-production leads to services that better reflect need. Stronger communication channels will also increase public trust in SEND provision.
- Create an advisory group including parents, young people, headteachers, SENCOs, and finance leads to review HNB pressures and advise on allocation decisions. o Use this forum to promote co-production and community accountability.

Promote Best Practice and Success Stories

- Create a communications strategy to showcase successful models and outcomes (e.g., Rainbow Room, Big Mouth Forum video) via websites and social media. Sharing good practice helps build confidence and encourages other schools to replicate successful models.

Embed Monitoring and Evaluation Frameworks

- Introduce clear KPIs to monitor the impact of HNB-funded provisions on learner outcomes and well-being.

- Review outcomes annually and feed insights into future planning cycles.

Promote Integrated Working Across Services

- Strengthen links between education, health, and social care teams to ensure joined-up support and better use of pooled budgets.
- Use joint commissioning approaches where possible to achieve efficiency.

Prepare Financially for the 2026 Statutory Override Expiry

- Develop a clear post-2026 financial contingency plan, including modelling of deficit scenarios and options for service continuity. The override's removal poses a serious budgetary risk. Proactive planning can help mitigate the potential for drastic cuts or Section 114 notices.
- Ensure recovery strategies are informed by long-term needs planning,