

South Tyneside Partnership

Health and Wellbeing Board

Date: 28 May 2026

Local SEND Reform Plan

Report of Stuart Easingwood, Director Children's Services

Why Has this Report Come to the Health and Wellbeing Board?

1. This report is presented to the Health and Wellbeing Board to provide oversight of the South Tyneside Local Area SEND Partnership's readiness for system reform and to seek endorsement of both the maturity assessment and the Local SEND Reform Plan.
2. The report sets out the partnership's assessment of its current position across system leadership, inclusion, partnership working and use of resources, alongside a structured programme of change to address identified gaps. It provides a clear line of sight between system pressures, areas for improvement and planned delivery over the next three years.
3. The Health and Wellbeing Board has a critical role in ensuring alignment between SEND reform and wider system priorities, particularly across health, early intervention and reducing inequalities. Endorsement of the maturity assessment and reform plan will support a shared, partnership-wide commitment to delivery and provide system leadership for the changes required.
4. The Health and Wellbeing Board is asked to:
 - Note and endorse the Local Area SEND Partnership maturity assessment.
 - Endorse the priorities and direction set out in the Local SEND Reform Plan.
 - Support system-wide alignment to ensure SEND reform is reflected within health, education and care delivery.

Which Outcome is this Linked to Within the Health and Wellbeing Strategy and How?

5. This report contributes directly to the strategic outcome "*Every child has the best start in life and is supported to achieve their potential.*"
6. The Local SEND Reform Plan is focused on strengthening early identification and intervention, improving inclusion within mainstream settings and ensuring that children and young people receive the right support at the earliest opportunity.
7. By improving consistency across education, health and care and reducing variation in how need is identified and met, the plan supports better outcomes in key areas including:
 - School readiness and early development.

- Attendance and participation in education.
 - Emotional wellbeing and mental health.
 - Preparation for adulthood.
8. The reform programme also supports improved experience for children, young people and families through clearer pathways, earlier support and more coordinated services, contributing to a more equitable system overall.

How Does This Report Contribute to the Cross Cutting Theme(s)?

9. The SEND Reform Plan contributes to key cross-cutting themes within the Health and Wellbeing Strategy:
10. **Reducing Health Inequalities:** Children and young people with SEND are more likely to experience poorer health, educational and social outcomes. The reform plan addresses this by improving early intervention, strengthening inclusion and increasing access to coordinated support, reducing inequalities in experience and outcomes.
11. **Integration & Partnership:** The plan is built on a partnership-wide approach across education, health and care. It strengthens shared accountability, joint decision-making and aligned delivery, ensuring that services operate as a coordinated system rather than individual organisations.
12. **Prevention & Early Intervention:** A core focus of the reform programme is earlier identification and support, reducing escalation into statutory processes and specialist provision. This supports a shift from reactive intervention to planned, preventative support.
13. **Community Engagement:** The plan strengthens co-production and participation, ensuring that experience informs system design, delivery and review. This contributes to more responsive services and improved confidence in the system.

SEND Reform Overview

14. Across South Tyneside, demand for SEND support is increasing at pace. There are more children and young people identified with SEND than in previous years, and the profile of need is becoming more complex. This is placing growing pressure across education, health and care services.
15. At the same time, the current system is not consistently delivering early, coordinated support. Support is not always provided at the earliest opportunity, and there remains variation in how needs are identified and responded to across settings and services. As a result, some children and young people do not experience a clear or consistent pathway and are not always able to access the right support at the right time.
16. These pressures are contributing to increased reliance on statutory processes and specialist provision, with demand often shaped by system capacity rather than planned responses to need.

17. SEND reform provides the framework to address these challenges by moving the system towards earlier intervention, stronger inclusion within mainstream provision, and more coordinated, partnership-led delivery. This requires a shift from reactive, service-led responses to a more consistent and needs-led approach, underpinned by shared accountability across the local area.
18. The reforms require local areas to:
 - Strengthen inclusion so that more needs are met within mainstream and local provision.
 - Improve early identification and access to support.
 - Deliver a coordinated approach across education, health and care.
 - Ensure that children, young people and families experience a more transparent and consistent system.
 - Improve financial sustainability by reducing reliance on high-cost, reactive provision.
19. Local areas are expected to develop and deliver a Local SEND Reform Plan, setting out how these changes will be implemented over a multi-year period, with a clear focus on improving outcomes, strengthening partnership working and delivering value for money.
20. All local area partnerships are required to develop a Local SEND Reform Plan. This involves an assessment of its current system maturity and set out a clear, deliverable plan for how it will strengthen inclusion, improve outcomes and ensure a more sustainable system alongside a robust data template.
21. There is a significant financial context underpinning this work. The local authority, along with many others, is carrying a substantial Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) deficit, largely driven by sustained pressures within the high needs system. Nationally, government has confirmed the introduction of a High Needs Stability Grant, which will provide funding equivalent to 90% of this deficit.
22. Access to this funding is conditional on the development and approval of a Local SEND Reform Plan. Local authorities will only receive this funding once their plan has been assessed and approved as demonstrating a credible and sustainable approach to managing demand and improving outcomes. This establishes a clear expectation that financial stability must be achieved through system reform, rather than short-term mitigation.
23. The government has required all local areas to submit their plans in June 2026, supported by a Local Partnership Maturity Assessment. Plans are then subject to a formal assessment process, with those meeting the required standard receiving approval and access to funding from Autumn 2026. Where plans do not meet the expected threshold, further revision and resubmission is required before any funding is released.
24. Following approval, delivery of the plan will be subject to ongoing monitoring and review, with continued support and challenge from national partners. The Reform Plan therefore acts as both a strategic framework for local improvement and a key mechanism for accountability, setting out how the partnership will deliver a more consistent, inclusive and financially sustainable SEND system.

Local Area Maturity Assessment

25. As part of the reform requirements, the South Tyneside Local Area SEND Partnership has undertaken a comprehensive self-assessment of system maturity across key areas of partnership working.
26. Overall, the system is assessed as being at an emerging stage of maturity. This reflects a position where core structures, relationships and approaches are in place, and there is clear commitment across partners to improve outcomes. Work is already underway to strengthen collaboration, improve consistency and develop more effective system leadership.
27. The assessment identifies several established strengths within the local area. Governance arrangements have been strengthened, providing clearer routes for decision-making and accountability. Partnership working across education, health and care is improving, with greater emphasis on shared problem-solving and collective responsibility. There is also increasing use of data and insight to understand need and system pressures, alongside continued development of inclusive practice and non-statutory approaches to support. Foundations for participation and engagement with families and young people are also in place and are beginning to influence system development.
28. At the same time, the assessment highlights several areas where further development is required to support reform at scale. Practice and thresholds are not yet applied consistently across settings and services, and the use of data to inform decision-making remains variable. Co-production is not yet embedded as a system-wide expectation, and workforce capacity and confidence vary across the partnership. Arrangements for joint commissioning and resource alignment are at an early stage, and the system continues to experience pressure in relation to sufficiency, with ongoing reliance on high-cost provision.
29. These findings provide a clear and evidence-based starting point for the Local SEND Reform Plan, setting out both the strengths to build on and the changes required to deliver a more consistent, inclusive and sustainable system.

Local SEND Reform Plan

30. The Local SEND Reform Plan is structured around four core building blocks, which together set out how the system will be strengthened over time. These building blocks reflect the key areas of system change required to improve outcomes, increase consistency and ensure long-term sustainability.

System Leadership, partnership working and coproduction

31. Sustainable reform requires clear system leadership and shared accountability across education, health and care. While governance arrangements have improved, there is a need for more consistent use of data, clearer decision-making and stronger alignment between strategy and delivery.
32. The plan strengthens governance as the primary mechanism for driving reform, with consistent reporting, performance dashboards and use of shared system intelligence to inform decision-making. This is supported by improved data integration across partners, enabling earlier identification of pressures and more coordinated responses.

33. Alongside this, the plan establishes a more structured approach to co-production. This includes the development of a partnership-wide co-production charter and routine mechanisms for capturing and responding to the views of children, young people and families. Over time, this will ensure that lived experience is consistently used to inform system priorities, service design and evaluation.

Access to specialist support and local provision

34. The plan also addresses how children, young people and practitioners access specialist advice and support. Current pathways can be fragmented and inconsistent, often resulting in delays and avoidable escalation.
35. The reform programme introduces a more coordinated approach through the development of the Experts at Hand model, providing earlier access to multi-disciplinary advice within mainstream settings. This is supported by the development of an Alternative Provision Specialist Taskforce and clearer, single routes of access to support, ensuring that expertise is applied earlier and more consistently.
36. Alongside this, a more structured approach to placement planning is introduced, using Annual Reviews and system intelligence to identify and plan transitions in advance. This supports a shift from reactive placement decisions to a more planned and needs-led approach, reducing reliance on out-of-area provision and improving system stability over time.

Strengthening inclusion across education settings

37. Additionally, the plan sets out how we will achieve a more consistent and confident approach to inclusion across early years settings, schools and further education providers. At present, practice varies across the system, and expectations about how needs should be met are not always applied consistently.
38. The plan sets out how a shared, needs-led approach will be embedded through the SEND in Mainstream Settings Framework, supported by moderation, workforce development and quality assurance activity to strengthen professional confidence and consistency. This is complemented by a structured review of specialist provision and planned expansion of local capacity, including additional SEN Unit places and development of provision aligned to identified cohort need.
39. Taken together, this will support a more reliable graduated response, reduce variation in practice and ensure that more children and young people are supported effectively within mainstream and local provision.

Encouraging inclusive behaviours and culture

40. The final building block focuses on the system conditions that influence how decisions are made and how resources are used. At present, system pressures can lead to variable thresholds, risk-averse decision-making and reliance on escalation.
41. The plan sets out a shift towards a more consistent, needs-led approach, supported by the development of SEND clusters as locality-based forums for shared responsibility, peer challenge and earlier problem-solving. This is

reinforced by a review of banding and funding arrangements to improve consistency and transparency in how resources are aligned to need.

42. Over time, this will support a cultural shift across the system, where inclusion is a shared responsibility, decision-making is more consistent and escalation is appropriately challenged. This will help to reduce reliance on high-cost provision and ensure that resources are directed towards early intervention and sustainable outcomes.

Delivery & Timescales

43. Delivery of the Local SEND Reform Plan will take place over a three-year period, structured to reflect the scale of change required and the current maturity of the system.
44. Year 1 (2026–2027) focuses on establishing the conditions for reform. This includes strengthening governance and accountability, improving the quality and consistency of data, and introducing more consistent approaches to early support and decision-making. During this phase, the priority is to reduce variation across the system, increase visibility of demand and ensure that partners are operating to a shared set of expectations.
45. Years 2 and 3 focus on embedding and scaling this approach. Building on the improved system discipline established in Year 1, activity will increasingly translate into measurable changes in practice and outcomes. This includes more consistent application of the graduated response, earlier access to specialist advice, and a greater proportion of children and young people supported within local provision.
46. By the end of the programme, the partnership expects to demonstrate a more consistent and inclusive system, with reduced variation in decision-making, improved experiences for children and families, and a more sustainable use of resources. This includes a reduction in reliance on high-cost and out-of-area placements, alongside improved outcomes in key indicators such as attendance, exclusions and placement stability.
47. Progress against the plan will be monitored through routine governance, with clear milestones, performance measures and delivery oversight in place. This will ensure that implementation remains on track and that activity is adjusted where required in response to emerging system pressures or evidence of impact.

Monitoring, Assurance & Governance

48. Delivery of the Local SEND Reform Plan will be overseen through established partnership governance arrangements, with clear accountability for performance, risk and delivery.
49. The Local Area SEND Partnership will act as the primary forum for oversight, supported by strategic and operational governance groups. These arrangements will ensure that progress against the plan is routinely reviewed, with clear reporting in place on delivery milestones, system performance and emerging risks.

50. A partnership-wide performance framework will be used to monitor progress, drawing on a shared set of indicators across education, health and care. These will include measures relating to demand, access to support, inclusion outcomes and system pressures. Data will be reviewed regularly to identify variation, inform decision-making and support early intervention where performance is off track.
51. Alongside quantitative measures, the partnership will use feedback from children, young people and families to inform improvement. This will ensure that lived experience is considered alongside performance data in understanding the impact of reform activity.
52. Progress will also be reported regularly to the Health and Wellbeing Board and the Corporate Transformation Board, ensuring continued strategic oversight, alignment with wider system priorities and collective accountability for delivery.
53. Clear escalation routes are in place to ensure that risks or barriers to delivery are addressed at the appropriate level, including escalation to senior leaders where required.
54. Taken together, these arrangements provide a structured approach to monitoring and assurance, ensuring that delivery remains focused, responsive and accountable over the life of the reform programme.

Risks & Mitigations

55. Delivery of the Local SEND Reform Plan presents several system-level risks which will require active management through partnership governance.
56. A key risk relates to workforce capacity across education, health and care. Delivery of earlier intervention models and expansion of local provision is dependent on sufficient specialist and operational capacity. Where this is constrained, there is a risk that reform activity does not progress at the intended pace, resulting in continued late intervention and sustained pressure on specialist services. This will be mitigated through a phased approach to implementation, prioritisation of system-strengthening activity, and alignment with wider workforce planning across partners.
57. There is also a risk that variation in practice and confidence across settings limits the consistent application of the graduated response. Without this consistency, thresholds for support and escalation may continue to vary, reducing the overall impact of reform. This will be addressed through the implementation of shared frameworks, structured moderation and targeted support to settings where variation is most evident.
58. The delivery of planned sufficiency improvements is subject to both capital and estate constraints. Delays in developing additional local provision would increase reliance on interim and high-cost placements, impacting both system stability and financial sustainability. This risk will be managed through phased development, use of existing capacity where possible and close alignment between sufficiency planning and demand data.

59. The effectiveness of the reform programme is dependent on the quality and integration of data across the partnership. Where data is incomplete or not used consistently, there is a risk that decision-making remains reactive and that emerging pressures are not identified early. This will be mitigated through continued development of shared data systems, clear ownership of datasets and routine use of performance reporting within governance.
60. Finally, there is a risk that the scale of system changes required leads to uncertainty or reduced confidence among partners and families, particularly where roles and expectations are evolving. This could impact engagement and pace of delivery. This will be addressed through clear communication, structured co-production, and visible leadership across the partnership, ensuring that change is understood, supported and consistently applied.
61. These risks will be monitored routinely through governance, with clear escalation routes in place to ensure that issues are addressed at the earliest opportunity and do not impact overall delivery.

Summary & Next Steps

62. South Tyneside is experiencing sustained and increasing pressure across the SEND system, driven by rising demand and increasing complexity of need. The partnership has undertaken a detailed self-assessment, confirming that while strong foundations are in place, delivery remains variable and further system change is required to improve consistency, outcomes and sustainability.
63. The Local SEND Reform Plan provides a clear and structured response to these challenges. It sets out a three-year programme of reform focused on strengthening inclusion, improving access to early support, and embedding more coordinated, partnership-led delivery. The plan also provides the basis for securing financial stability through access to the High Needs Stability Grant, which is conditional on approval by the Department for Education.
64. Subject to endorsement, the plan will be submitted to the Department for Education in line with national timescales. Following submission, the partnership will continue to refine delivery plans, embed Year 1 activity and prepare for implementation at pace. Ongoing monitoring and reporting will be provided through established governance arrangements, with regular updates to the Health and Wellbeing Board and the Corporate Transformation Board.
65. The Health and Wellbeing Board is asked to:
 - Note the findings of the Local Area SEND Partnership maturity assessment
 - Endorse the priorities and direction set out in the Local SEND Reform Plan
 - Support continued system-wide alignment to ensure delivery of reform across education, health and care