

NHS Greater Manchester Integrated Care Partnership Board

Date: 29th May 2026

Subject: 'Every Child Achieving and Thriving' - Schools White Paper and Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) Reforms

Report of: Katherine Sheerin, Chief Commissioning Officer and Executive Lead for SEND – NHS Greater Manchester

Purpose of Report

This report provides an overview of special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) delivery across Greater Manchester together with an outline of the emerging response in relation to the Schools White Paper and SEND reforms.

Recommendations:

The Integrated Care Partnership Board is requested to:

1. Note the report and information on SEND reforms.
2. Note the challenges as set out in relation to timescales and workforce requirements.
3. Agree to receive an update on progress against the development of the SEND Reform Plans in line with the Schools White Paper requirements

Contact Officers

Louise Rule – Associate Programme Director Children & Young People – NHS GM

1. Introduction/Background

- 1.1. This report provides an overview of special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) delivery across Greater Manchester together with an outline of the emerging response in relation to the Schools White Paper SEND reforms.
- 1.2. In England, SEND provision is primarily governed by the Children and Families Act 2014 (Part 3), which mandates support for children (0-25). Key regulations include the Special Educational Needs and Disability Regulations 2014 and the statutory SEND Code of Practice: 0 to 25 years, along with the Equality Act 2010.
- 1.3. A child or young person has SEND if they have a learning difficulty or disability which calls for special educational provision to be made for them. This is defined if the child or young person has a significantly greater difficulty in learning than the majority of others of the same age or has a disability which prevents or hinders them from making use of facilities of a kind generally provided for others of the same age in mainstream education settings.
- 1.4. Currently, support for SEND is delivered through the graduated approach, which aims to ensure that support is proportionate to need, moving from inclusive classroom practice to more targeted and specialist interventions as necessary.

2. SEND Governance and Assurance

- 2.1. Planning, commissioning and delivery of services for children and young people (0-25) with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) in a local authority area is the responsibility of the local area SEND partnership. The partnership includes the local authority, Integrated Care Board, education providers, and other relevant providers, working together to ensure positive experiences and outcomes for children and young people with SEND.

- 2.2. Local area SEND partnerships are subject to joint inspections by the regulatory body for Local Authorities, Ofsted (the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills) and CQC (Care Quality Commission), the regulatory body for the ICB. The inspections evaluate the impact of the local area partnership's arrangements on the experiences and outcomes of children and young people with SEND, and how local area partners work together to plan, evaluate and develop the SEND system.
- 2.3. In Greater Manchester, there is a SEND Strategic Partnership in place that brings together local authorities, the Integrated Care Board (ICB), Parent Carer Forum representatives and other partners to work collaboratively to deliver on shared priorities and address common issues and challenges through strategic system discussions and planning. It is informed by the work of the ten locality SEND Partnership Boards and chaired by a lead Director of Children's Services for SEND (Jill Colbert, Tameside) and ICB Executive Lead for SEND (Katherine Sheerin, Chief Commissioning Officer). The Partnership reports to the Integrated Care Partnership Board and GM Children's Board.
- 2.4. The ICB Chief Executive, Colin Scales, is the ICB strategic lead for SEND and the Executive Lead for SEND is Katherine Sheerin, Chief Commissioning Officer. The 10 GM local areas have an ICB place lead with each having a deputy place based lead who has responsibility for co-ordination of ICB SEND activity.

3. SEND Reforms – Schools White Paper ‘Every Child Achieving and Thriving’

3.1. The Schools White paper, titled “Every Child Achieving and Thriving”, outlines the governments vision for education reform in England. It aims to reduce disadvantage gaps, improve pupil wellbeing and behaviours and reform the special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) provision. Schools are positioned as universal community anchors, supported by integrated local services. The white paper includes plans for wider school reform, such as joining or forming multi academy trusts, and setting new standards for these trusts. It also emphasises the importance of collaboration, inclusion and community engagement in education. The white paper was published on 23rd February 2026 and is accompanied by a consultation on the SEND and wider school system proposals.

3.2. At its core, the Schools White Paper sets out the Government’s long-term reform of the education and SEND system to ensure that every child can achieve well and thrive, regardless of background or need. It recognises that the current system is too fragmented, reactive and unequal, particularly for children with SEND and those from disadvantaged backgrounds, and aims to shift the system towards earlier support, stronger inclusion and shared responsibility.

3.3. In summary the Schools White Paper is trying to:

- Raise standards and inclusion together
- Ensure children with SEND and disadvantage are supported earlier and better
- Reduce reliance on crisis and statutory routes
- Strengthen mainstream capacity and workforce capability
- Create a more joined-up, place-based system with shared accountability

Table 1 illustrates the timescales for implementation of the Schools White Paper reforms

Table 1

Phase one: 2026 to 2028 Investment and building new system	Phase two: 2028 to 2029 Improved support	Phase three: 2029 onwards Future system
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Workforce training programmes for all staff. • Schools, Colleges and early years settings first receive £530m per year from Inclusive Mainstream Fund. • Experts at Hand comes on stream for all settings. • Specialist Provision Packages published • National Inclusion Standards published 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mainstream legislation enacted • First assessments of children take place under reformed system. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Independent special school price restrictions introduced. • EHCP, National Inclusion Standards and Individual Support Plan legislation enacted. • First children using Specialist Provision Packages. • 60,000 new places for children with SEND created.

3.4. SEND reforms are detailed in a separate consultation document - SEND Reform: Putting Children and Young People First (closed 18th May). A GM system response was submitted on behalf of the GM SEND Strategic Partnership.

3.5. The white paper announced significant funding across the system to support the Reforms proposals of £4bn reform funding (26/27-28/29) and £3.7bn capital funding

Inclusive Mainstream Fund - £1.6bn For to schools, colleges and early years settings, to spend on targeted support for children with additional needs, such as small group support for literacy or numeracy.
National training for all EY, School and Post-16 staff – over £200m To ensure that all staff get new training to support children with SEND.
Experts at Hand - £1.8bn For LA and health services to give EY settings, mainstream schools and colleges direct access to expert support - 40 days per average primary school and 160 days per average secondary school.
Education Psychologists and Speech and Language Therapists - over £40m To fund training for over 200 more educational psychologists per year from 2026 and 2027 and ensure there is a SaLT advanced practitioner in every Integrated Care Board (ICB) area.
Support for local areas to deliver the new system - £200m To transform local SEND services and build a cohesive, child-focused, inclusive system. This funding will strengthen LAs' strategic planning, commissioning, leadership capacity and engagement with the education sector.
Best Start in Life Family Hubs – over £200m For every Best Start Family Hub to enable each hub to have a SEND practitioner to offer direct support to children and families.
High Needs Capital - £3.7 billion To create 60,000 new specialist places, including tens of thousands of places in inclusion bases and new special school places.

(25/26-29/30). Table 2 below shows how this funding has been allocated.

Table 2

4. Local Area Reform Plans (LARP)

- 4.1. The Secretary of State for Education and Secretary of State for Health wrote to the ICB Chief Executive and the Chief Executive and Director of Children's Services of each local authority setting out requirements within the Schools White Paper to develop a Local SEND Reform Plan underpinned by a Local Partnership Maturity Assessment. These documents should set out how improvements and system strengthening tilt provision towards stronger inclusive practice and early intervention and ensure that the conditions underpinning effective long-term outcomes are in place.
- 4.2. A working draft, showing direction of travel, partnership maturity and emerging delivery plans was submitted by each of the 10 Local Authority areas in GM to DfE by the deadline of 19th May.
- 4.3. A deadline of 19th June has been set for the formal submission of the LARP to DfE. NHS England will be part of the team assessing the draft and will provide any comments as part of the process.
- 4.4. The single Local Area SEND Reform Plan must be jointly developed and owned by the local authority and the Integrated Care Board (ICB) as part of the wider local area partnership. The guidance is explicit that SEND reform is a shared system responsibility, with the local authority acting as system convener and the ICB expected to commit leadership, resources and delivery capability
- 4.5. Plans must articulate a clear local vision for SEND reform that aligns with the national ambition set out in the Schools White Paper and SEND Reform consultation. Each must be underpinned by a Local Partnership Maturity Assessment. This assessment is intended to provide an honest baseline of how effectively the local area partnership currently operates, including leadership, governance, joint commissioning, data and workforce arrangements. The maturity assessment should inform priorities and actions within the plan. Plans must set out a practical delivery plan, not just aspirations and must describe how the SEND system in the local area will be governed. The plan must clearly set out the role of health partners and the ICB.

- 4.6. For local areas with the most acute performance concerns, heightened scrutiny will be put in place with clear accountability expected through a named Senior Responsible Officer. The Department for Education will also use returned Local SEND Reform Plans to assess ongoing performance and delivery with support and challenge from government officials, alongside assigned SEND Advisers and Financial Advisers.
- 4.7. DfE and NHS England will use the plans to help identify effective, innovative practice and barriers to reform, and identify how to effectively target support to local areas through the period of transformation. They will support local areas to continue to develop iterative reform plans, will join quarterly review meetings with local area partnerships to understand progress and provide appropriate support and challenge as needed. This will include providing assurance on use of funding, the co-design and implementation of key changes to local service delivery, and the rebalancing of the system towards early intervention, inclusive education, and sustainable local services.
- 4.8. A GM approach is being taken where possible to support the completion and submission of the Local SEND Reform Plans across the ten local areas looking to ensure consistency of inclusion where appropriate.
- 4.9. The expectation is that the plan is discussed, agreed, and signed off at the relevant SEND (Place Based) Governance Boards. As a minimum, the plan must be formally signed off by the Local Authority Chief Executive (CEO), the Integrated Care Board (ICB) Chief Executive, the Local Authority Director of Children's Service (DCS), the Integrated Care Board NHS Place Director, and the Local Authority Chief Financial Officer (CFO/Section 151 Officer).
- 4.10. All local authorities with a SEND deficit will be eligible in 2026–27 to receive a High Needs Stability Grant covering 90% of their High Needs related DSG deficit accrued up to the end of 2025–26. This grant will only be paid once each local authority has secured approval of their local area's Local SEND Reform Plan.

5. Experts at Hand (EAH)

- 5.1. As part of the reforms, funding allocations and funding guidance for an Experts at Hand (EAH) offer were issued on 15th April 2026. Information on how funding allocations were calculated is included in Appendix 1.
- 5.2. EAH is a central part of the Government's SEND reform programme. It's purpose is to strengthen mainstream education settings so they can meet children's needs earlier, more consistently and more inclusively, without families having to rely on statutory processes such as Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs)
- 5.3. The White Paper describes Experts at Hand as a new, routine route for schools and settings to access specialist advice and support from education and health professionals. This includes professionals such as; educational psychologists, specialist teachers, speech and language therapists and occupational therapists.
- 5.4. Crucially, the EAH support is intended to be available without a child needing an EHCP or formal diagnosis, removing barriers that currently delay help
- 5.5. Experts at Hand is not designed to replace NHS-commissioned clinical services or statutory assessment pathways. Instead it aims to; build the capability of mainstream settings, support early intervention and reduce escalation into crisis or statutory routes. This reflects the White Paper's wider emphasis on prevention rather than crisis response
- 5.6. EAH is intended to be delivered through local area partnerships with local authorities leading on the education system and SEND arrangements, Integrated Care Boards (ICBs) contributing health expertise and workforce and shared planning across early years, schools and further education. The White Paper stresses that this reform requires shared responsibility across the system, not isolated action by schools alone.

5.7. A Greater Manchester-wide approach is being delivered across all ten local areas, combining consistency with local flexibility and underpinned by strong ICB–local authority partnership working. Partners are actively co-designing the delivery, commissioning and governance of the Experts at Hand model, with work already underway to determine how funding can be deployed at scale—potentially through NHS GM, using pooled budgets, aligned service specifications and workforce development and deployment as well as integration with the Balanced System that is already progressing across GM for SLC. This creates a significant opportunity to demonstrate system leadership and deliver a coherent and sustainable model.

EAH funding allocations

5.8. Government have already announced the allocations for local areas. The grant is paid to Local Authorities, with the explicit expectation that it is delivered in partnership with Integrated Care Boards (ICBs). Table 3 shows the allocations for Greater Manchester.

Table 3

LA name (alphabetical order within region)	Provisional Allocation
England	£429,298,505
Bolton	£2,684,156
Bury	£1,603,673
Manchester	£5,211,112
Oldham	£2,397,793
Rochdale	£2,093,810
Salford	£2,093,906
Stockport	£2,186,801
Tameside	£2,046,647
Trafford	£1,985,012
Wigan	£2,605,768
GM	£24,908,678.

Current GM programmes that support Experts at Hand

- 5.9. Greater Manchester is already working towards implementation of the 'Experts at Hand' model for speech, language and communication (SLC) through implementation of the Balanced System® framework for SLC support. This work was mobilised in 2025 and is now 15 months into delivery with all 10 localities redesigning local provision to , prevention.
- 5.10. This approach includes the linked therapist model which aligns with the DfE description of 'Experts at Hand'. Linked speech and language therapists are aligned to schools and early years settings through a data driven approach. They build a strong relationship with the school or setting and are the lead point of contact in supporting the development of speech, language and communication provision, across the continuum of need, for all including support for children with SEND.
- 5.11. The synergy between the SEND reforms and work underway to embed the Balanced System® Core Delivery Principles of Easy Access; Place Support and a Continuum of Offer through the linked therapist model for SLC, provide strong foundations for wider implementation of the 'Experts at Hand' model for children's therapy services.
- 5.12. As part of the Reform Plans, the ICB will work with partners to establish the delivery approach and clear governance for the EAH model aligned to the Balanced System® approach. This will include setting out if delivery will be local authority-led, contracted to the ICB, in partnership with another area or through an external partner, and setting out the role of Best Start Family Hubs within this.
- 5.13. Responding to an exponential growth in autism & ADHD assessment waits (a picture that is reflected nationally), NHS GM are taking a whole system approach to the ND pathway to help manage the unsustainable demand on our health providers.
- 5.14. The new neurodevelopmental (ND) model of care aligns closely with the Experts at Hand approach by shifting from a diagnosis-led system to a needs-led model that provides earlier access to support within mainstream settings. It introduces consistent, accessible offers across all Greater Manchester localities, enabling children and young people to receive timely advice, guidance and intervention without requiring an EHCP or formal diagnosis.

- 5.15. Through a standardised triage and prioritisation process, the model ensures specialist expertise is targeted to those with the greatest need, while building capacity across education, community and health services. It clarifies the role of CAMHS in supporting those with co-existing mental health needs and strengthens community-based provision, reflecting the Experts at Hand ambition to embed specialist support into everyday practice, reduce escalation to crisis pathways and improve outcomes through earlier, integrated intervention.
- 5.16. Each of the 10 local areas are currently establishing ND hubs that include local support offers to ensure that families aren't waiting too long to be seen without access to support. Each of the 10 areas are at various stages of development and roll out for this work.
- 5.17. The Experts at Hand model will require targeted additional investment to build the necessary workforce capacity, specialist skills, and system leadership functions. The workforce challenges associated with Experts at Hand are amplified by existing pressures across health, education and community health services. There is a requirement to rapidly expand and redeploy specialist expertise into mainstream settings across all ten localities, while managing high demand, long waiting lists (e.g. neurodevelopmental pathways) and workforce constraints within NHS providers. The expectation that ICBs contribute clinical leadership and workforce capacity—without direct allocation of EAH funding—creates additional pressure on already stretched services and risks competition for scarce staff both within GM and nationally. There is also a need to build new roles, develop multidisciplinary working and upskill the wider workforce in schools and community settings, requiring coordinated system-wide workforce planning, training and retention strategies.

- 5.18. The Schools White Paper places clear expectations on NHS providers to play an active role in a more integrated, needs-led SEND system, working in partnership with local authorities and education settings. Providers are expected to contribute clinical expertise to multidisciplinary models such as Experts at Hand, supporting earlier intervention, advice and guidance within mainstream settings rather than relying solely on diagnostic pathways. There is an emphasis on aligning services (e.g. CAMHS, community paediatrics, therapies) to ensure timely access, consistent pathways and prioritisation based on need, including participation in triage and assessment processes. NHS providers are also expected to support workforce development, data sharing and system-wide planning through Local Area Reform Plans, while maintaining delivery of statutory services. Overall, the White Paper requires providers to shift from isolated, service-based delivery towards collaborative, place-based models that build capacity in the wider system, reduce waiting times and improve outcomes for children and young people.
- 5.19. Without a consistent GM-wide approach, there is a risk of variation between localities and inequitable access to expertise, reinforcing the need for commissioning at scale, potential pooling of resource, and alignment with existing GM programmes (e.g. ND pathway new model of care, Balanced System) to ensure sustainable and equitable delivery.
- 5.20. As well as the expectations outlined in the EAH model above, NHS GM will take a single NHS Greater Manchester commissioning approach, with the ICB holding strategic responsibility for consistency, quality, and outcomes across all providers. A shared framework will enable local flexibility - localities may tailor delivery to meet population needs, but must operate within the GM-wide specification and adhere to shared principles, outcomes, and system expectations. Any additional investment or contractual variations will be overseen by NHS GM.

5.21. The EAH funding guidance makes it clear that this funding is for local authorities to work in partnership with the ICB to develop and deliver a new EAH offer for mainstream education settings. This includes the establishment of at least one new speech and language therapist advanced practitioner in every ICB area. Draft GM Local SEND Reform Plans will be reviewed by local authority and ICB colleagues to consider how best to approach this on a GM-level, including the use of funding for health-related elements of the model.

5.22. The ICB have set up a Commissioning Oversight Group to take forward the development of the EAH model and will align this work with the modelling and roll out of existing programmes of work. Full EAH guidance is expected to be published by the DfE in May.

6. Greater Manchester Ambition

6.1. Over the past year, GMCA has been leading on the development of education priorities for collaboration across Greater Manchester, including SEND reform. A partnership approach was taken to formulating a Greater Manchester proposition, describing the changes to the SEND system we would like to see. Our GM proposition defined our ambition in the following way: every child should be welcomed, valued and supported in their school and community; every school should have the resources and expertise to meet local needs; and every parent should feel confident that support will be in place without having to fight for it.

6.2. The key targets and ambitions in the White Paper align with this proposition and ambitions in the Greater Manchester Strategy. Since the publication of the White Paper, GMCA, local authority and NHS GM colleagues have been in dialogue with the Department for Education about proposals to lead the delivery of some aspects of the reforms, working as a single, coordinated system through our established partnerships across Greater Manchester and building on the foundations of our Prevention Demonstrator programme. The proposals are being advanced through the Greater Manchester SEND Strategic Partnership, with executive-level support from GMCA, local authorities and NHS GM.

7. Recommendations

The Integrated Care Partnership Board is requested to:

1. Note the report and information on SEND reforms.
2. Note the challenges as set out in relation to timescales and workforce requirements.
3. Agree to receive an update on progress against the development of the SEND Reform Plans in line with the Schools White Paper requirements.